

Towards Social Change Leadership: Integrating UN SDG's & Walden's Social Change Skills Curricular Framework

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Short Description

In this conceptual paper we illustrate how Walden University is integrating our Social Change Skills Leadership framework with a more systems-oriented approach to the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goal framework in order to assure that our curricula prepare our students and enhance their skills as social change leaders.

While there are many variations of the UN SDG framework, *most do not attempt to show how the various elements of the framework link to one another within a causal dynamics framework*—and thus are not as helpful in showing how specific educational and leadership skill development curricula might help us reach the Agenda 2030 goals.

We, therefore, offer a particular “causal diagram” of the 17 SDG areas, and then show how Walden's specific *Features for Social Change Skill Development Framework* can assist curriculum designers and faculty to help students make more direct links between what they are learning in their programs of study, and how they can apply their skills and knowledge to affect positive social change within the UN SGD framework.

As a benefits corporation (B Corp), Walden University is committed to positive social change and to helping all our students and stakeholders become more prepared to be effective social change leaders. Walden is using our research-based Features of Social Change Leadership Framework to help propel our mission forward.

The skills oriented framework for social change leadership include seven specific skill sets (scholarship, systematic thinking, reflection, practice, collaboration, advocacy, and civic/political/stakeholder engagement), one attitude (ethical), and an integrative leadership disposition and practice. These skills are exercised within a range of “levels of analysis/contexts”, from the individual, to pairs and groups, organizations and professions, through community, society and global connection.

We will present a synthesized systems view of the UN SDG elements, and then show how our Features of Social Change Leadership Framework can help curriculum designers and faculty make direct connections between what students are learning, and how they can exercise those skills to improve the world.

Evolution of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Framework:

The Initial UN “Static” Framework

The United Nations High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development was established in 2012 from a mandated outcome document during the United Nations conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20). The United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) were then formed in 2015, as a strategic plan called ‘Agenda 2030’ (<https://www.globalgoals.org/#the-goals>). The purpose of this plan was to promote a better future for all people throughout the

world and at a global level by 2030. Figure 1 illustrates how the United Nations presents the SDG framework:



Figure 1: United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division

In describing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 performance targets, the United Nations talks about the goals as “integrated” and “indivisible” and suggest that they balance the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Having made these claims about the framework, the suggested “balance” is not intuitive within the framework, and other than “partnership for the goals”, it is also not clear how the elements are integrated nor indivisible.

Towards a More Systemic Approach

To remedy such inconsistencies, some academic research teams, and even private organizations have attempted to show a more systems-integrated perspective with respect to the 17 goals. For example, PepsiCo, in its 2015 Global Reporting Initiative Report breaks the 17 goals into three larger systemic buckets, “People”, “Planet”, “Products”, as shown in Figure 2 on the next page.

