SERES

TRANSFORMATIVE SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP

THEORY OF
change

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EDITORS
Jacob Carter, Corrina Grace, Sherry Miller

DESIGNER
Christa Ponce

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that operates in the US and beyond.

For further information about SERES please visit www.seres.org or contact:

SERES
3865 Lakeshore Avenue
Oakland, CA 94610

Ph: +1 949 447 5566
Email: info@seres.org

This document provides an overview of SERES' theory of change and pedagogical approach as it relates to our work in sustainability education and youth leadership development. The primary purpose of this document is to present a narrative that weaves together our own experiences from the last seven years working with economically marginalized and vulnerable communities on the frontlines of climate change with the technical and academic frameworks that have recently emerged in the sustainability leadership field. The objective is to provide a theoretical basis from which we can better understand the potential impact for social transformation and continue to design and innovate sustainability learning and leadership in a more systematic and strategic manner.

It is important to note that this document is not an academic investigation nor does it represent an exhaustive review of the literature and research that exists. It is, more than anything, a synthesis of practical experience, shared learning and current thought leadership in the field. In addition, as this work seeks to impact living systems - both social and ecological - we recognize that the work itself is subject to transformative and emergent change processes as described by Doug Reeler in his paper *A theory of social change and implications for practice, planning, monitoring and evaluation (2007).* Simply put, what is true today may not be tomorrow. With this in mind, we present this work in the spirit of making a contribution to this emerging and relatively new field with the hope that this may help to further accelerate actions and drive the transformation towards a more peaceful, just and regenerative society.

"The rates of social change, the movements of the world's people, industrialization, globalization, and militarization continue to escalate at an ever-accelerating pace. Educators face an unprecedented task. They must support people to become highly creative, collaborative, problem solvers, and critical thinkers. They must cultivate people's capacities to see the world from profoundly different perspectives. They must nourish people's capacities for connection and caring in a fragmented and divisive world. Nothing is more important."

Mary Field Belenky

Co-author of Women's Ways of Knowing and A Tradition That Has No Name

CREATING A

FUTURE

WE CAN
LIVE WITH

Our current industrialized-growth society and extractive economy convert natural resources into commodities and relationships into services without consideration for how this affects our broader social fabric and environmental ecosystems now and over time (Eisenstein, 2012). The global sustainability crisis is a result of this, manifesting in the myriad of interconnected political, social, environmental and economic challenges we see all around the world, threatening life and the future of our planet as we know it. Solving this crisis calls for nothing short of a transformation at every level of society as we radically and rapidly convert our current economy, systems and society from degenerative to regenerative, life-threatening to life-sustaining.

We are at a kairos moment in human history and the next generation, whose coming of age is marked by such unprecedented change and wicked global problems, has a decisive role to play. But creating climate-friendly and socially-aware citizens is not enough. The scale and pace at which transformation must take place is beyond anything we have previously imagined. In the words of the People's Climate March, "to change everything, it takes everyone."

The work of transformation is more than the work of a handful of leaders and conscientious citizens, it requires a movement of leaders...a leaderful generation.

At a time when there are more young people in the world than ever before, the decisions and actions of this generation will be instrumental in shaping the future. SERES believes that unleashing the leadership of this generation to create a movement of climate leaders is the only way to meet the rapidly accelerating global crisis at the scale and pace necessary to preserve human life, human dignity and the integrity of our planetary systems. This leadership is distinct from that which has brought us here and shaped the predominant world view. It is based on an understanding of the world that is deeply rooted in our common humanity, our connection to each other, and our connection to this Earth. It is a leadership that is committed to working authentically, inclusively and transformatively, taking responsibility for fellow human beings and translating it into actions to create a future that we can all live with. This document and the work it represents are dedicated to this leadership, and to the leaderful generation that embodies it.

3

Transformative Sustainability Leadership

SERES' theory of change proposes an approach to education designed to cultivate this leadership, supporting young people to lead where others have not. We believe that given encouragement and the right kind of learning, any young person can become a highly influential and impactful leader, deeply committed to addressing the root causes of injustice and inequality in their community. We call this approach Transformative Sustainability Leadership (TSL).

