# 4. Democratic leadership: the work of leadership for social change

There is scant knowledge about how the global crisis affected local communities and how they responded. A robust answer emerges, however, when social innovation is explored at the neighbourhood level in urban contexts. There, members of social organizations, engaged in a new type of activism, confronted the consequences of the shocks experienced by vulnerable in the wake of the financial collapse. Realizing that governments would not solve the post-crisis aggravated community problems, social organizations – as has traditionally happened– responded with creative solutions to their constituents’ new landscape of scarcity.

What type of leadership practices did participants in these organizations use to make their work more resourceful? How did they transform individual efforts into collective achievements that produced social transformation? How did the leadership work in these organizations help community members bring their voices into the public debate as they engaged in contestation, public deliberation and action, as agents of change and active protagonists of collective problem solving? Our research on social innovation at the neighbourhood level tried to address these types of questions. As the reader will notice, these are not about the leaders and their attributes or actions. Concepts like practices, collective achievements, and leadership work point to the collective dimensions of leadership. This chapter explains why these are better questions to ask. We delve deep into a constructionist leadership perspective applied in our research, and show its connections with capacity building, social change and ultimately, democracy.

Our conceptual framework poses that social innovation is a function of the dialectical relationship between the neighbourhood-based contextual features enabling or inhibiting innovation and the emergent leadership practices to address such obstacles and foster collective action. The dynamic combination of neighbourhood features and action – civic capacity and democratic leadership in our research design – helps explain the nature and impact of social innovations in neighbourhoods, we argue. This post-crisis environment offers a real life laboratory to study social change. People react at the most proximate level of analysis, where, embedded in geographical communities, they identify as members of a neighbourhood. We can ask thus what role social innovation plays in the change process, and how neighbourhood features and leadership interact to produce the type of innovation yielding the desired change.

We hope to contribute to integrate a disruptive perspective of social innovation with a relational perspective of leadership, drawing in both literatures from the critical voices within them. Defining leadership as the agential dimension of social innovation in a study applying a social innovation critical and systemic perspective has implications. We must find an equivalent critical and systemic perspective on leadership to ensure theoretical and methodological fit. This requires clarifying the nature of leadership as the agency side of the social innovation equation. We must also draw on insights from the empirical leadership literature exploring its relationship to social innovation and change.

As mentioned earlier, fractures in the leadership literature suggest clarifying the epistemological underpinnings of the chosen leadership perspective. This is particularly true because two current perspectives offer quite different understandings of the nature of leadership. We chose to challenge leader-centred traditional understandings and propose instead highlighting the collective nature of leadership: leadership is not only relational, but collective. This perspective considers individual leaders as merely one component of the leadership phenomenon. Considering *leaders* as the ‘tip of the iceberg’ of a deeper leadership process (Drath 2001), we are also critical of the social innovation leadership literature, which continues to be leader-centred.

Appropriately so for our project, our research design draws on insights from an empirical constructionist leadership research program focusing on social change organizations (SCOs). This type of community-based organization is committed to addressing root causes of the community’s problems, challenging existing power relations to produce change. This is consistent with an approach to social innovation that also connects power to social change. This program has helped to theorize and operationalize the ‘agency’ side of our research, without falling back into a leader-centred approach.

This chapter first offers an overview of a contemporary shift in leadership theories to clarify where our approach fits within the leadership studies landscape. We then differentiate it from the traditional literature linking leadership to social innovation, and clarify the implications of a constructionist, critical perspective that theorizes collective leadership. In a next section we introduce a framework developed from a multi-year constructionist research program on leadership in SCOs, since our research project builds from these findings. Then we describe the three types of leadership practices identified in that research, which drove our data collection, illustrating how we tried to tap on the collective dimensions of leadership in the identified innovations. Before the conclusion, we reflect on the relationship between the work of collective leadership, the identified leadership practices, and democracy.

## 4.1. The leadership studies landscape: from individual to collective dimensions

With the emergence of plural forms of leadership (Denis et al. 2012), the leadership literature acknowledges a shift from a heroic, leader-centred perspective to a post-heroic, broader perspective giving equal weight to its collective dimensions. Questions turn from how formal leaders’ traits, styles and behaviour influence followers or vice-versa, to how processes and systems of relationships produce leadership in a group, organization or system. A selected overview of theories suggests a trajectory toward a greater emphasis on the collective, even though we need more solid empirical work to refine the new theories.

### 4.1.1 Leader-centred relational theories

Leader-centred theories prioritizing the leader as the primary leadership source have dominated the field. Personal qualities like emotional maturity and power motivation, among others, and behaviours, actions and styles enacting these traits, are codified and measured at the individual level of analysis. For example, the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ) characterizes the effective leader through nine factors like interest in empowering others, integrity, decisiveness and determination, among others (Antonakis et al. 2003).

Recognizing the limits of this model, leadership scholars have broadened their interest to the relational nature of leadership. For leader-member exchange theory (LMX), for example, leadership effectiveness is a function of high-quality leader-follower relationships yielding high levels of mutual trust, support and obligation (Dulebohn et al. 2012). Follower-centred theories – e.g. followership theory and social identity leadership theory – highlight complex social processes, like the leadership attributions individuals make to favour leaders who share their beliefs, backgrounds and identities (Hogg 2008). Process-oriented theories – e.g. cognitive leadership theories – connect complex cognitive process, like thinking and information processing, to effective leadership (Avolio et al. 2009). For example, leader effectiveness stems from leaders’ cognitive attributes or abilities (Lord & Hall 2005), and their impact on shared thinking (Mumford et al. 2003). Likewise, distributed and shared leadership theories propose that leadership roles are often decoupled from formal authority and distributed across the organization. More than one leader may emerge in different locations, time periods, and task contexts, with fluid, dynamic and reciprocal leader and follower roles (Bolden 2011).