Figure 1:
PEPSICO'S PERFORMANCE WITH PURPOSE

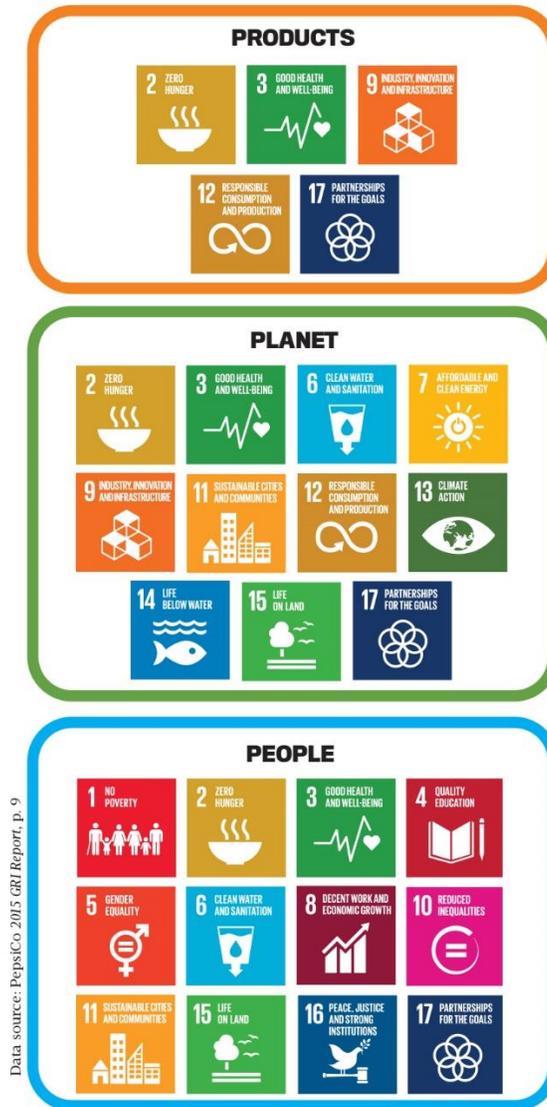


Figure 2: PepsiCo “Three P’s” Approach to Understanding the UN SDG Framework

PepsiCo’s approach is interesting, but ultimately suffers from “classification” inconsistencies, as there is no underlying systems logic to explain the typology/system. So, “zero hunger” is listed under “planet” and “people” and “products, while “sustainable cities and communities” is not a part of products (recycle, minimize carbon footprint and waste packaging are planet issues—that should be part of products too).

A much more useful and dynamic systems approach to understanding the inter-relationships and causal pathways of the SDG framework is offered by Folke, Biggs, Norström & Rockström (2016, 4):