TSL is a learning ecosystem that teaches young people to navigate through emerging contexts, lead from a living processes paradigm[1], and commit to taking action. This learning ecosystem:

Builds critical core competencies for effective sustainability leadership

Provides tools for both personal and societal transformation

Cultivates the skills and processes to experience a higher level of self-identity beyond the ordinary, reactive ego level

Creates a common connection and identity beyond traditional boundaries of race, religion, class, culture, politics, wealth, and education

Connects young leaders into a diverse, dynamic network of entrepreneurs, movement builders, artists, activists, and changemakers united by their own sense of agency and urgency, committed to working together to build a better world.

"The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering."

Ben Okri

[1]An understanding that the world is an interconnected web of constantly changing, dissolving and emerging relationships (Burns, Vaught & Bauman, 2015, p133; Wheatley, 2006).

IMPACT³

A transformative learning ecosystem recognizes that fundamental and lasting social change can only be achieved at the intersection of people, process and place - what SERES refers to as P3 or Impact³.

(Figure 1)

figure 1
SERES Impact cubed model

Without these elements, programs and projects do not have the infrastructure to sustain change over time, much less transform systems and cultures.

The TSL framework has been built on this principle, working to incorporate people, process and place by:

- Teaching the tools for transformation through experiential and interactive processes that engage participants at the level of hearts and minds

- Fostering the leadership and growth of whole people and empowering and engaging with them as the principal agents of change

- Supporting people to work for change in their place, strengthening their connection to community while building resilience and sustainability from the individual to the societal level

DRIVING CHANGE THROUGH
BREADTH AND DEPTH

TSL recognizes the importance of working both broadly (building movements of people working towards change) and deeply (developing highly skilled, transformative leaders) to create the kind of systemic impact that is capable of transforming our systems, societies, economies and cultures. For example change may be brought about through a wide-scale episodic or symptomatic action (e.g. many people participating in a national cleanup day) or a strategic system action engineered by a handful of highly skilled entrepreneurs or leaders (e.g. an initiative to ban single-use plastic bags).

IMPACT³

TRANSFORMATION

transformative leadership *(depth)*

SYSTEMIC

SYMPTOMATIC

EPISODIC

building movements *(breadth)*
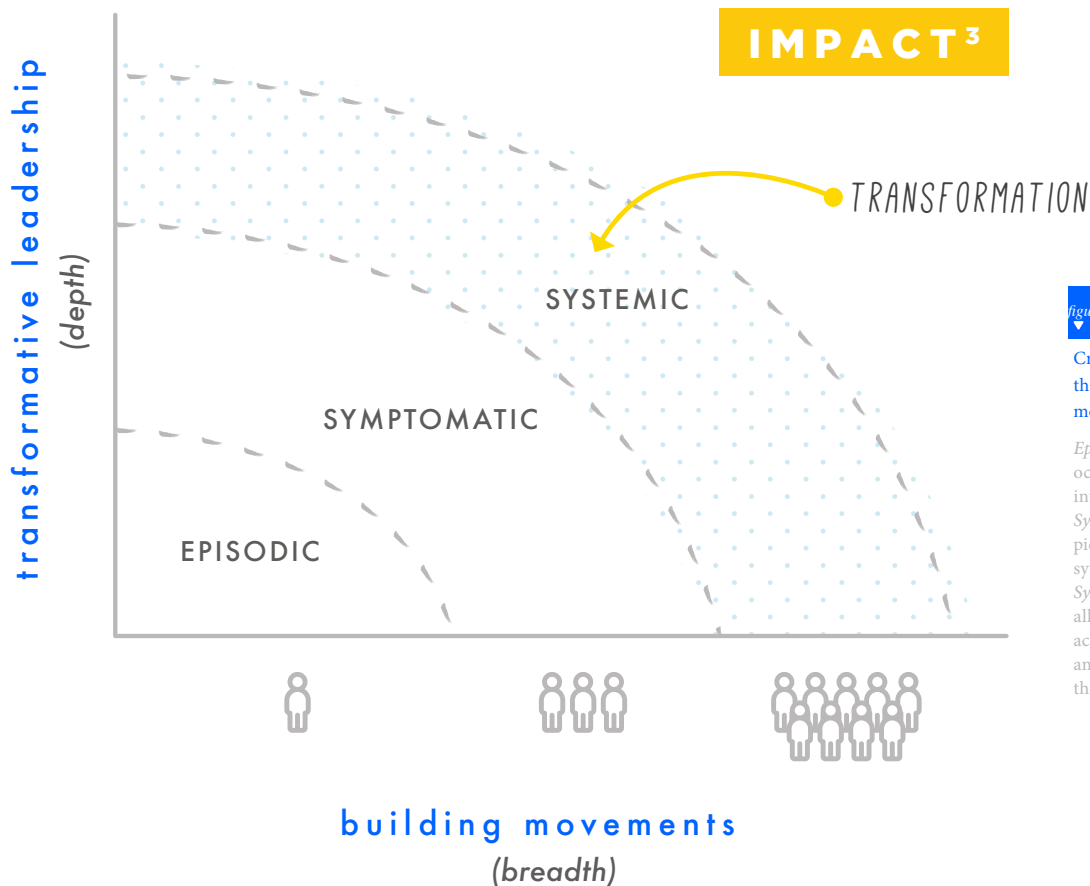
figure **2**