Broadening our understanding of leadership, these theories connect the emergence of relational leadership to a societal trend (Ospina & Foldy forthcoming). *Collective leadership as trend* connects the relational emphasis with the uncertainty, complexity and interdependence produced by broad changes in the organization of work in a post-industrial society. As declining managerial authority and alternative sources of influence raise, flatter, more open and flexible organizing and complex network forms emerge, parallel to hierarchy.

Networks, task forces, teamwork, contingent workers, strategic alliances, and outsourcing, reflect the co-existence of hierarchical and lateral models of organizing. Leaders, engaged in intra and inter-organizational relationships must ensure connections across levels, silos and organizations. The need for more collaborative work, focused on collective influence processes explains the emergence of more plural and perhaps less hierarchical leadership forms - like shared leadership in self-directed teams - (Fletcher 2012).

Leader-centred relational theories, nevertheless, share a common assumption: the epicenter of leadership remains the individual leader. Engaged in dynamic configurations and reciprocal influence, the separate entity of a leader or a follower at a given point in time, takes up leadership or followership roles.

### 4.1.2 Systems-centred relational, collective theories

Scholars giving priority to the collective dimensions locate the source of leadership one level up from the individual or the relationship. They focus on the broader system of relationships –the collective – where individuals’ decisions and actions are embedded. In this collective space, leadership emerges as individuals interact and respond to others. Particular contexts shape how leadership happens, when and who takes up different roles, and what form leadership actually takes, singular or plural.

Theories emphasizing the collective include Network Leadership Theory (NLT) and Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT). NLT view leader and follower attributions emerging not at micro-level interactions but as properties of the system, where people connect through influence relationships defining relational structures. This happens as networks of individuals interact within a single organization, and across inter-organizational and cross-sector networks (Cullen-Lester & Yammarino 2016). CLT casts organizations as one type of networked system, a complex adaptive system (CAS), which becomes the right unit of analysis to study leadership. Leadership emerges when networks of interacting agents address the system’s functional requirement of adaptability to confront uncertainty (Uhl-Bien et al. 2007). Rather than associating leadership with attributes, roles or hierarchical positions, these theories view it as an emergent, interactive process that ‘gives capacity to group members’*,* thus generating innovation and adaptability to navigate complexity.

While Network and Complexity theories share with leader-centred theories the ‘collective leadership as trend’ explanation of relational leadership, the systems-centred relational theories move to a collective level of analysis. Refining the implications of interdependence and complexity for leadership, they develop robust methodologies to study leadership collective processes (in organizational and inter-organizational networks). Yet some basic assumptions about the ontology of leadership remain unchallenged.

### 4.1.3 Systems-centred collective, constructionist theories

Some leadership scholars draw from constructionism, a social theory with strong currency in the social sciences (Endres & Weibler 2016; Fairhurst & Grant 2010). Constructionist leadership theories conceptualize leadership as organizing agreements emerging from systems of relationships at the organizational level, like network and complexity theories. But one ontological assumption differentiates them: leaders and followers are not independent entities, who then engage with one another to form network configurations assigning particular roles. Social actors exist as *beings-in-relation*: their understanding of self and other happens through relationship. ‘Leadership,’ ‘leaders,’ ‘followers,’ are co-constructed to help advance organizing tasks. Owned by the group, leadership is always achieved collectively. Leadership is collective by its very nature, not just when it takes more relational or pluralistic forms.

Discursive leadership theory (DLT) and relational social constructionist leadership theory exemplify this perspective. DLT gives primacy to language, since this is how humans share meaning and construct social reality. Leadership is an emergent process of influence characterized by the management of meaning through talk and corresponding actions to advance a task (Fairhurst 2007). Understanding how people think, see, and attribute leadership requires attending to both little-d-discourse (e.g. micro-level conversation and speech acts) and big-D-discourse (macro-level explanations of how things are). A shift of attention from individual cognition to social and cultural systems allows the analyst to recognize leadership’s collective dimensions.

Social constructionist leadership theory considers discourse as one of several meaning-making processes associated with leadership, but not the only one. Shared meaning-making also becomes visible as *practices* – *recurrent ways of doing things that have produced the desired outcomes* for the group – and thus represent acceptable collective solutions to organizing problems. Leadership happens when interdependent actors engage in discourses and practices that allow them to experience the results of their individual efforts as collective achievements (Ospina et al. 2012). Leadership is *collective work* that expresses how members of a group agree on a path forward to achieve a task, commit to it, and adapt to changing circumstances in pursuing it (Drath et al. 2008; Raelin 2011; Raelin 2010).Leadership manifests in the *outcomes of the group’s work*, not in specific individuals producing it, hence its collective dimension.

Constructionist leadership theorists insist that any form of leadership – from top-down to collaborative, from singular to plural – is by its very nature relational and collective. The field’s shift to more collective perspectives represents a change of the lens used to look at the phenomenon of leadership in the world. Constructionist assumptions about the nature of human beings and social reality refer us to a different ontology and epistemology to study leadership (Ospina & Uhl-Bien 2012). Since leadership is always co-created and co-constructed in interaction, independent of context, we can better understand it by changing the lens, not just calibrating it. This is a ‘collective leadership as lens’ explanation in contrast to ‘collective leadership as trend’(Ospina & Foldy forthcoming).

Finally, some constructionist scholars also incorporate a critical lens to study leadership. If power asymmetries shape the relationship between the world, its actors, and the observer, then scholars must explore how unequal power relations influence social outcomes (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003; Lotia & Hardy 2008; Fairhurst & Grant 2010), including leadership. Areas of interest include discourses and practices that sustain unjust power structures; the political dynamics of systems of production and work; and the unequal impact of these on owners, shareholders, managers and employees (and on their relationships) (Cunliffe 2009). Critical scholars share the emancipatory aim of producing knowledge that supports transformative action to increase human freedom, reduce all forms of injustice (Bohman 2002). Collinson (2011: 181) identifies an emergent group of critical leadership scholars who *‘critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are often reproduced, frequently rationalized, sometimes resisted and occasionally transformed’*. He lists as key themes explored the dialectics in leadership dynamics, like control-resistance, dissent-consent, and men-women.