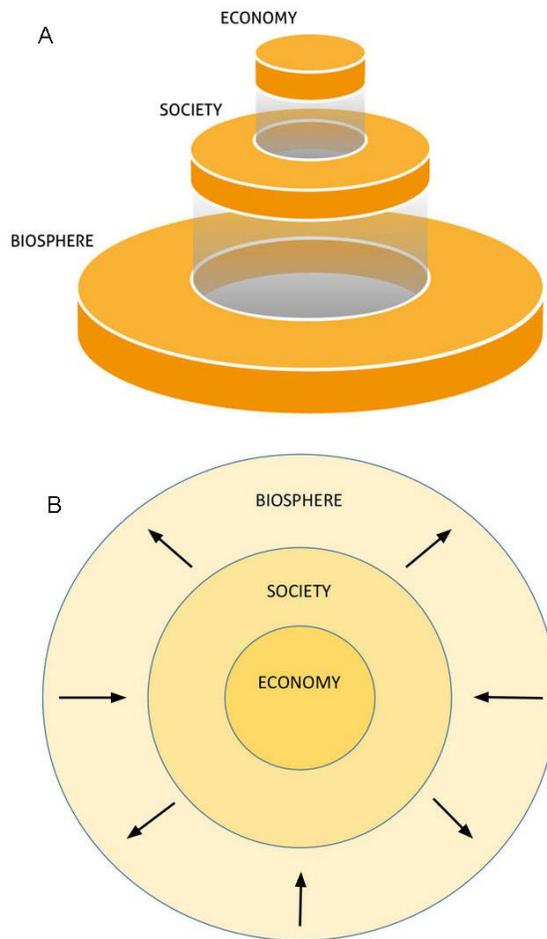


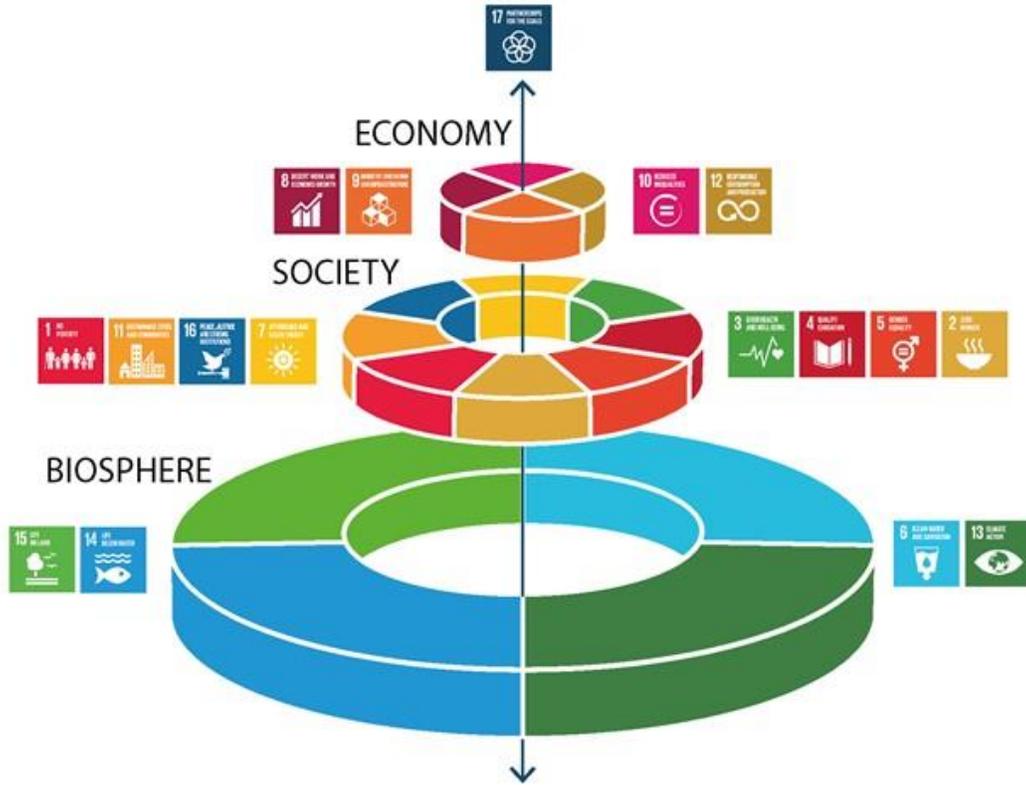
Figure 3: The Economy and Society as Embedded within the Biosphere

In their social-ecological approach, the authors build their model on the observation that humanity does not exist apart from nature and the biosphere, where the environment is an “externality”; but rather, that the biosphere and its health and well-being is a fundamental precondition for human flourishing, social justice, economic development and sustainability.

In their model the biosphere is the foundation upon which human systems and action rest, and general society is the foundation upon which economic systems and actions rest—and all three “systems levels” influence and change the nature of the other (two way arrow).

In this systems approach, human systems (socio-political/economic) are inexorably weaved into ecological/natural systems, and, since humans [may] have the capacity to be stewards of a sustainable social-ecosystem, we, as a species should try to do so because it is in our own long-term self-interest.

Folke, Biggs, Norström & Rockström (2016, 5) take their conceptual model, and apply it specifically to the United Nations’ 2030 Goals:



Folke, Biggs, Norström, Reyers, & Rockström, 2016

Figure 4: A Dynamic Systems Approach to the UN SDG Framework

Their general dynamic systems framework provides a strong logic that can serve as a base for an even more detailed systems approach that can be used as a foundation for exploring how to focus curricula to optimize “systems intervention impact” for positive social change, which we present in the next section.

A More Elaborate Dynamic Systems Perspective on the UN SDG Framework

The UN SDG framework, which is composed of 17 different, but interrelated elements, is a comprehensive way of organizing the various categories of inputs and outcomes that one must address in order to reach a long-term, sustainable equilibria for quality survival of the human species. The framers argue that the 17 elements balance the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Yet, having made these claims about the framework, the suggested “balance” is not intuitive within the framework, and other than “partnership for the goals”, it is also not clear how the elements are integrated nor indivisible.

In order to be more useful as a framework for helping guide and prioritize curricula development, it is necessary to better understand how the 17 elements relate to one another

from a cause-effect-cause feedback loop perspective, so that we can answer important questions, such as:

- Where can interventions in the system have the most direct, and/or long-lasting impact into the entire system?
- How does our curricula address such potentially important interventions and help our students acquire the knowledge and build the skills necessary to focus on or lead such change efforts?
- How can we help our students understand how the knowledge and skills they are learning in our program fits into the larger efforts (via the SDG's) to improve life on earth for everyone and everything?