Creating systems transformation through leadership and movement building

Episodic: one-off, occurring occasionally or at irregular intervals.
Symptomatic: reactionary, piecemeal, responding to symptoms.
Systemic: change that pervades all parts of a system, taking into account the interrelationships and interdependencies among those parts.

The TSL framework fosters a bi-directional approach to transformation of both breadth and depth through three key strategies:

1 Development of core sustainability leadership competencies,

2 Implementation of Community Action Plans (CAPs)

3 Building of a dynamic, highly connected and diverse community of transformative young leaders.

These strategies are shown in the first tier of the outcomes map in Figure 3 below and outlined in further detail in the following section. These strategies have a high level of interdependence, working in parallel and complementary processes that create impact at both individual and population levels. The purpose of these strategies is to create pathways through which young leaders are working to create the new systems and structures that will build more sustainable, resilient communities. In order to achieve this goal, these pathways to resilience must "build power, expand democracy, increase community voice and transform place" (DeBacker et al., 2012, p IV). The outcomes map *(Figure 3)* shows how this happens over time through short, medium and long-term outcomes.
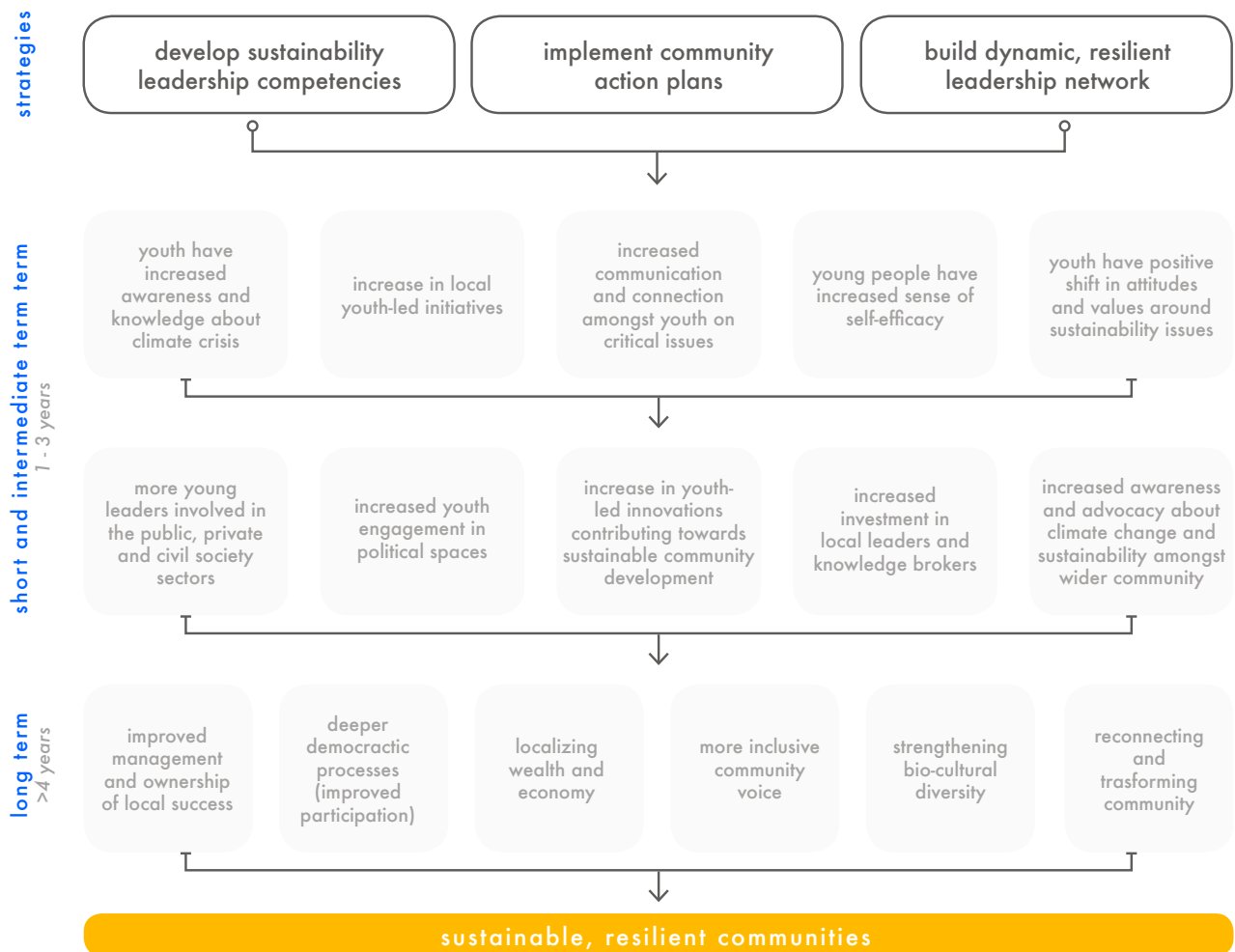
strategies

develop sustainability leadership competencies	implement community action plans	build dynamic, resilient leadership network

short and intermediate term term
1 - 3 years

youth have increased awareness and knowledge about climate crisis	increase in local youth-led initiatives	increased communication and connection amongst youth on critical issues	young people have increased sense of self-efficacy	youth have positive shift in attitudes and values around sustainability issues

