

The role of moral leadership for sustainable consumption and production

some theoretical and normative explorations

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Abstract:

In this paper we argue that an adequate understanding of sustainable consumption and production (SCP) involves a mature consciousness of the interdependence between ourselves and the rest of our human family and its habitat. The principles, the actions and the vision that form the basis for SCP are not unknown, but there is a considerable gap between knowledge and action and behavioural incentives are not sufficient for system change. In the conversations between the authors of this paper, a practitioner and an academic, on the reasons for this knowledge-action gap there emerged a common recognition of the potentially significant role of values and particularly values-based leadership in the processes and partnerships that work for sustainability transitions in SCP. Our starting point is that values, what we humans consider to be good, are formed by a range of factors (cultural, political, social, religious) and are thus subject to change. Individuals who internalize values that are supportive of SCP manifest values-based leadership and if these are accompanied by specific capabilities, such leaders will exemplify the necessary paradigm shift towards sustainable consumption and production and lead the wider society towards it.

The paper outlines how one model of values based leadership — the framework of moral leadership (ML) developed by Eloy Anello and others at Nur University in Bolivia — supports transformation towards sustainable consumption and production.

Keywords

moral leadership, transformation, capabilities, training, responsibility, mature society

1 Introduction

The need to transform the prevailing patterns of consumption and production as they have been developed in the industrialised world and now adopted across the globe, towards more sustainable ones that respect the planetary limits needs little elaboration. What rather needs

elaboration is the pathways on which we can reach the required transformations. It is clear how challenging these are from the limited progress we made so far. The challenge of transforming our societies towards sustainability lies in adopting a systemic perspective and translate that into responsible and sustainable consumption and production patterns, worldwide, including the physical, social and institutional structures involved. The pioneers who act upon this will exercise *de facto* leadership that is necessary to help individuals to transform themselves and the structures of society. To be effective as a leader however, such a pioneer must be conscious of the elements and the capabilities that are most conducive to bring about the changes aimed for. In this paper we seek to elaborate on the role of leadership in steering societies in their micro and macro context on those pathways; discussing what type of leadership it takes, what is required as motivating factors for such leaders to develop, and exploring one promising model of leadership that, if adopted, could speed up the transition to more sustainable patterns of production and consumption considerably.

2 Leadership and societal change

Transition to lifestyles for sustainable consumption and production (SCP) involves both a change in the thinking, values and behaviour of individuals and in the structures of the systems they make up. Any type of fundamental change in the system at whichever scale — populations, communities, firms, etc. — depends both on individual knowledge, values and actions, and on the ability to channel individual action into collective enterprises that change the structures of the system that in turn further empower individuals to act responsibly. Actors in this process range from individuals to large institutions including governments, private companies and non-governmental organizations and various hybrid constellations. Often, however, the role of individuals as leaders can easily be obscured and omitted in the analysis of large-scale societal change. The literature on socio-technical transitions seem to be indicative of this, for example in the book synthesizing a six-year research project on transitions, there is no reference to leadership (Grin et al., 2010). On the other hand this literature identifies the ‘technological niche’ as the locus of innovational change, these niches are grassroots initiatives that are enveloped in a multi-level context of socio-technical regimes and landscapes Geels (2002a; 2002b; 2004). This has a parallel in Toynbee’s (1939) discussion of creative minorities as the locus of societal change. Attitudes and patterns of behaviour are taken from the family to the larger society. Likewise changes in the larger society start in small groups with a high level of trust, unity and cooperation such as families or circles of friends or colleagues. It is only in groups that the concept of leadership emerges and the role of leaders become visible. Leaders in this sense are people who have a larger than average influence on their environment and thus have larger potential to change it, or prevent it from change depending on the pattern of leadership they adopt.

2.1 Leadership for sustainability and against sustainability

Decision-making for SCP, and many other challenges of a mature society (see discussion below) ask different qualities of leaders than what has been sufficient in societies before. The challenge of change towards a higher degree of sustainability are e.g. a high degree of complexity, uncertainty and connectivity. They are complex in the deep system changes that need to be accomplished, uncertain in how environmental degradation (like climate change) will play out in reality, uncertain in what policies are more effective and/or legitimate and in what various actors will be willing to do, and they display connectivity over space and time between all inhabitants of the globe including future generations.

