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# Subnational leadership in response to environment and climate change

Lummina G. Horlings<sup>a</sup>  and Jane Wills<sup>b</sup> 

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores subnational leadership in collective action, responding to environment and climate change. The research was conducted in the county of Cornwall in the UK to explore why and how people take up local leadership roles, and how personal and shared values influence their activities. The results show four dimensions of place-based leadership: (1) willingness (the individual or I-dimension), (2) mobilisation and framing (the collective or WE-dimension), (3) place-shaping practices and leadership roles (the practical or IT-dimension) and (4) collaboration and responsiveness (the political or THEY-dimension). Our findings illustrate the relevance of (inter)subjective aspects of local leadership and how leaders support different scaling processes.

## KEYWORDS

collective action; place-based leadership; values; environment and climate change; community; Cornwall

JEL L31, Q1, R0

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The urgency of environmental and climate crises is now widely recognised, demanding decisive adaptive actions to avoid, or at least to buffer, the negative effects on human societies (Bendell & Read, 2021). Both people and ecosystems have been adapting to live with environmental challenges and climate change, but more transformative long-term strategies and responses are also needed (Fedele et al., 2019) to realise more sustainable futures (Ziervogel et al., 2022). Transformation requires broad and dynamic leadership at multiple scales, including multi-stakeholder collaboration to foster innovation and action (Schreuder & Horlings, 2022).

Such transformations depend on the institutional and cultural context, demanding a place-based approach (Turner & Wills, 2022). Place-based action galvanises human agency in ways that reflects local circumstances, resulting in a variety of local and regional strategies and impacts (British Academy, 2022). A major driver of deliberate transformative responses to the current challenges are bottom-up processes in which communities self-organise (Ajulo et al., 2020). Local community initiatives can encourage people to engage in place-shaping and take the lead in organising community activity (Horlings

et al., 2020, 2021). This place-based environmentalism (Shutkin, 2000) is of growing importance, and it obviously requires leadership.

This paper focuses on the role of leadership in the context of collective action at the subnational scale. While place-based leadership has gained increasing academic attention in the last decade, the focus has been mainly on policy leadership and institutional entrepreneurship and less on the kinds of leadership able to mobilise civic and civil society. An important exception has been Hambleton's new civic leadership and his focus on the community leaders who give their time and energy to local activities in a wide variety of ways (Hambleton, 2015, p. 117).

Our central question concerns what such leaders do and why they engage in local collective action in response to environmental change. This includes attention to subjective aspects of local leadership, exploring why people take action, including their motivations and values. Values shape who emerges as a leader, guides their actions, helps to build trust among community members and fosters connections in and across space. We use a four-quadrant framework to capture the different dimensions of leadership and values in civic collective action, and although our study relates to organising on the local community level in response to the environmental crisis, it could be

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applied to other forms of action, and at a variety of geographical scales.

Furthermore, transformation depends not just on local action and leadership, but also on the potential for scaling up and out successful practices and innovations. The literature suggests that while disconnected local initiatives will often be insufficient to address the challenges that communities are facing, leadership can connect actors and initiatives across geographical scales and political levels, working towards systemic change (Castro-Arce & Vanclay, 2020). Opportunities for the up- and out-scaling of their actions increase the potential for wider impact and this deserves much greater attention.

We have explored these leadership dimensions of collective action and scaling in the county of Cornwall, UK, an exemplary case where local collective action is relatively vibrant in relation to other parts of the country. Statutory governance bodies, community leaders and their organisations are taking action to improve the social well-being and environmental health of their area and local communities, including innovative efforts to engage and mobilise civic and civil society groups in this work (Honeybun-Arnold et al., 2024).

Our empirical analysis is based on an analysis of relevant documents, a review of websites about civic initiatives and interviews with leaders from seven local initiatives in Cornwall in May–June 2022. In the next section we provide an overview of the literature on leadership of local collective action for sustainability and explain our conceptual framework. We then use the framework as a scaffolding for presenting our findings and analysis. We draw conclusions about the ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘why’ of leadership in local environmental action. Our key message is that the effectiveness of leadership will ultimately depend on how the different dimensions of place-based leadership are developed and connected in specific subregional contexts, with further opportunities for scaling.