Please review the diagram on the next page.

This figure below describes how the SDG framework could be viewed, in terms of a causal-loop systems analysis, and it builds on the Folke, Biggs, Norström & Rockström (2016) logic.

That is, the diagram should be interpreted as a loop (imagine rolling the page into a cylinder or mobius strip), where the “end points” (the bottom of the page—“Effective and Fair Polity” and the top of the page (“Life on Land, Life Below Water) meet in a causal continuum that affect each other directly.

That is, without the high level outcomes of improving/preserving “Life on Earth and Life Below Water”, it is impossible to sustain human flourishing (or even survival); and, without “Effective and Fair Polity (through #16A—Strong Institutions, and #4—Quality Education) there is much less of a chance of humans responsibly protecting and improving the life of people and societies, and the health of the biosphere.

The causal logic of this model is most usefully thought of through a “bottom-up” reading, with the most fundamental SDG goals—upon which other goals and outcomes are dependent—at the bottom, and the most general, high-level outcomes/goals at the top. In reality, this is difficult to display in two dimensions, so one might consider a “roll-up” depiction, as illustrated in figure 5a.

U.N. SDG FRAMEWORK

← WITHIN A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

WALDEN UNIVERSITY

Fix Basic Systems to Affect Higher-Order Goals

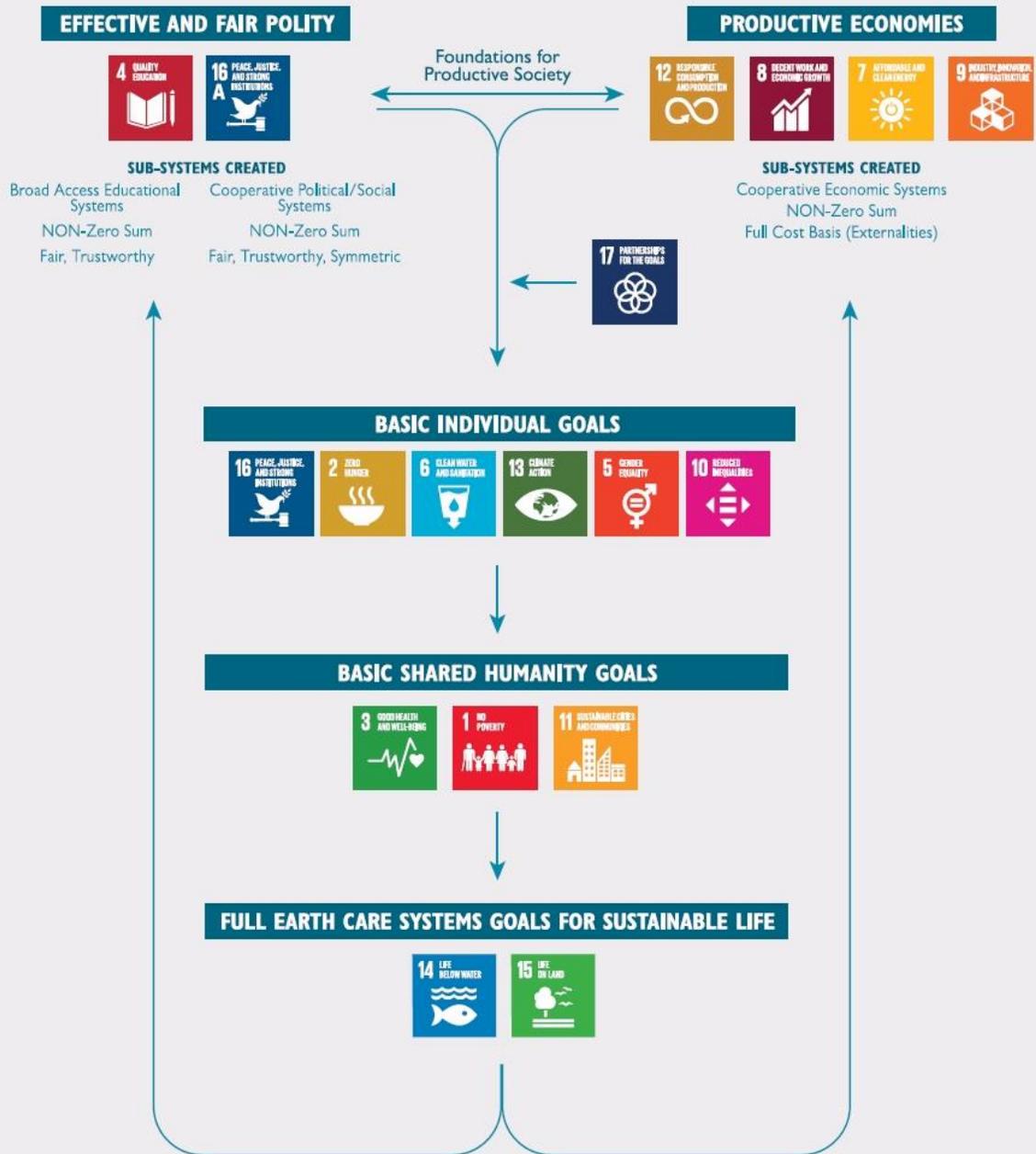


Figure 5: A Systems Causal-Loop Diagram of the UN SDG Framework



Figure 5a: A “roll-up” depiction of the UN SDG Cause-Effect-Cause System

If one can build and sustain strong institutions (political, social/familial) AND provide fair access to education to all members of society, then one has the fundamental base needed to build industry, be innovative, be responsible in consumption—which are bases for having decent work, affordable and clean energy and economic growth that benefits all.

These “productive economies” are then the base from which basic individual goals for equity, opportunity, peace, and justice can expand (and reinforce/grow the strength of institutions and education in a positive loop); and where societies can be in a stronger position to eliminate hunger, clean/keep clean the environment, and take larger climate actions.