In sum, various theoretical strands are presently engaged in conversation as a collective perspective of leadership starts to gain currency in the leadership field. The argument is not that some theories are better than others, but that scholars must enter the empirical study of leadership with awareness of their ontological and epistemological assumptions, and the consequent methodological choices to capture leadership.

At the core of this new conversation in the field is agreement of *relationality* as a critical dimension of leadership (Uhl-Bien 2006). This means understanding the leader-follower relationship as embedded within a broad system of intersecting relationships where power, meaning-making, communicative and organizing processes contribute to shape it (Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012). While this development is recognized in theory, in practice, much research devolves back to leader-centred concepts and methodologies, even when collective approaches are preferred. This is the main challenge for scholars who want to advance the conversation.

The benefits of engaging these different perspectives in dialogue for advancing leadership research and theory have been well articulated (Uhl-Bien & Ospina 2012), and show the advantages of multi-paradigmatic interplay (Romani et al. 2011). Scholars in the field can become conversant of both perspectives and capitalize on the insights each brings, without having to espouse the entire set of assumptions behind it. Furthermore, it could be argued that part of the scholarly enterprise is to engage in constructive criticism that helps refine both perspectives thus contributing to advance new knowledge.

We believe that applying a critical, constructionist understanding of leadership to investigating social innovation using a disruptive perspective can contribute to this agenda. We explore next the research implications of its assumptions, as we review how leadership has been connected to the study of social innovation in the leadership studies field.

## 4.2 ‘Collective leadership as lens’ and social innovation

Leadership scholars in the *trend* strand take up the movement to process-and systems-centred models as a methodological strategy demanded by the need to capture ‘leadership’ at the right level of analysis, at the level of the system of relationships. But most continue to conceptualize individual leaders and followers as relatively fixed, independent entities with subject identities, roles and positions that exist prior to the leadership relationship. A ‘collective leadership as lens’, in contrast, represents an epistemological shift, a different way of thinking about where and how we see leadership, and thus claims that all leadership is collective. It is in relationship, through interaction to construct shared solutions to the challenges of advancing the work, that people adopt leader or follower stances.

Constructionist scholars who take a leadership as lens approach agree that new trends in the world demand a new type of leadership. But this new type, even if taking more pluralist forms, is not more collective than the old unitary forms of leadership. In other words, collective leadership is a lens from which to explore the empirical reality of old and new forms of leadership. This lens can also be applied to a study, like ours, asking what is the role of leadership in processes of disruptive social innovation at the neighbourhood level.

Leadership research studying social innovation draws from the process-oriented, cognitive leadership theories described above, and takes a ‘leadership as trend’perspective. Because it represents the most recent efforts to understanding how leadership affects social innovation (the object of our own research), we describe it in some detail to explore its possibilities and limitations.

### 4.2.1 A constructionist critique to leadership studies of social innovation

Recent innovation studies in the leadership literature take a relational stance to explore how leader’s and followers’ cognition (e.g. information processing and strategic thinking), influence social innovation (Mumford et al. 2003; Marcy 2015; Marcy & Mumford 2007; Hansen-Turton & Torres 2014). The research asks what cognitive frameworks guide the thinking and actions of leaders, identifying problem-solving mental schema. In the case of social innovation, this implies creating new configurations of interpersonal and social interactions to advance common goals (Marcy & Mumford 2007). Scholars have identified cognitive tools that leaders use to effectively foster and develop social innovations: diagnostics for scanning, mental shortcuts to address complexity, and causal analysis. Leaders who use these, effectively leverage information already present in their minds as they confront complex challenges (Marcy & Mumford 2007).

 Marcy (2015) moves the agenda closer to our own by connecting the individual, organizational and societal levels of analysis in his study of radical innovation. He argues that doing so may advance knowledge of the role of leadership because it broadens the scope to situations aiming at disruptive changes in *‘social relations [involving] a challenge to established status, power and values’* (Marcy 2015: 371). Building on prior research, Marcy studies five cases of radical social innovation (led by the founding member of the Situationist International, Guy Debord), asking how the leader used cognitions to implement socially innovative ideas at the societal level.

Nine propositions articulated from received theory are tested qualitatively to identify cognitive approaches of effective leaders in radical social innovations. In contrast to incremental social innovators, Marcy argues, radical leaders hold more disparate knowledge structures, engage more in sense breaking tactics, are more critical of elite status, values and goals, and are able to make more creative contributions to social problem solving. In addition, radical innovators incorporate elite and public understanding of the issues in their mental models, use themselves and their teams as ‘demonstration projects’, have experienced a catalyst event that allows them to develop alternative mental models, hold multiple interpretations of causal variables within the system and are more critical of it, and leverage informational and expertise power to influence followers and the public.

This list of ‘leadership’ cognitive attributes of social innovators offers a glimpse at how complex cognitive processes may vary and affect differently the leaders’ ability to advance shared goals, according to the nature of his problem-solving strategy. Findings surface the importance of power and resistance as key factors affecting disruptive change. Yet ultimately, the exploration of the role of leadership in social innovation becomes the exploration of the leader in a particular complex context.

More refined than an exclusive intra-organizational focus on behaviours and actions, this work points to the complexity of navigating change that requires considering structural and systemic issues. Nevertheless, the focus on the leader as the primary source of leadership offers a very partial view. The focus stays in the leader’s cognitive traits, his consequent actions and the implications for his relationship to followers, both his team and the broader public targeted for his change agenda. The narrative and the methodological choices reflect an entity, process-centred perspective that is promising, but the story reverts to a traditional heroic leadership model, thus contributing to reproduce it uncritically.