Transition towards SCP is a comprehensive subject and many leadership functions are involved, both generally and for specific groups at specific governance levels, functions that often revolve around the way knowledge is generated and used and the type of institutions (norms) that are adopted to guide individual and collective actors (Meijerink and Stiller forthcoming). However, the spectrum of required leadership functions provide sufficient arguments for why some of the most established leadership patterns do not have much to contribute as such for this kind of policy issues. Whether one rules by the power of ones position or authority, or wraps his guidance in a veil of paternalistic “love”, or wipes out all knowledge of possible other contributors by ones own superior knowledge, or plainly manipulates to influence the outcome, such types of leadership are obstacles to transformational change. Authoritarian, paternalistic, know-it-all, or manipulative, they all share the feature that they seek to dominate decision-making, serve an egoistic need for power, and most important, completely neglect to develop the potentialities of the members of the group (see below section 3.1 for discussion on the three key functions of a group). This means that the “group cannot be better than its leader” (Anello and Hernández, 1996:34). Transformational change will require more from individuals and groups. It will require processes where individuals' capacity to serve the common good are continuously strengthened and used as a resource for transformational change. The moral leadership framework we are about to examine recognizes this need.

2.2 Motivating new types of leaders in a mature society

In the previous section we discussed the role of leadership and leaders in the transition to SCP and why we have to leave old leadership patterns behind and train leaders with new capabilities and indeed new values in order to enable transition. In the following section we will elaborate on one model of leadership that meets these criteria. First, however, we need to elaborate on the normative principles for motivating the promotion of this values based leadership model . This is a recurring omission in the literature on leadership models for sustainability that often describe or prescribe types of leadership that have proven to be effective based either on particular cases or based on a conceptual model (Meijerink and Stiller forthcoming). This research seldom elaborates on the reasons (such as personal values or knowledge) for why specific individuals step up to promote sustainability or if and how it would be possible to actively nurture the development of such leaders. We are not basing our analysis on psychological analysis of ‘good’ sustainability leaders but rather on normative theories about who should take responsibility and act to address specific governance challenges such as that of SCP. Karlsson (2007) summarized the principles that have been raised for allocating governance for sustainable development to specific actors at specific levels (along the vertical and horizontal axes in a system of multilevel governance) into the areas of culpability, capacity and concern.

The principle of culpability (also referred to as the contribution principle), see Karlsson (2007) and Barry (2005), argues that those who are causing a problem also should get involved in addressing it, that is simply an implication of justice. In a society that has reached a level of integration as ours, many of our individual and collective actions have implications for the planet and its inhabitants, now and in the future. There is no wall anymore to dump our waste at the other side of a border as we have reached the limits of the earth system.

However, the principle of culpability is not sufficient to allocate responsibility. For example, there are those who are consuming unsustainable products but who have no other options (based on lack of knowledge or resources). They do not have the capacity. Other

actors may have capacity to change the opportunities for sustainable consumption (governments providing subsidies etc.) irrespective of their direct contribution to the problem.

But the principles of culpability and capacity are not very relevant unless actors feel concern for the welfare of other human beings, a deep concern for the plight of others is necessary as a complement to the principles of culpability and capacity (Karlsson 2007). Even more, if this were present, it would reduce the need for information on who is culpable and who has capacity. It would encourage all to act. Such a concern for humanity can also be described as a matter of maturity, as Covey (1989) argues: childhood is characterised by dependence, we live the way we are told to, adolescence by independence, we keep ourselves busy proving that we can think for ourselves, maturity by interdependence, we have learned the limits of our independence and understand that we have to cooperate in order for life to flourish. This is true both for individuals and for groups. Understanding our interdependence leads to mutual concern as an element of enlightened self-interest (ref my thesis and others).

The practicality of relying on the principle of concern to motivate action of individuals, including to take bold leadership for sustainability, builds also on the assumption that human beings have an innate ability to rise above the utilitarian rational self-interest model of behaviour that underpins much of current economic and political analysis and express altruism, see e.g. Mansbridge (1990) and Monroe (1996). This means that humans have the ability to move away from the culture of contest where egos fight for themselves or their own group to a culture of cooperation for the benefit of themselves and others, others not being limited to anything short of the rest of humankind (Karlberg, 2004). The moral leadership framework that is discussed in the next section is developed to play a role in this. It is built on the notion that for the next stage of the evolution of humanity, it will be necessary for people to take more responsibility for the condition of the planet and the species inhabiting it. The kind of leadership that can help people to get there will have to be more horizontal and service oriented rather than top-down and control oriented. It consists of a number of elements, not the least of which is learning or developing some eighteen capabilities on the personal, interpersonal and social level. People mastering the elements and the capabilities of this kind of leadership can indeed be seen as a next generation of leaders for sustainability transitions.