If individuals have equitable access to opportunity, so that they can reach their own best potential to help themselves, their families and other (which is in one’s rational self-interest), then it is possible to have sustainable cities/polities, the good well-being and health of everyone, and no poverty.

Each of these outcomes, again, reinforces and strengthens the stability of strong institutions and a virtual causal loop ensues—protecting the biosphere as a by-product of human flourishing.

Overall, this dynamic systems approach to the UN SDG Framework helps clarify effect-cause-effect (E-C-E) chains of intervention logic, and provides a basis from which one can begin to see where and how to effect “optimal intervention” in the system.

Action in all areas does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes for the system as a whole, given the E-C-E logic, and it is important to know how one can align knowledge, skill and passion most productively within the system.

Walden’s Features of Social Change Leadership Framework

So, how does this relate to Walden’s Features of Social Change Leadership Framework and, ultimately, Walden’s approach to building curricula?

Figure 6 on the next page is a graphic that describes Walden’s framework.

This framework was developed by members of a Walden Social Change task force, as they prepared a White Paper in 2014 on Social Change at Walden for a Higher Learning Commission accreditation special emphasis review. The task force studied the current literature, discussed with their colleagues, and eventually identified eight general features that they thought captured the essence of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to become more effective leaders for social change.

Like the UN SDG framework, these eight features are not necessarily discrete; that is, they are not always independent of each other but often flow together in practice. But they do seem to emerge as key elements in social change activity. What is really important about them is that they are all learnable. Or at least, by learning about them and practicing them, a person can usually get better at them.

How Walden's 8 Features of Social Change Come to Life Eight Individual-Level Knowledge & Skill Sets for Effective Change Agents