This relational perspective of leadership views collective leadership as a trend: a complex environment fraught with resistance and power dynamics associated with the radical nature of change, requires a different type of leadership, and thus a different type of leader. As the leader’s cognition becomes the focus of inquiry, we loose sight of the mechanisms by which his cognitive work produces common agreements and of the social dynamics contributing to the emergence of the leaders’ cognition. The emphasis on cognitive processes at the individual level misses an opportunity to consider other approaches to capture the collective dimensions of leadership.

Proposing a shift from trend to lens, a critical constructionist perspective on leadership may help to illuminate social innovation processes that intend to produce changes in relations of power in community contexts. This is particularly true if the aim is to deconstruct the tension between structure and agency in processes of social innovation aiming at producing broad transformation. Empirical research on leadership in social change organizations illustrates the promise of pursuing this agenda (Ospina et al. 2012; Dodge & Ospina 2015). It also helps to introduce the categories that we use to study the role of leadership in disruptive social innovations in vulnerable neighbourhoods.

## 4.3. Leadership in social change organizations: a constructionist study

Public leadership scholars have explored the role of organizational leadership in transforming policies and structures in the wider society. They stress the importance of embedding the social problems within the wider institutional setting where values, norms, structures and power asymmetries contribute to give them meaning, thus shaping the organizational actors’ understanding of how to change them (Crosby & Bryson 2010; Bryson & Crosby 1992; Ganz 2010; Selsky & Smith 1994). This work considers several levels of action, from individuals to networks of relationships and societal forces. Yet the research focuses, like in the social innovation research described above, on how visible leaders help mobilize followers. The constructionist lens proposes a shift to focus instead on exploring how leadership is constructed through organizational practices to produce collective achievements around shared purpose (Ospina & Foldy 2015). Without ignoring formal and informal leaders, this approach de-centers the research away from the leaders and places attention on practice as a collective construct.

Practice is the outcome of collective meaning-making, and is grounded on shared knowledge, largely tacit and embodied, historically and culturally specific. Practice captures cognitive processes but it surpasses individual cognition as it reflects social agreements based on repeated interaction (Schwartz 2006; Orlikowski 2002; Wenger 1998). Understanding social change leadership requires identifying recurrent assumptions and interactions that reflect agreements about the organizing demands of the social change mission. Insights from constructionist empirical research on social change leadership helps to illustrate the application of this approach and offer background to understand our research choices.

### 4.3.1. The social change leadership framework

Social change organizations aim to produce social transformation, harnessing their constituents’ power so they can participate in actions that alter their own circumstances (Chetkovich & Kunreuther 2006; Ganz 2010). Addressing systemic problems, and empowering vulnerable groups, they offer *‘a grass-roots response (i.e. one grounded in a local community) to systemic social problems’* (Chetkovich & Kunreuther 2006: 14). Working in multiple areas of public policy like education, youth development, art, criminal justice, the environment, women rights, human rights and economic development, these organizations engage in public action similar to local processes of social innovation, understood from a systemic, disruptive perspective (see Chapters 1 and 3).

The social change leadership framework presented in Figure 4.1 was developed from empirical research in SCOs. It offers an ideal type that summarizes key dimensions of the leadership work in organizations committed to social change. The weight of these dimensions varies according to the context and strategic choices of particular organizations, and to the opportunities found in its environment. The importance of leadership practices was common to all studied organizations (Ospina et al. 2012).[[1]](#endnote-1)

< FIGURE 4.1>

At the core of the framework are practices that represent distinct types of leadership work. They support the meaning making process (sense giving and sense breaking) that builds capacity to deploy the core tasks of SCOs that move collective efforts forward. Leadership work is part of the organization’s ‘strategic action’ to build the capacity and leverage the power needed to disrupt the status quo. An integrated worldview grounds this action and provides a powerful source of meaning to participants. The shared experience of the systemic problem becomes a leadership driver grounded in assumptions about social change, corevalues of social justice and a collective vision of a different future. Ultimately, the drivers, the worldview and the strategic action are harnessed to create long-term changes in mental models, policies, structures and relationships.

### 4.3.2 Unpacking the constitutive elements of the framework

The work of leadership in SCOs is geared less to create organizational effectiveness and more to nurture the collective capacity that generates effective change outside the organization. Three components represent the context within which leadership practices emerge: A humanistic worldview, strategic action to construct capacity and leveraging power to produce changes.

**A humanistic worldview**. Leadership drivers, assumptions and values produce a coherent and encompassing worldview, ‘grounded humanism.’ This is characterized by a faith in participants’ humanity and their potential to contribute to transforming society. An experienced systemic inequity is named as an injustice, thus surfacing its underlying causes, and helping identify strategies to marshal resources to redress it by changing power relations. Problem framing helps articulate new visions for the future, inviting members ‘to dare to dream’ what can actually come to pass. A strong motivator of action, this vision is rooted in co-constructed shared assumptions about the nature of change, social problems, knowledge and power. Social justice values inspire, awaken and direct the passion of participants, thus ‘connecting values to actions.’ Leadership work helps participants connect individual problems to inequitable structures so they understand the need to leverage power. They also learn to recognize personal experience as a primary form of knowledge, and thus as an important source of power. The worldview of groundedhumanism offers a moral compass to clarify appropriate strategic action and to bound the use of power.

**Strategic action to construct capacity**. Practices and activities geared toward ‘strategic action’ are outcome-oriented and sensitive to environmental dynamics. Recognizing the centrality of power for change, the goal is to build the capacity to leverage it. The means are leadership practices and core social change tasks. To be discussed in the next section, leadership practices cluster around three distinct types of leadership work: reframing discourse, bridging difference and unleashing human energies. They infuse with meaning the core social change tasks, that is, the modes of engagement that produce specific influence strategies for change (Smock 2004; Chetkovich & Kunreuther 2006; Su 2010).