3 Leadership as possibility: the moral leadership framework

3.1 Background and overview

In the traditional types of leadership, a leader's power comes in the category power over, it is the power to dominate which is the core of those models. The leadership model we will describe here, however, envisions a leader who has power to, the capacity to accomplish something, usually in consultation and cooperation with others:

"People who are acting in a cooperative or mutualistic manner in the pursuit of a common goal are exercising 'power with' one another rather than 'power over' one another" (Karlberg, 2004).

We do not believe that SCP can be reached by directing people how to live or what values to have. We will need to empower them all in a consultative process of which this moral leadership framework (MLF, see box 1) is an example. This framework was developed over a series of years by educators at Universidad Núr in Bolivia and others who were engaged in development and education projects around the world. They identified the lack of leadership based on ethical values as a root cause of the challenges that such projects, and society at large, faced. They also took inspiration from a WHO evaluation report which identified the absence of a moral leadership sufficiently committed to the values of social justice, equity

and participation that was underlying the global action plan Health for All by the Year 2000, as a major reason for the lack of implementation of this plan (Anello and Hernández, 1996). The report concluded that moral leadership was essential at all levels in ministries of health in order to inspire sustained efforts to work for the necessary changes as well as create a willingness to assume the personal risks inherent in dealing with resistance to change WHO (1988) quoted in Anello and Hernández (1996:ix).

Box 1

Moral leadership must:

Be a leadership that is fully aware of the dynamics of the processes of disintegration-integration which characterize our age, and consciously align itself with the processes of integration;

Have a clear vision of the society it wants to create and some of the strategies that will help bring it into being, and on the basis of this vision and these strategies, actively strive to construct a better society;

Entail a deep personal commitment to strive for individual transformation through the development and exemplification of a life based on ethical and moral principles, characterized by qualities of both uprightness and kindness, and to strive for collective transformation through actions which promote unity and justice.

Source: Anello and Hernández (1996:17)

Leadership, the MLF team argues, always occurs in a group. Otherwise the concept is meaningless. It is therefore essential to identify what a group is, and what functions it should have. In our context the group that we consider can be at all scales, from the smallest family unit to international organizations. The dynamics are of course very different depending on group size, membership and mandate but leadership always plays a crucial part where there are goals to reach in how the group operates and in its outcome. The MLF team considers that groups have three primary functions (Anello and Hernández, 1996:23):

- conserving and strengthening the unity of the group;
- carrying out those tasks for which the group was created;
- developing the potentialities of the members of the group

These functions are normative and may be far from how many groups and organizations define their own roles (if they take the time to do that) but it is undeniably a perspective that would by itself change the dynamics of many groups that seek to accomplish transformations towards a more sustainable world.

The first function is focused on building unity. This is a foreign concept in much societal discourse dominated by adversarialism and contest. Unity comes close in meaning to social cohesion that is seen as a requirement for the peaceful development of societies. Unity, however, is reaching deeper than the mere feeling of togetherness of people in a group, it represents a strong sense of common purpose and is based on genuine concern and love for the group members. The value of this function is obvious if we consider the

counterproductive result if efforts to address, for example environmental degradation, are made in ways that create division among people and nations.

The second function may seem obvious but is in practise often compromised.

The third function makes the group an arena where the potential of individual members are expanded, thus contributing both to their personal transformation, and indirectly to collective transformation as group members in this way will exert influence in much wider contexts with which they interact.

3.2 Basic elements of the framework

The conceptual framework of moral leadership as developed at Núr University is in line with modern leadership theory, and it also gives a workable model that is striving for real hands-on practical results (Menking, 2003). The methodologies that are used in the training activities that are developed from the framework are diverse, but at the level of concepts there are four elements, Núr (1999) quoted in Menking (2003):

- questioning mental models, our traditional, often unconscious way of interpreting the world;
- constructing conceptual frameworks, replacing mental models with conscious patterns of belief and understanding;
- development of capabilities, also called ‘empowering for action’, there are eighteen capabilities identified that are part of this framework;
- utilization of participatory techniques, practicing more horizontal and less vertical power structures

The developers of the MLF summarize the core rationale and elements of the framework in the following way:

“The world needs a new model of leadership dedicated to personal and collective transformation, totally committed to moral values and principles, based on the unfettered search after truth, inspired by a sense of transcendence, and guided by the exercise of capabilities in service to the common good.” (Anello and Hernández, 1996:51).