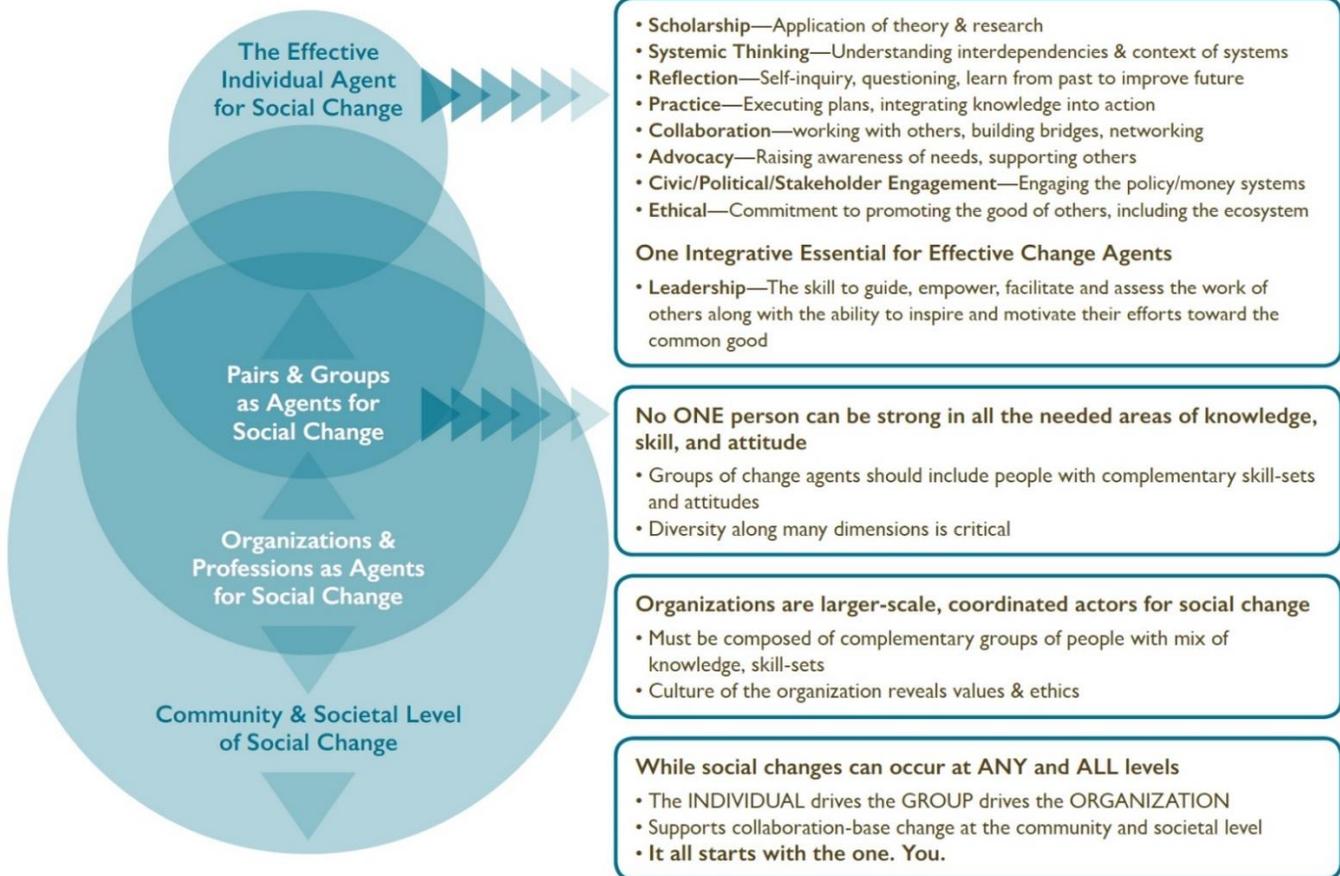


Figure 6: Walden's Features of Social Change Leadership Framework

Another important characteristic of these eight features is that they address the whole person. A social change agent needs to know things, be able to do things, and is guided by values and attitudes. Mind, body and heart are all part of being an effective agent for social change. This translates into education with three domains. That is, it includes learning experiences designed to develop cognitive abilities, practical know-how, and values and commitments. Here are the eight features in these three domains.

Cognitive abilities

1. **Scholarship**—The ability to employ trustworthy, effective research strategies that could be used to find answers to significant questions along with the ability to locate and assess the research findings and claims of others.
2. **Systemic Thinking**—The ability to analyze a set of inter-related causes and effects which can be applied to finding solutions to complex social problems.
3. **Reflection**—The ability to examine and assess one's own skills, strengths, weaknesses, and contributions and to similarly evaluate one's team and partners in ways that can contribute to improved efficacy.