According to this model the core tasks are: *Organizing* (mobilizing a base of members directly affected by the organization’s issues); *Advocacy* (working with policymakers to change policies); *Community Building* (developing social capital and a common identity); and *Service Provision,* (addressing individuals’ and groups’ needs). SCOs choose and integrate them in their work to fit their understanding of social change (Chetkovich & Kunreuther 2006). For example, an immigrant organization may provide services such as English language instruction, lobby on issues like fair wages, organize day labourers to fight abusive contractors, and promote family cultural activities to build community. Together, these activities build individual, organizational and inter-organizational capacity. Collective capacity is a means but it is also an outcome itself: achieving it—independent of social change—represents abundance, builds collective efficacy and cultivates hope in vulnerable communities.

**Leveraging power to produce long term outcomes of social change**. Collective capacity is power in repose; it is capability waiting to happen. When it is leveraged as a means toward achieving long-term outcomes, power in repose becomes power in use (Gamson 1990). Leadership theories of innovation tend to associate power with the individual leader’s capacity to influence others (Bedell-Avers et al. 2009). Consistent with the social movements and organizational theory literatures (Teske & Tetreault 2000; Brass 2005; Foldy 2002; Gaventa 2000), the framework identifies how power is built to create influence outside the organization. Power is leveraged to change policies (rules, laws or regulations at the local, state, or federal level), structures (more systemic changes in particular systems, altered governance structures, or changes in patterns of relations), thinking (new language, surfacing collective imaginaries about what people believe is possible and thus sustain power structures) and relations (new ways of relating on equal footing).

At the core of the framework, three types of relational practices foster capacity, and infuse with meaning the core social change tasks in SCOs. We turn to these leadership practices next.

## 4.4. The work of leadership in SCOs: Practices to leverage power for social transformation

The social change leadership framework offered a holistic answer to the research question of how communities doing social change engage in the work of leadership. The research revealed leadership practices illuminating three mechanisms that transform individual efforts into collective achievements. The first mechanism is *reframing discourse*, that is, leadership work that challenges dominant discourses reproducing the articulated social problem. Reframing practices produce new language that shapes a vision for the future. The second mechanism is *bridging differences,* that is, leadership work that weaves worldviews and experiences around common identities. Bridging practices promote connectivity while valuing difference to maximize the potential of collaborative work. The third mechanism, *unleashing human energies,* is leadership work thathelps to potentiate the untapped resources of community members. Unleashing practices create the conditions for people to participate fully in the organization’s work.

These practices helped operationalize the leadership construct in the research documented in this book, and thus they deserve further elaboration here. Drawing on prior documentation of the original research (Ospina et al. 2012) we discuss their content and briefly describe how we translated the collective leadership lens into operational interview questions. This prevented reverting to a focus on individual leaders’ actions (as they were a primary source of information). It ensured a focus on the ways organizational members made meaning to advance their work toward social change. For example, instead of asking questions about leadership from the onset, which could evoke leader-centred responses, we focused on ways to attain the organization’s goals, and the means to do so.

Having details of the emergent innovations and their organizations from a prior data collection cycle, we tried to frame the leadership questions around specific features, using the language participants used in prior encounters or in organizational documents and websites. This yielded grounded ways of talking about the organization’s core social change tasks, prompting narratives that would allow us to identify recurrent practices where leadership work was taking place.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We started with expressed interest in the processes and dynamics that helped members to feel committed to the work and to each other, to know the group’s intended direction, and to connect their work to others’ and to the goals (this is a constructionist definition of leadership, following Drath et al. 2008). We thus shared our concern with clarifying how participants were able to work together to achieve the common goals that brought them to this work in the first place. We then asked: ‘*Regarding the social innovation efforts we have discussed, how, in general, do things manage to get accomplished?*’ Only after hearing participants’ explanations in their own words, did we ask direct questions about leadership, like ‘*How do you define leadership in the context of the innovation we have been discussing?*’ With this information in hand, specific questions about reframing discourse, bridging difference and unleashing human energies followed, as described below.

**Reframing Discourse**.A social change vision cannot rely on the same language, imaginaries, and cognitive models that dis-empower and alienate the affected communities (Teske & Tetreault 2000). SCOs disrupt established frames and invent new ones congruent with the organization’s worldview and vision for the future. Reframing is leadership work that helps the group articulate practices to challenge and dispel small ‘d’ and big ‘D’ discourses that reinforce injustices (Walsh 1995; Fairhurst 2007; Bartunek & Moch 1987). For example, an indigenous group threatened by oil drilling in their pristine land may reject an environmental frame to define their problem, and reframe it as one of human rights. This new frame evokes a life-and-death struggle for a people, who uphold their right to a good, healthy life in the mist of corporate greed and expansion.

Reframing discourse requires creating language and interactions that confront collective imaginaries supporting the status quo. It is about proposing alternative explanations about what is, as well as imaginative visions of what can be. But reframing is not just presenting counterfactuals, it is adaptive leadership work to reconceptualise the problem and suspend cherished assumptions so that one can even imagine a solution (Heifetz et al. 2009). If the aim is leveraging power, reframing practices also help participants understand dominant frames and their changeability, so they can invent new repertoires and narratives that can be evoked and lived through action. These new frames categorically reject discourse and actions that dehumanize experience.

Reframing happens not only for external audiences, but also for the community itself (Foldy et al. 2008). Constituency-related reframing interrupts the ways a vulnerable community sees itself, or how others see it. An organization fighting for equal treatment and access to opportunities for low-income immigrants may infuse its narratives with signifiers of power, describing their constituents not as victims, but as ‘makers of history’ and ‘co-authors of justice.’