In more detail the MLF is built up of six elements. The first element concerns the style or the character of the leadership required. In order for leadership to serve the common good to its greatest extent, it will need to be service based, in line with the work of e.g. R.K. Greenleaf, so that its fruits are widely spread. In short, not he who dominates the most is the greatest leader, but he who serves his community the best. Currently authoritarian, paternalistic, manipulative, and know-it-all modes of leadership often “cripple those very groups which they claim to be serving” (Anello and Hernández, 1996:50). Too often groups are used to serve the leader’s will and thus the MLF team argues that what “the world needs at this point in time is to transfer power from the individual leader and give it to the group. Leadership must be accessible to all, not just a privileged few” (Anello and Hernández, 1996:50). They further stress that a true service oriented leader is not motivated by a desire for personal gain, but by love, love for the community or for the persons whom we serve, love for mankind, love for the best results for the job we are working on, unselfish love as we find in mothers and in many so called indigenous cultures in the world (Anello and Hernández, 1996).

The second element of the MLF is that the purpose of leadership is transformation, both personal and social. Without transformation nothing substantial really happens. That also means that leadership needs a vision, a comprehensive systemic vision of the desired future. We may just be organising only a small detail for that future, but we must have the vision in order to make the right choices, and the transformation we are striving to achieve must support it. Personal and social transformation support each other at different levels as

discussed above. To only change the system does not work. The flaws of the system are in the end brought into it by the people working in it, and without personal transformation, they will bring in the same flaws again. On the other hand we need the support of some group we are part of for our personal transformation.

The third element of the MLF is the moral responsibility to investigate and apply truth. Truth is of course a challenging and much contested concept, particularly in postmodern and critical discourses. Anello and Hernandez (1996:69) refer to contingent truth and ideal truth, or the facts as they are in the current situation or reality, and the desired future situation to be established, respectively. For scientists in the positivist tradition truth is an accepted concept that they see as the basis for good objective research, however:

“...scientists are the first to admit that their knowledge of contingent truth is relative and not absolute. This humble recognition is what keeps science on track. So, when we speak of the need to understand truth, it is a relative, but ever deepening understanding, and not an absolute one, that we are referring to” (Anello and Hernández, 1996:69).

Ideal truth is normative and is based on principles. For the MLF team the goal is to transform the contingent truth, the way things presently are, in a way that is in harmony with the ideal truth, that is, based on principles. Covey (1990:18) puts a similar emphasis on principles:

“Our effectiveness is predicated upon certain inviolate principles – natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as unchanging, as laws such as gravity are in the physical dimension. These principles are woven into the fabric of every civilized society and constitute the roots of every family and institution that has endured and prospered.”

This element of the MLF has different dimensions but at the core is that the love of searching for and applying truth is a fundamental characteristic for the leadership that the MLF team wishes to promote.

The fourth element of the framework is very much related to vision and to the mental models that we have of the human being. Anello and Hernandez (1996:78) discuss different assumptions about human nature and how it influences our social interactions. They discuss the racist concept, that one group of humans is inherently better than others; the concept of humans as rational animals, a concept we often see among scientists and in the western world in general. They also discuss the assumption that human beings are products or victims of forces beyond their control in society, the deterministic view; and the view of humans being born in sin and characterized by weakness and error. In contrast to these assumptions they favour the view that humans are essentially noble, like mines rich in gems that have to be developed, cultivated, polished, etc.

The fifth element of the MLF is transcendence. With this term the MLF team argues that as a leader, it is necessary to have a certain distance from operational problems in order to keep the focus, the vision and the goal. In practical terms, they stress that transcendence can help us to persevere when we encounter obstacles in our path of personal or social transformation. Transcendence is about the ability to see our problems under all circumstances in a broader perspective and not get lost in details. When we make decisions and take action guided by values and principles based on our understanding of truth, this gives us a sense of connection with the eternal and generates an experience of transcendence. Therefore, a working definition of transcendence is the capacity to detach oneself from “current reality” and to connect with those values and principles which one believes to be of eternal worth and which form part of one’s vision (Anello and Hernández, 1996:85).

The sixth and last element of the conceptual framework for moral leadership is the development of a number of capabilities, they have so far included eighteen such capabilities which all require knowledge about the concepts, and development of skills, attitudes and

qualities that go with them. The following section will look in more detail at a subset of these that seem particularly relevant for responsible living.