Practical know-how

4. **Practice**—The skills needed to plan, execute, manage, and evaluate a practical project to improve conditions or seize an opportunity that would advance the common good.
5. **Collaboration**—The ability to identify and connect with stakeholders, resources, experts, useful networks and potential partners combined with the personal skills needed to work with others on joint projects.
6. **Advocacy**—The ability to deploy strategies and actions appropriate to raising awareness in others around an issue or opportunity that calls for a response from them.
7. **Civic & Political Engagement**—The skill to work with policy-makers at various level in government, professional organizations and institutions to bring about improvement in rules, laws, policies, or practices.

Values and commitments

8. **Ethics**—The development of and commitment to a personal set of values, principles, attitudes and personal responses in relating to one’s own responsibilities, to others and to the wider world.

The Essential +1 Integrative Practice: Leadership

We’ve reviewed eight high-level learning and skill features that are elements which research indicates is important to being able to be an effective agent for positive social change. But there is also one important “integrating” process--**leadership**.

It is an overarching feature because strengths in the previous 8 features are foundational for leadership. At times strengthening this skill may also mean highlighting learning experiences that develop abilities in conflict resolution, motivation, organization and project management.

Each of the general features above are part of the larger, more complex and integrative practice of leadership itself. When motivated, individuals step-up to guide, empower, facilitate and inspire others to join them in efforts towards the common good. We will not be addressing the many facets and approaches to leadership, but it is important to recognize that the eight features do comprise many elements necessary for individuals to become effective leaders.

How the Two Frameworks Combine to Provide Curricular Development Guidance

We’ve reviewed a systems-oriented framework of the UN SDG’s that helps us understand the potential value and impact of specific interventions within the 17 core element areas; and we have also reviewed a features of social change leadership framework that identifies high-impact skill, knowledge and integration capabilities that can help individuals and teams affect positive social change. The figure on the next page grafts these two frameworks together.

U.N. SDG FRAMEWORK WITHIN A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Fix Basic Systems to Affect Higher-Order Goals