more young leaders involved in the public, private and civil society sectors	increased youth engagement in political spaces	increase in youth-led innovations contributing towards sustainable community development	increased investment in local leaders and knowledge brokers	increased awareness and advocacy about climate change and sustainability amongst wider community

long term
>4 years

improved management and ownership of local success	deeper democractic processes (improved participation)	localizing wealth and economy	more inclusive community voice	strengthening bio-cultural diversity	reconnecting and trasforming community

sustainable, resilient communities

figure **3**

Outcomes map

In communities that have various generations of young leaders that have participated in the TSL programs and where there are multiple super-organizers (see Section 3.3.3) maintaining a strong and vibrant network, it is possible to see how these strategies work to create impact, influence and leverage. For example, through this process many young women find the courage and inspiration to step into spaces of leadership and influence that have been traditionally male-dominated, and from where they can advocate and be role models for issues of gender equality. Other young graduates have found themselves stepping into positions in local government, from where they are able to propose alternative policies and economic solutions that promote sustainable development and protect their community's resources. And still other young leaders are beginning to attract the attention and support of both local and international donors who are interested in investing in them and their projects. More information about the long-term impact of the TSL framework in communities where Asociación SERES has worked in Central America can be found in the research paper: *Analysis of Youth Leadership and Empowerment towards Sustainable Community Livelihoods: A case study in Guatemala and El Salvador* (Rivera, to be published in November 2016).