Social change organizations also reframe relational dynamics, acting in ways counter to dominant expectations, and challenging performances that reproduce the status quo. For example, they may develop democratic procedures for meetings and decision making to ensure equitable relations, voice and participation. They may cultivate cultural or identity-based rituals that assert their ways of being fighting marginalization’s negative messages of the self. Reframing is also about finding ways to validate the legitimacy of the community’s claims and ways of life, thus positioning their voice differently. In this way, reframing helps to unleash human energies too.

To study empirically reframing discourse, we asked interviewees: ‘Think for a moment about the key social problem this initiative is trying to fight: What is it?’ Once the problem was described, a follow-up question asked: ‘*How is this organization’s**[named] definition of the problem different or similar to that of others who have influence, let us say, government officials, the public or other relevant groups? Why is it different?*’ We then asked, given their stated definition of the problem, how different was their solution compared to others. Building on this information we asked next how they ensured that people inside and outside of their organization understood the framed problem and solution (in other words, how they convinced others to agree with this frame to mobilize people into action).

**Bridging Difference**. SCOs bring diverse actors together and facilitate joint work while maintaining and appreciating the differences each brings (Ansell & Gash 2008; Huxham & Vangen 2000; Bryson & Crosby 1992; O’Leary et al. 2006; Ospina & Foldy 2010; Gasson & Elrod 2006). Bridging practices may operate inside the organization, to help build connections and generate a common identity across diverse members. Bridging operates also across organizations, to cultivate alliances and partnerships. Bridging work is about surfacing the interdependencies among individuals and groups, so that collaborative action becomes obvious and collective achievements natural (Ospina & Foldy 2010).

Bridging practices build community by weaving relationships among people from different worldviews and backgrounds. Finding commonalities breaks down isolation and thaws the fragmented experience of marginalization. For example, an organization supporting minority youth to cope with exclusion must do work to bridge Black and Latino youngsters, who may view each other as distinct and even as competitors. Events promoting joint reflective, critical, and emotional analyses of their experiences may make visible what connects them. Culminating with an activity to write together a ‘manifesto’ for their group softens the ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality. This adaptive leadership work is fraught with paradox: it entails building connections without suppressing difference or ignoring its value, as well as cultivating difference that does not turn into disunity. A key leadership goal is to avoid reifying a community as monolithic, finding ways to draw unity from diversity (Saz-Carranza & Ospina 2011).

Bridging difference across organizations helps to leverage resources. Finding like-minded and ‘unlikely’ allies builds momentum for collaborative work. A unified front maximizes success. A leader of a SCO coalition of urban immigrant groups explains that their power lies precisely in speaking ‘with this very diverse voice…,’ which makes policy decision-makers realize that they must pay attention, as they see unity among groups with different ideologies and roles in immigrant communities from different parts of the city.

Examples of practices for successful inter-organizational collaboration include conducting mutual trainings and workshops on campaign issues; challenging each other by examining organizational culture and interpersonal relationships around issues that separate them; creating the mechanisms for maintaining on-going contact, like sitting in each others’ boards and attending mutual strategic meetings; and fostering trust the collaborators’ ability to follow the lead of the initiating organization and do a good job representing each other’s issues and concerns (Stephen et al. 2005: 19).

Using a collective lens to identify bridging practices in our research project, we started the interview by acknowledging the importance and difficulty of collaboration. Then we asked the interviewee to help us understand how the organization gets people with different backgrounds and perspectives to work together to advance the work they are doing. Another question was ‘*How do you make sure that stakeholders with different voices or opinions are heard when it comes to advancing this organization’s [name] work?*’ Questions inviting stories about issues that have generated conflict or tensions among participants, how they were resolved or if not how they managed to ensure continuity of the work followed. More direct questions inquired about key allies, how they were engaged, how they ensured that coalition work was nurtured.

***Unleashing Human Energies.*** Knowledge is power and it comes from within the community, despite its perceived scarcity. Unleashing practices helps the community connect with this power. As a SCO leader described this work: *‘...it’s about recognizing wisdom. It’s about bringing the genius that’s there up and out.*’ Unleashing practices create conditions for transformational learning so that every group member reclaims his or her full humanity and, in the process, they recognize their inherent power to direct their lives. Unleashing human energies is both instrumental and expressive work, because SCOs are committed to support human development, not just as a means, but as an end. Successful unleashing also produces reframing at the individual and collective levels.

Unleashing practices range from formal educational mechanisms such as language classes, policy trainings, and leadership development, to more informal but intentional interactions like structured dialogues that enable people to reflect on the systemic causes of their situation, their roles in both the current and envisioned worlds, and the solutions that will transform society. For example, a networked organization coordinating day labourer groups nationally organizes a power analysis activity where day labourers identify people who have influenced their lives, are challenged about their definitions of who is ‘a leader,’ and engage in a conversation through which they come to realize they can be leaders. **G**rowth becomes a possibility when participants recognize that they are capable of being leaders.

Since lived experience is a legitimate source of expertise, it can be as powerful as recognized forms like legal, scientific, technical or professional knowledge. People already have a ‘natural mastery’ of the problem, from experiencing it personally, and unleashing practices draw it out, help refine it and supplement it with a systemic understanding of the problem and policy responses. SCO’s also validate the community’s expertise vis-a-vis external actors (like government) inviting testimonials during advocacy work. Thus policy makers gain evidence about the problem, which, while not found in books, cannot be ignored.

A critical unleashing practice to tap this knowledge is storytelling. Sharing stories about personal experience also helps individuals reinterpret what appear as personal shortcomings in the perspective of large systemic forces, thus regaining self-worth. Indeed, opportunities for sharing help people to address internalized oppression, discovering the power of their own agency and humanity. This also helps reframe their experience, and connects members in a deeper way.