## 2. THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN LOCAL COLLECTIVE ACTION

Local collective action and engagement of citizens is the focus of a rapidly increasing body of literature. We define this as a form of citizenship practice, addressing issues of public concern via collective initiatives to protect public values or to make a change in a community, by mobilising people to take care of common goods or services. It can be addressed to governmental, corporate or private interlocutors as well as to the general public. Such collective action has been referred to in debates about grassroots innovations and localisation (Seyfang et al., 2014), as self-organisation (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011), broad-based community organising (Wills, 2016), citizen initiatives and civic engagement (Horlings et al., 2021) and do-it-yourself adaptation (Cloutier et al., 2018).

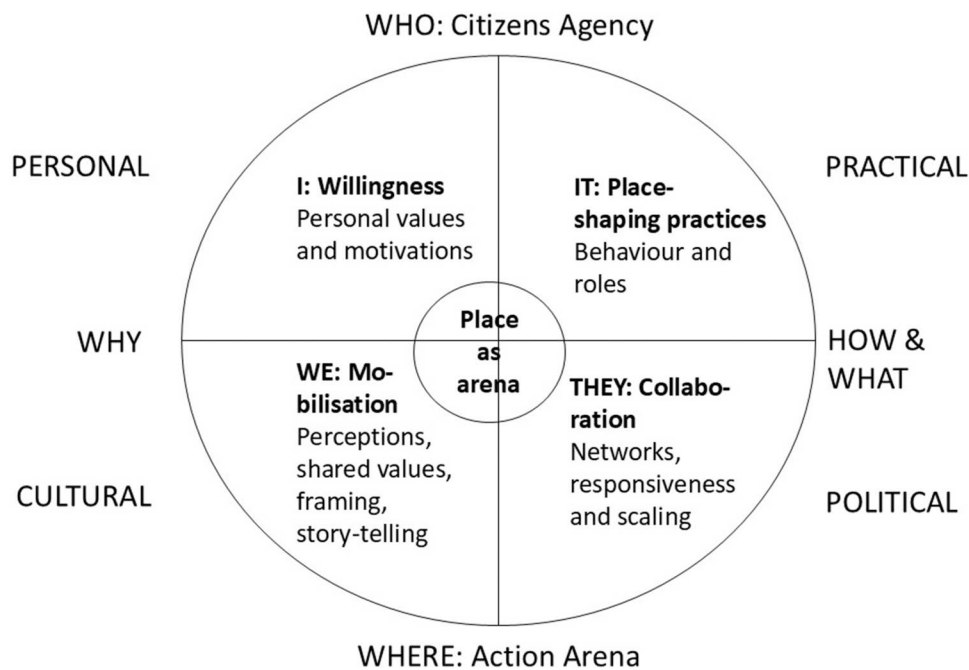
Our focus is on environmental action that is explicitly focused on place. There is a growing literature that captures the importance of place leadership with the potential to learn from scholarship in relation to the geography of

policy innovation, sustainability transitions and green development paths (Beer et al., 2019; Horlings et al., 2017; Sotarauta et al., 2012; Sotarauta & Beer, 2021). In doing so, we hold both the individual and collective forms of leadership in view; local action involves a process of individual–collective simultaneity, a continuous process in which individuals act in relation to a group to enact transformational change (Gram-Hanssen, 2021). Such leadership shapes people and institutions and creates impact over time which has implications for place development (Horlings et al., 2017) and path dependency (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Sabetti, 1996). However, place-based transformational change is not just predetermined by influences of structure and institutions within a certain opportunity space, it also results from agency and a shared understanding of future possibilities (Beer et al., 2023). The literature suggests that leadership plays a key role in developing place-based transformations to respond to sustainability problems, supporting local capacity and ‘inner’ transformation, with the potential to scale up and out successful innovations. Indeed, the self-organisation of citizens will necessarily influence broader patterns of socio-cultural change that might help to promote sustainability outcomes at multiple scales (Hasanov, 2021). This raises significant questions about the motivations, capacity and durability of place-based leadership at a subnational scale. Given its significance, we also need to know more about how such leadership can be developed and actively scaled up and out to realise multi-scalar action and positive change.