Transformative Sustainability Leadership Strategies

3.3.1

STRATEGY 1

Sustainability Leadership Competencies

In discussing sustainability leadership competencies, SERES has chosen to use the framework proposed by Wiek, Withycombe and Redman in the research paper Key Competencies in Sustainability: A Reference Framework for Academic Program Development (2011). This framework identifies five key competencies necessary to enable learners to analyze and solve sustainability problems, anticipate and prepare for future sustainability challenges, and create and seize opportunities for innovation in sustainability (Wiek et al., 2011). *The five competencies identified in the framework are:*

> systems thinking competence
> normative competence
> strategic thinking competence
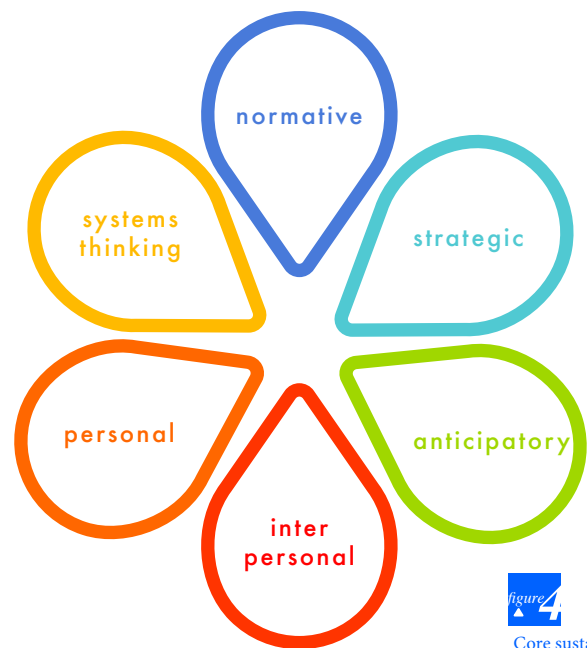> anticipatory competence
> interpersonal competence[2]

figure 4

Core sustainability leadership competencies

The TSL framework adds a sixth competence to this list: personal competence. The addition of this sixth competence recognizes that the dynamic interrelationship between inner life and the outer world is a fundamental aspect in transformational leadership (Pearson, 2012) . It also shifts the overall focus of the framework from academic to transformative by embedding the person into the change process. As emerging transformational leaders journey out into the world there is a parallel, internal journey that takes place, moving from reactive ego constraints to proactive courage and creative consciousness. The journey to develop this consciousness requires cultivating practices of thinking, being and relating that create authenticity, strengthen awareness of self and deepen our understanding of the interdependence of all life - all important characteristics of a transformational leader (Pearson, 2012).

2 Definitions of these core competencies are provided in Appendix A

3.3.1.1

the ebb and flow of transformative learning

Transformational learning is most impactful when the learner is able to move through a constant ebb and flow of experiencing and reflecting, moving out into the world, and coming back to self. A transformative learning ecosystem should provide space for this process, which more often than not has a non-linear time element. The TSL framework does this by offering a set of programs and training modules that are anchored around nine learning spheres. Each of the learning spheres contributes to the development of multiple sustainability competencies (Figure 4). Any TSL program or event uses a cross-cutting approach that draws on each of the nine spheres, which together create a rich and transformative learning experience. As young people participate in these programs as trainees, mentors or facilitators they have the opportunity to incrementally strengthen core competencies and broaden and deepen their understanding of TSL.

figure **5**

SERES learning spheres of transformation

sphere 1
SUSTAINABILITY

Understanding the contemporary global sustainability crises, and the impact this has on social, environmental and economic challenges such as health, migration, climate, human rights, social and environmental justice and development.