Unleashing also happens through learning by doing, as participants engage, with adequate training, in the core tasks of social change, particularly organizing and advocacy. Through small wins they realize that they can influence their context and environment to further their agenda. This develops self-efficacy, the belief in one’s capabilities to perform at the level needed to exercise influence over events that affect one’s life (Bandura 2000; Hannah et al. 2008). Moreover, by fostering a collective sense of pride, trust, cohesion and commitment for the group’s common good, unleashing practices foster collective efficacy, a group’s belief in their capacity for effective action (Sampson et al. 1997). Recognizing the organization’s ability to identify and marshal the financial, material, symbolic and relational resources needed to produce social change, a virtuous cycle is triggered that reinforces self-and collective efficacy.

Applying a collective lens to identify practices for unleashing human energies in our research, we explored the role participants who experience the problem played in the organization’s activities and process, and specifically tried to identify how the organization helped develop leadership of its various stakeholders. We elicited stories through a battery of questions that included: ‘*Can you think about a participant of this initiative whose leadership has developed considerably since s/he started to engage in this work? How was this person before and after joining the initiative in terms of their capabilities, attitudes and behavior? What would you say contributed to that change? Why do you think of him or her as a leader and can you give examples that demonstrate this?*’

Altogether, reframing discourse, bridging difference, and unleashing human energies ensure members’ full participation, independent of their position in the organization: participants discover what is their role as contributing leaders, are prepared and ready to enact it, believe in the relevance of their contribution to a legitimate and urgent cause, and submit to a social justice moral compass. When this happens, collective capacity for effective public action is leveraged as influential community power to transform reality. Social change leadership potentiates the strength of a community by transforming its members’ experience of material scarcity into abundance, renewed energy, and actualized power to achieve their collective goals.

This way, the work of leadership generates ‘leadership capital.’ As individual efforts become results collectively achieved, a virtuous cycle contributes to develop endogenous leadership and transform it into public leadership. The permanently created energy, sometimes in use, sometimes in repose, a mix of symbolic, social and human capital is itself a powerful form of capital (Bourdieu 1985; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993). Whether applied immediately or used at the right moment, leadership capital generates a force field that is always alive, growing and helping transform individual efforts into collective achievements.

We conclude this section by arguing that a focus on leadership practices does not deny the existence of leaders, but it does shift attention to better understand empirically who they are, where they are in the system, and what they are doing to produce change. Formal and informal leaders who want to enact their leadership in a collective way have the huge responsibility if creating ‘*conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainly*’ (Ganz 2010: 527). This means creating spaces for every member is able to take up their individual leadership and engage the work of leadership as needed in the service of that purpose. Raelin (2005) calls this organizational state a ‘leaderful organization.’ An effective leader is a multiplier of leaders, an architect of leaderful spaces and a builder of leadership capital.

## 4.5. Collective leadership and democracy

Septima Clark, an American educator and activist in the US 1960’s Civil Rights Movement defined democracy as ‘*a system that allows people to make the most of their talents’* (Preskill & Brookfield 2009: 78). She believed that democracy could not flourish until people had the space to exercise their talents, which meant supporting human growth by creating such opportunities. The learning spaces she organized with her colleagues at the Highlander Folk School and the nation-wide citizen schools gave disenfranchised African-Americans *‘…a taste of the emancipatory possibilities inherent in every local community*’, and support to begin their change work back home (Preskill & Brookfield 2009: 78).

This example and those reported above suggest that there is a potentially rich democratic vocation in this approach to leadership. The myth of the omnipotent heroic leader who transfers downward and single-handedly directives about social change work is replaced with a more widely distributed model that fosters leaderful social spaces (Raelin 2005). In practice, however, this approach may or may not result in democratic leadership. To become democratic, the work of leadership must have a strong value orientation (the social justice compass in SCOs) and must place interest in human value in its own right (grounded humanism in SCOs). Furthermore, content and form must match one another in democratic leadership work. Those espousing it must be deeply committed to ‘walking the talk,’ that is, practicing what is preached, consistently enacting democratic discourse in their own treatment of one another. Democratic leadership fosters transformation, inclusiveness and empowerment.

The leadership practices depicted in the social change leadership framework are examples of democratic leadership. Reframing practices create a space of interaction where dehumanization is rejected and replaced by alternative imaginaries that transform modes of knowing, speaking and being in the world. In rehearsing the language of the future, the community also learns to articulate their voice and a powerful discourse for deliberation in public spaces. Bridging difference creates a space of interaction that legitimates and honours the value of multiple voices, nurtures tolerance and dialogue among diverse perspectives and fosters collaboration among ‘equals.’ For members of marginalized communities, this represents a counterpoint to the experience of inequality and exclusion, thus making their experience more inclusive. Unleashing human energies creates a space of interaction that cherishes the value of lived experience and helps its carriers articulate it as legitimate knowledge to be used in collective action. As people learn and practice together how to use this and new capabilities they also develop a sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, recognizing their right to conditions that dignify their humanity. This way, unleashing practices contribute to empower participants.

Critical management and leadership scholars claim that democratic leadership is possible in any type of organization. But research suggests that full participation does not happen automatically or by ruling. It requires steady leadership work that often goes against the grain of what is rewarded in today’s society (Raelin 2005; Preskill & Brookfield 2009). Yet only intentional work aiming to enact the democratic content of a humanistic ethos transforms collective into democratic leadership.

When people recognize their dignity they are more likely to recognize that of others, and connect their particular problems to the universal aspirations of a better life for all. Printed on the back of a donation slip for a SCO fighting the prison focus of the US justice system, a former prisoner turned board member said: ‘*The future is not a place we are going to, it is something we are creating. We have a responsibility to create a better world, to leave a more hopeful legacy for future generations*’. In fact, this statement suggests that democratic leadership is propitious for the cultivation of democracy in society, by nurturing responsible, engaged citizenship.