## 3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the role of leadership in local collective action we draw on a framework that captures the personal, practical, political and collective aspects of action. The AQAL model (all quadrants and levels) is an integrative approach that incorporates dimensions of subjective, inter-subjective, objective and inter-objective agency. The model categorises four different dimensions of transformation determined by two axes: ‘interior versus exterior’ and ‘individual versus collective’, resulting in four quadrants. This model has been operationalised and applied by scholars in a variety of contexts (Esbjörn-Hargens, 2010; Grenni et al., 2020; Wamsler et al., 2023), but less in relation to action over environmental change (except Ballard et al., 2010). We have adjusted the model, identifying the values and actions of leadership associated with each of the four dimensions (Figure 1):

- I (individual subjective): willingness of community leaders and members to act. This refers to personal and psychological dimensions of leadership including values, motivations and sense-making.
- WE (collective subjective): mobilisation of community members, including perceptions, framing and shared leadership values, for mobilisation and creating community trust.



**Figure 1.** Comprehensive framework to understand the role of leadership in local collective action.

- IT (individual objective): place-shaping practices, the activities of leaders, roles and actions undertaken.
- THEY (collective objective): collaboration and network-building; also includes the ways in which other institutional actors respond to local action and the impact of wider political developments.

While the practical and political aspects of leadership and place-based development are getting increasing attention, there is less understanding of the personal or interior and cultural aspects of leadership (Horlings, 2015). In our analysis, we have highlighted the role of values in explaining the drivers of leadership actions and behaviours. Values point to what is valuable and desirable for people, indicating personal, cultural, biological and social meanings, which influence individuals' decisions to lead and the impact they have in the process. Distinctions have been made between universal values (Schwartz, 2012) and those that are more contextually dependent, acquired via experience (Appleton, 2014). In shaping behaviour, such values necessarily influence the decision to get involved in local activity and to engage in place-shaping processes (Grenni et al., 2020). In our study, we decided to take a broad view of values incorporating principles, intentions, preferences and motivations, all of which are intertwined, context-determined and culturally varied (Horlings, 2015). This includes ethical (Schroeder et al., 2019), leadership (Žydzūnaitė, 2018) and motivational values that all shape behaviour (Bouman et al., 2018; Steg, 2016). In our empirical results below, we differentiate between: (1) values that provide a personal motivational basis for environmental action; (2) leadership values that support the mobilisation of others; and (3) values that are relevant to creating community trust.

## 4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 4.1. Empirical context: initiatives and leaders in Cornwall

Our empirical research took place in Cornwall, a county in the far south-west of the UK. This is an interesting case to investigate because of the strong presence of communities taking collective action in response to environmental change. Since the 1970s, Cornwall has had a strongly networked cadre of indigenous and in-migrant environmental activists who have been organising and mobilising people around green issues (Trower, 2015) and their legacy is seen in the hundreds of civil society groups that remain active in responding to environmental concerns.

Furthermore, the local authority was one of the first to declare both a climate and an environmental emergency, and it has subsequently developed policy and activity to mobilise a response (Turner & Wills, 2021). Part of this has involved the development of a sophisticated plan to foster greater sustainability by 2050 as well as a pilot local nature recovery strategy and an ambitious programme for planting trees. In addition, the county has 210 town and parish councils that retain control over many green spaces and community facilities. This local leadership has provided further institutional support for engaging people in local action to improve environmental quality and resilience (Turner et al., 2021).

Our research used a qualitative research approach to analyse why and how community leaders engage in place-based collective action in relation to the environment and climate change. We used semi-structured interviews to include the (inter)subjective aspects of leadership, which would be more difficult to retrieve with a quantitative survey or from secondary data. We are aware

that the social experience of respondents is necessarily ever-changing, but our data represent conversations we had at the time.