sphere 2
PERSONAL MASTERY

Cultivating the skills and processes to experience a higher level of self identity beyond the ordinary, reactive ego level, facilitating a journey from reactive constraints to proactive courage to creative consciousness.

sphere 3
EXPRESSION

Using voice work, body work, social media and other communication platforms to develop clear communications skills and build self-confidence

sphere 4
LEADERSHIP -IN-ACTION

Exploring leadership as a verb, that requires doing, and an artform, that requires practice - informing the way that I work and walk in the world.

sphere 5
SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION

Developing a critical lens to recognize and understand game changing" solutions that move from symptomatic to systemic transformation.

sphere 6
CITIZEN MUSCLES

Developing self-efficacy through active community engagement, that helps build the skills and contacts required to make changes happen

sphere 7
NETWORKING

Developing a self-supporting network with peer-to-peer support and mentoring to move from episodic to transformational change

sphere 8
PEACEBUILDING

Teaching about conflict mediation and peacebuilding training through non-competitive play[1]

sphere 9
ACCELERATING ACTIONS

Teaching project planning tools and skills for innovation and creation to accelerate actions and increase impact

transformative pedagogies

The processes used in TSL are based around experiential and transformative pedagogies that include exploration, interaction, dialogue, critical reflection and building authentic relationships (Taylor, 2009). This type of learning "dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world" (O'Sullivan, Morrell, & O'Connor, 2002, p. xvii) allowing participants to learn at the level of hearts and minds that is not often achieved in traditional transmissive learning processes.

These strategies are not only effective in developing a critical lens around sustainability, since they involve "our understanding of ourselves...our relationships with other humans...our understanding of relations of power...our visions of alternative approaches to living and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace" (O'Sullivan et al, 2002), but have also been shown to be foundational in fostering leadership development (Burns et al., 2015).

Further information about the individual programs and curriculum used by Asociación SERES in their work in Central America can be found in the SERES Synopsis 2016, available online at http://seres.org/programs/ or by contacting the organization.

3.3.2

S T R A T E G Y   2

Community Action Plans (CAPs)

TSL recognizes that young people are often the prime movers of social change and leaders in innovation, and that their energy and creative ideas can be truly incredible. However in order to allow these ideas to flourish, it is important to provide youth with a voice and a safe place where they can push boundaries, experiment, watch, listen and learn. The TSL framework does this through the Community Action Plan (CAP). The CAP is a change idea or initiative designed, developed and implemented by the participants to address the most pressing concerns that they identify in their community.

As a core strategy within the TSL framework, the CAP has four main objectives:

> Helping learners to develop an identity as a leader (with self and others) by discovering their capacity to enact change and positively influence the world and others

> Creating opportunities for emerging leaders to practice their skills, build their toolkit and develop experience leading a community project while strengthening the critical lens on systems transformation

> Rooting young leaders to "place" by restoring and strengthening their own economic, ecological, cultural and political connections to community

> Building actions and strategies for community climate resilience

The dimensions and direction of the CAP are as limitless as the imagination, drive, creativity and resources of the youth leaders, addressing issues such as human and environmental health, education, conservation, climate change adaptation, agrobiodiversity and food sovereignty. As an element within a dynamic learning ecosystem, the CAPs themselves also change and morph over time, moving from episodic to systematic as participants deepen and strengthen their own leadership. For example, moving from a one-off tree-planting event to looking at education, community development strategy and policy around environmental conservation. Since all participants are involved in a CAP, it also creates a common thread to share stories and experiences through the network. For example, two groups addressing water contamination issues in their local community may approach the solution very differently, one through an education lens and the other through a direct-action lens. The opportunity to share and discuss these approaches creates a rich co-learning environment and contributes towards building stronger movements over time.

"The great aim of education is not knowledge but action."

Herbert Spencer

3.3.3

STRATEGY 3

building a movement of leaders

The model of leadership upheld in TSL assumes that everyone has the capacity for leadership, and that the role of that leadership is not to lead over, but to lead with. With this perspective, our leadership becomes rooted in relationships, and the importance of connection and interdependence is paramount. It is this understanding that makes the third strategy of TSL - building a dynamic, highly connected and diverse network of transformative young leaders - so important.