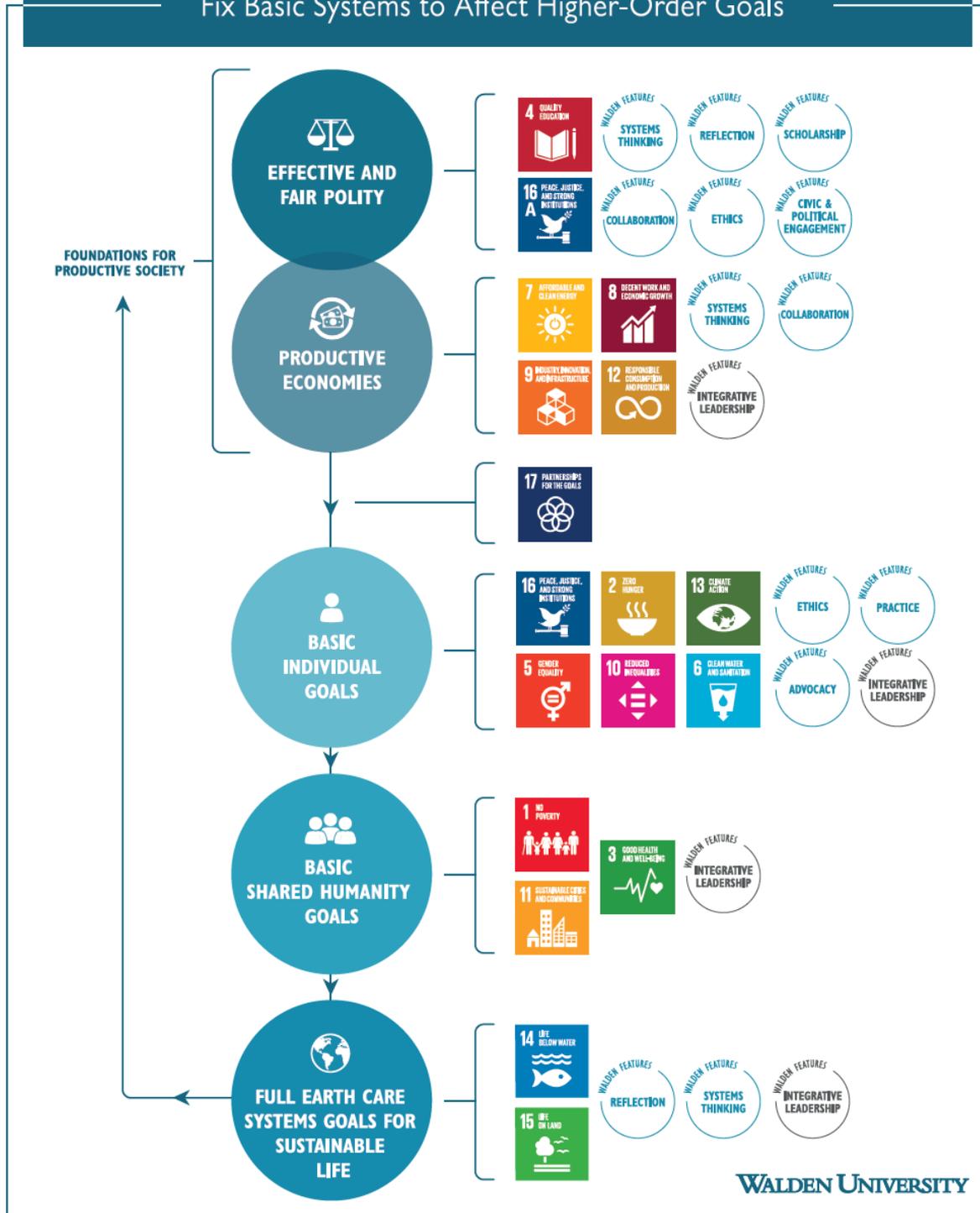


Figure 7: Integration of Walden and UN Frameworks

In this overlay, we can explore how the core knowledge and skill elements of Walden's Features of Social Change framework can help us design and revise curriculum so that our students can be more prepared to take leadership roles, and to support leaders in efforts to achieve specific actions and target areas within the 17 SDG areas.

A number of implications of the overlay logic come to mind:

1. Walden, in the declaration of its very mission and its commitment to broad access to education, is fully engaged in supporting SDG #4, and it can be part of the systemic solution to expanding access to quality education in the U.S. and worldwide. Walden's dedication to quality education, as indicated by the number of specialized accreditations we hold, is a testament to how we help develop humane practitioner-scholars.
2. There is a significant opportunity for Walden to ensure that all of its students, in all of its programs, build knowledge and skills related to local, regional, national and global citizenship and civic/interdisciplinary stakeholder engagement. Building, and more importantly, maintaining strong institutions requires an active, collaborative citizenship that can talk across traditional political, economic, social and disciplinary boundaries. Walden can model these behaviors by scaffolding the curricula to require them.
3. There is an opportunity to expand curricula related to formal systems thinking, which would give students the needed skills to better understand vexing and difficult social change problems, and to seek to participate in collaborative solutions.
4. There is an opportunity for Walden to support the development of interdisciplinary research and practitioner teams that can address multiple SDG linkages. Walden's participation and support for the "Polarities of Democracy" project is an example.

Any particular discipline should be able to find a "home" within this combined framework. For example, the School of Management could use this framework to:

1. More clearly articulate the roles and responsibilities that B-Corp and other business organizations can play in sustaining healthy and productive economies that can be innovative and responsible (to the biosphere).
2. More clearly articulate how the PRME framework can help sustain stronger institutions, and build a more equitable and ethical set of expectations for what businesses should contribute to society as a price for having access to legal, and regulated markets.
3. Focus on the role of cooperative economic systems in helping ensure that individuals have fair and equitable access to organizational and societal opportunities—and to show that such equity leads to greater gains for everyone (are not zero-sum).

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