3.3 Capabilities for transformation towards SCP

It is widely recognized that there is considerable need for capacity building in order to support a sustainable society. The capabilities that the MLF team considers vital are less technical or issue-specific yet more fundamental for the ability of individuals to contribute to the common good by acting as moral leaders in a variety of collective arenas and thus contribute to social transformation.

These capabilities are, in their view, both necessary and within reach to develop by people of diverse educational and cultural backgrounds, whether they work in positions of formal leadership or not. They divide these capabilities into three categories: capabilities that contribute to personal transformation; capabilities that contribute to better interpersonal relationships; and capabilities that contribute to social transformation. In this paper we cannot explore the capabilities in the MLF, but table 1. lists the 18 capabilities that have so far been identified. We like to stress that the list is only indicative and not final, and that assigning individual capabilities to one of the three categories is often ambiguous.

Table 1.

Capabilities that contribute to personal transformation

- **S**ELF-EVALUATION
The capability to evaluate one's own strengths and weaknesses without involving the ego.
- **R**EFLECTION ON ACTION
The capability to learn from systematic reflection on action within a consistent, evolving conceptual framework.
- **I**NITIATIVE
The capability to take initiative in a creative and disciplined way.
- **P**ERSEVERANCE
The capability to endeavour, persevere and overcome obstacles in the achievement of goals.
- **S**ELF-DISCIPLINE
The capability to postpone immediate gratification by turning towards higher purposes.
- **R**ECTITUDE OF CONDUCT
The capability to manage one's affairs and responsibilities with rectitude of conduct, based on ethical and moral principles.
- **S**YSTEMIC THINKING
The capability to think systemically in the appraisal of a situation and in the search for solutions.

Capabilities that contribute to improving interpersonal relationships

- **E**MPATHY
The capability to imbue one's thoughts and actions with sincere love and care.

- **E**NCOURAGEMENT

The capability to encourage others and truly promote their development.

- **C**ONSULTATION

The capability to participate effectively in the process of consultation in group decision making.

- **F**AMILY RESPONSIBILITY

The capability to be a caring and responsible member of a family.

- **P**PROMOTING UNITY

The capability to create and promote unity in diversity.

Capabilities that contribute to social transformation

- **V**ISION

The capability to create a vision of a desired future based on shared values and principles, and to articulate it clearly and simply so that it inspires in others a sense of commitment towards its fulfilment.

- **T**TRANSFORMING DOMINANT RELATIONSHIPS

The capability to understand relationships of domination and to contribute towards their transformation into relationships based on reciprocity, sharing and mutual service.

- **J**USTICE

The capability to contribute to the establishment of justice.

- **E**MPowerment – PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The capability to commit oneself to the process of empowering educational activities.

- **S**ERVICE TO INSTITUTIONS

The capability to serve on institutions of society in ways that assist their members to develop and utilise their talents and capabilities in service to society and humankind in general.

- **H**ISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The capability to perceive and interpret the meaning of present-day social processes and events in the light of an appropriate historical perspective.

Source: Anello and Hernández (1996:95-97)

4 Conclusions

The way we live is deeply rooted in the values and institutions of society and the way to change this could start with informal groups of individuals who are moral leaders in their own environment, willing to listen and share knowledge and points of view in a more democratic way, willing to change their values and to design new institutions. Few, however, would consider values to be levers of system change; values tend to be considered fixed and unchangeable, particularly in economic and other social science models of human behaviour. If, nonetheless, we depart from this view and assume that humans indeed have the capacity to adopt more expanded value spheres, then more possibilities open for changing lifestyles and thus the way we produce and consume 'stuff'.

In this paper we particularly explored the values underpinning leadership and the impact that could have on the efforts to move towards a society with individuals who take responsibility for their actions, who have capacity to promote sustainability and who do so out of concern for others. The ethical values of leaders, whether in small family and neighbourhood contexts or in global negotiations, have a particular potential to spearhead this development.

The moral leadership framework which we explored takes distance from the prevalent leadership styles that are built on the desire to dominate and is instead aiming to create groups which are united, can reach their goals and empower their members to develop capabilities to serve their communities. This normative framework of leadership has very practical components. We suggest that it would be worth to analyse in more detail how the set of capabilities which provide a key and practical element of the framework could support leaders that want to pioneer sustainable production and consumption.

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