The characteristics of this network - as a reflection of the individual elements - is also highly important. In the book *Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, Brafman & Beckstrom (2008) explore the characteristics and potential of two different types of organizations and networks: the traditional, centralized network (the spider) and the decentralized starfish network. The TSL framework sees to create the latter type of network: leaderless yet leaderful, distributed, highly connected and unstoppable.

The TSL framework is designed to encourage these qualities by cultivating and supporting active nodes of "Super-Organizers". In Asociación SERES' work in Central America, these Super-Organizers are classified into four roles: Ambassadors, Catalyzers, Champions and Entrepreneurs. These roles are not mutually exclusive and it is possible that one person may have multiple roles. A description of each of these roles is briefly outlined below:

4

TYPES OF
SUPER-ORGANIZERS

ambassadors

trained and certified facilitators of TSL programs, ambassadors organize and facilitate events, provide peer-to-peer learning, and support the emergence of new circles of young leaders in their communities.

catalyzers

provide horizontal and vertical support (e.g. mentoring, peer-to-peer feedback) to their peers and other young people in their community. They inspire and connect individuals and groups and, through their movements and connections, provide the support and infrastructure for growth and expansion of the network. Together with Ambassadors, Catalyzers also drive the demand for more education and programs, encouraging and inspiring other young people to get involved.

champions

passionate advocates for unleashing youth leadership to build a better future. Champions are not exclusively youth, but encompass a broader community of supporters that are dedicated and committed to creating space for and lifting up the voices of these unlikely, transformative young leaders.

entrepreneurs

hands-on project people that are designing and implementing practical solutions to address economic and social transformation of their communities. These may range from localized initiatives (e.g. implementation of sustainable farming practices) to much larger projects.

The specific roles of Super-Organizers will vary depending on the needs and requirements of the network itself. However, all Super-Organizers role model the power and potential of youth leadership. This is important now more than ever, at a time when we need strong role models who can demonstrate that new ways of seeing, being and doing are possible. This is particularly true for those unlikely leaders that come from marginalized and frontline communities, where their success and impact can have a catalyzing effect on other young people from similar backgrounds, for whom role models are few and far between.

4

CONCLUSION

Over the last seven years SERES has been developing, piloting and implementing the TSL framework. Working broadly, deeply and inclusively with young people from the center, the margins and the frontlines we have seen the impact of this work: increasing community resilience and reducing vulnerability of people and communities on the frontlines of climate change, helping to influence changes in policy, practice, regulations and public opinion towards a socially-just climate resilience agenda and finding ways to leverage investment from funders to support community-led strategies to address vulnerability and build resilience.

TSL offers a solution to the increasing demand for sustainability education and the urgent need for new leadership that challenges existing paradigms. It also provides the opportunity for those who stand to lose the most to play a defining role, empowering young people to step into committed and responsible leadership, shaping the future they want, aligned with society's broader needs. On the frontlines of enormous political, social, environmental and economic changes, united in their stand for justice and equality for people and the planet, these young leaders are changing the status quo.

5
PATHWAYS
forward

As the number of TSL trainers, trainees, educators, students, facilitators and learners grows, so too will the body of knowledge and experience and, of course, its impact. But will this growth be enough? The size and urgency of the contemporary sustainability crisis calls for us to find ways to transform at a rapid scale and pace fast enough to adequately prepare ourselves and the next generation for the challenges that lie ahead. It is here that innovation and creativity is required. TSL is by its very nature experiential and co-created, transforming even as it transforms. It cannot be distilled into content-based modules taught by a teacher standing in front of a classroom of students, which challenges traditional scaling methods.