### 4.5.1 Developing leadership, constructing democracy

Civic organizations transform participants into engaged citizens through intentional work to nurture social spaces that are full of leadership. They are social because they represent reconfigurations of existing social arrangements and relationships, where participants, engaged in the organization’s work, practice and learn to relate democratically to one other and to others outside that space. In these spaces participants ‘taste’ what it feels like, in mind and body, to live outside of the structures of oppression that characterize and mark their daily experience. They are counterfactual for people who experience marginalization, powerlessness and inequality on a daily basis. They represent instances, existential moments where the micro and macro aggressions of social inequality are ‘suspended,’ moments where the ‘self-in-relation’ experiences what it is to live in a just world. This experience is transformative.

The idea of space that nurture democracy is not new. Calling civic associations ‘schools of democracy,’ the neo-Tocquevillian civic engagement tradition connects trust and social bonds generated through organizational interactions to democratic virtues like civic-mindedness and tolerance for diversity, and thus to a healthy democratic political culture (Clemens 2006; Van Der Meer & Van Ingen 2009). In the social change literature, a variety of contexts where space is key are described with names like public homeplaces (Belenky et al. 1997); authentic public spaces (Greene 1988); free spaces (Polletta 1999; Evans & Boyte 1986); and safe spaces (Gamson 1996). The idea also appears in the figure of ‘movement half way houses’ so important for the Civil Rights Movement (Morris 1984), and in the reference of a ‘beloved community’ (Marsh 2004). Common to all these labels is the image of a social space where the object of action is of public and collective nature, but the process to approach action springs from participation in a protected, intimate, familiar, safe and ‘beloved’ site, a welcome space that did not exist before for its vulnerable members, and that is transformational in as much as it returns them to an existential position where dignity and self-worth are real.

Others have theorized how these opportunities for human development at the micro level connect to social change at the macro level. Intentionally designed organizational spaces help ‘*people develop the freedom to gaze on old arrangements with a critical eye, dream of better ways, and actually imagine and build new models for living*’ (Belenky et al. 1997: 64). These experiences represent ‘fractures of the hegemonic armour’ (Fine et al. 2000), places where inklings of a just future become alive and real in time and place, thus transforming consciousness in ways that weaken hegemony.Here individuals can discover again their vocation and live it as free human beings (Freire 1970). They become capable of controlling their own destiny, and of defining ‘the kind of lives they have reason to value’ (Sen 1999).

More recent research helps understand the specific mechanisms by which associational practices help construct democracy from the ground up (Chetkovich & Kunreuther 2006). For example in the context of environmental SCOs, Dodge (2009) documents the creation of ‘containers’ for engagement, where individuals start viewing themselves as citizens and take up this identity in an active way. An example is inverting the content of the hierarchical structure so that the constituents become the key experts and leaders guiding the process, while staff and experts support and offer them resources. Being called ‘leaders,’ formally represented in boards and coordinating councils, participating actively in working committees for political campaigns, testifying in policy hearings, writing op-eds and networking and coalition building are examples of membership activities cultivated in a ‘deliberative space’ that nurtures leadership development and encourages the practice of these capabilities in actual political contexts, thus sharpening citizen skills in action (Dodge 2011).

The building of this space is the practical construction of democracy on the ground, and highlights the potential role of vulnerable members from civil society as protagonists of a new type of governance. Its construction, and the actual experience of living this space, represents an exercise of democracy, an enactment of its core values and principles, and a commitment to a worldview where the core values of social justice are brought into the present. It is the intentional, slow, cumulative and process-oriented construction of leadership and leaderful spaces, experienced at the most micro level, what must be highlighted as key leadership work for creating social change that also deepens democracy.

## 4.6. Conclusions

Combining the state of the art of two fields, our research integrates social innovation and leadership theories to answer its questions. It brings together a geographical perspective on social innovation that emphasizes the impact of structural neighbourhood features on innovation, and a critical constructionist perspective of leadership that explores how agency contributes to innovation. Findings from empirical research on leadership in SCOs using a constructionist perspective help to advance this agenda. They allow to operationalize the agentic dimensions of innovation without falling into a leader-centred approach that ignores the structural and context dependence factors emphasized by the geographical lens.

Prior empirical research suggests that organizations effectively producing social change are driven by a worldview grounded in social justice values, and anchored in a vision to bring a different future into the present, in response to a lived community problem. Strategic action helps build capacity oriented to cultivate and leverage power so that the organization can influence external actors to produce long term change outcomes. At the core of the framework, three types of relational practices represent leadership work that fosters this capacity: reframing discourse, bridging difference and unleashing human energies. These infuse with values the core social change tasks of organizing, advocacy, community building and service provision.

The patient cultivation of leadership capital supports proactive, strategic action articulated in a space owned by the group, and yields community capacity to leverage power to change structures, systems, thinking and relations. Leadership work of this type creates powerful and resilient capacity for public action over time. This is a virtuous cycle through which learning that generates efficacious action, that generates impact, engenders new collective capacity, that helps generate new learning, and so on.

Two propositions guided the empirical work that produced the findings presented in this book. First, that structural and historical-geographical features of the neighbourhood (such as civic capacity) both facilitate and limit the emergence of innovation that produces social transformations: the more civic capacity a neighbourhood exhibits, the more effective and scalable the emerging innovations will be. Second, that agency, manifested through leadership represents a key factor that helps manoeuvre the structural constraints and opportunities: the more democratic the leadership practices are in the emerging innovations, the more effective and scalable they will be.

Given that leadership must be studied in the context of the identified social innovations, the fieldwork and data collection included two separate stages, first to identify the neighbourhood features and innovations, and then to go into the innovations to explore their leadership dynamics. We were particularly interested in exploring the presence of the leadership practices, and the extent to which they reflected more democratic leadership forms on the ground. While the reader will be able to appreciate the leadership work throughout the description of the innovations themselves, at the end of each case we return to summarize our characterization of such leadership in action.

**Notes**

1. This and the next section draw heavily on the research reported and documented in Ospina et al. (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. These examples are drawn from our interview questionnaire. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)