We have wrestled with the question of scale for many years, searching for ways to step up to the ever increasing need for urgency without losing the essence of what makes these programs unique and effective. As we hold this question, there are a number of pathways that we are beginning to explore: expanding the youth leadership network beyond borders to build the bigger "we"; bringing together communities of young people whose lives, foodsheds, economies and cultures are deeply interwoven, yet separated by political, geographic and social boundaries; creating a regional resilience hub to offer safe and creative spaces to bring together emerging young scholars with community leaders and knowledge brokers; and experimenting in ways that we can use the Impact 3 model to scale horizontally rather than vertically.

We are exploring with emergent strategies and invite you to explore too. The time is now. We need more change agents calling us to find creative solutions and possibilities. We need young people finding their voices and becoming a "leaderful generation". We need leaders who optimize, use ancestral wisdom, collaborate, and believe in themselves and their abilities to facilitate positive change. We need transforming leaders.

If you find resonance with this work, whether as a trainer or trainee, educator, student, practitioner or learner, please feel free to contact us with any questions, comments or experiences that you may like to share. We also encourage you to read more about the work of the other organizations and practitioners mentioned in the acknowledgements and also the research and publications listed in the bibliography, which have been influential in our own learning and growth. Above all, wherever you are in your journey, if you have come far enough to read this, then we encourage you to keep on going. In the words of Antonio Machada, "there is no road, the road is made by walking."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is a celebration and reflection of the support, impact and influence of so many inspirational people that have directly and indirectly guided our thinking and strategies over the last seven years. We wish to acknowledge the collaborative effort of so many and hope that by putting this together, we may "pay forward" this gift.

We also wish to acknowledge and recognize two organizations with which SERES has celebrated a dynamic and collaborative working partnership over the years, and who, both together and individually have also contributed to this emerging body of work. In particular we recognize the Principals of these two organizations: Abigail Reyes (Director, University of California's Sustainability Initiative) and Sue Lennox (CEO, OzGREEN). To these two women we give thanks and honor their leadership, dedication and commitment towards building a better future for all.

We would like to acknowledge the other people and organizations for whom we hold deep respect and admiration and whose work has inspired, informed and strengthened our own: Fran Peavey, Joanna Macy, Movement Generation, Movement Strategy Center, OzGREEN, Rockwood and the Social Transformation Project. Thank you.

Lastly but perhaps most importantly, we would like to acknowledge and express our deep admiration and respect for those young leaders with whom SERES has worked for the last 7 years, many of whom are from frontline communities in Guatemala and El Salvador. It is your courage and leadership that is reflected here and without you this work, this movement, would not exist.

APPENDIX A

DEFINITIONS OF KEY COMPETENCIES IN SUSTAINABILITY

Systems Thinking: the ability to analyze complex systems across different domains (society, environment, economy, etc.) and different scales (local to global), thereby considering cascading effects, inertia, feedback loops and other systemic features related to sustainability issues and sustainability problem-solving frameworks.

• • • • •

Normative: the ability to evaluate the (un)sustainability of current and/or future states of social-ecological systems and then to co-create new or alternative sustainability visions for these systems. This capacity is based on acquired normative knowledge including concepts of justice, equity, social-ecological integrity, and ethics.

• • • • •

Strategic: the ability to "get things done", and transition from the current state to the desired (sustainable) state'. This involves familiarity with real-world situations and relationships, political understanding, challenging positions at the right time, being able to solve logistical problems, using language that non-academics are comfortable with, working with deadlines that governments insist on, and so forth.

• • • • •

Anticipatory: the ability to collectively analyze, evaluate, and craft rich "pictures" of the future related to sustainability issues and sustainability problem-solving frameworks, thereby being able to analyze situations such as unintended harmful consequences and/or intergenerational equity.

• • • • •

Interpersonal: the ability to motivate, enable, and facilitate collaborative and participatory research and problem solving, and the capacity to understand, embrace, and facilitate diversity across cultures, social groups, communities, and individuals is recognized as a key component of this competence.

• • • • •

Personal: going beyond competence and skills, being able to live life from a creative rather than reactive viewpoint, aligning action with values, being driven by personal vision and purpose, understanding the creative tension between vision and reality, self-efficacy, personal mastery.

APPENDIX B

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