We used several ways to select initiatives for research including an online search, a snowball approach and an

overview map made by the Environmental Sustainability Institute. Online information about these initiatives was retrieved using keywords such as ‘climate initiative’, ‘community energy’ and ‘transition towns’ in combination with the term ‘Cornwall’. The coding by hand of online

**Table 1.** Aims and activities of Cornish initiatives and their leaders included in the empirical research.

<b>Who?</b> <b>Initiative, leader and role</b>	<b>Why?</b> <b>Aim and mission for 2030</b>	<b>What?</b> <b>Practices and activities</b>	<b>How?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Café Disruptif, Wildly Brilliant</li> <li>• Manda: community activist/director/facilitator</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To support system-thinking and system change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate the ‘Good Companions’ network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect disruptive people, imagine positive change</li> <li>• Collect tools, techniques and insights for transformation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bude Climate initiative</li> <li>• Rob: initiator and project leader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carbon neutrality by 2030</li> <li>• Protecting the town, coastline, countryside and way of life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research and engagement for change, including: community carbon audit; transport study; sustainable tourism; climate resilient catchments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and implement a local climate plan</li> <li>• Publish local stories</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community Energy Plus</li> <li>• Tim: chief executive of Community Energy Plus (CEP), director of Cornwall Climate Action Network, active member of Low Carbon Ladock</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energy advice services, address fuel poverty and support local transition to low carbon energy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote renewable energy, retrofitting and the decarbonisation of domestic heating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act as an impartial advisory resource for local people to decarbonise energy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cornwall Community Flood Forum</li> <li>• Kitty: chair of trustees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support local resilience to flooding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare for flooding and facilitate post-flood recovery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise awareness and develop up-to-date flood plans</li> <li>• Train community flood wardens</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helston Climate Action Group</li> <li>• Katherine: initiator and leader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be carbon neutral by 2030</li> <li>• To support local social and climate justice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and deliver Helston’s climate action plan: reduce carbon emissions, support nature restoration, build community resilience, encourage localism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manage projects in partnership with relevant stakeholders</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition Towns</li> <li>• Peter: coordinator of Exeter Green Futures Network, co-chair and trustee of the international Transition network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To model, develop, learn and collaborate on new systems for groups and organisations to function in a way that is regenerative and just</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with others to ‘reimagine and rebuild our world’</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To support Transition within any community</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wadebridge Renewable Energy Network (WREN)</li> <li>• Chris: chief executive officer (CEO) and technical director of WREN</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To support low carbon living including new community-owned renewable energy schemes and decarbonisation projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce local carbon emissions and support sustainable economic development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advise, create awareness, support community projects, engage in innovation and international research collaboration</li> </ul>

information was done using the framework, while also adding information about the organisation (location, goals, members, etc.). Leaders of seven initiatives were interviewed in June 2022 either in person or online, and additional information about these initiatives was retrieved from documents and websites (Table 1). While we do not claim that these are fully representative of all civic and civil society initiatives that have been developed to respond to environmental change in Cornwall, they cover the breadth of issues, activities and geographies, and are recognised leaders in the field.

A ‘civic lantern’ event held in June 2022 (Honeybun-Arnolda et al., 2024) also helped to detect relevant initiatives and issues. This was co-organised by the second author and co-designed with a steering group including representatives from Cornish organisations already engaged in civic and sustainability action across a range of issues. This steering group organised a short online survey of organisations to collate ideas for effective action that could be shared and scaled-up to achieve greater sustainability. Overall, 34 complete responses were received identifying eight broad themes: housing; employment, skills and wages; community; circular economy and waste; health and well-being; land, biodiversity and water; food; and energy (Collins et al., 2022a). This information provided the focus for deliberating over shared goals for action during the lantern event, but for our purposes here, it also indicates the range of socio-ecological sustainability issues being tackled by civic and civil society leaders and actors in Cornwall. Around the same time, we also interviewed the representatives from seven organisations capturing the more environmental aspects of these concerns, focusing on climate adaptation, community flood response,

community energy and place-based sustainability initiatives (Table 1).

#### 4.2. Data collection: interviews with leaders of community initiatives in Cornwall

Our aim was to interview all seven leaders in person, but due to distance and availability, three interviews were conducted online. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were transcribed using Otter.ai and subsequently checked to ensure accurate transcription. The interview questions consisted of two parts. First, introductory questions were asked via email (using Qualtrics), documenting their personal values (Table 2). For this purpose, we described the motivational values in Table 3 as statements and asked the respondents to prioritise these (by scoring these from 1 to 10). We also asked about the organisational mission, where they see themselves in 2030 and about their networks. Second, the interview in person explored their leadership experience, roles and values in-depth, as well as their activities and collaboration with others.

During the interviews we discussed the different aspects of our framework. To operationalise the I-dimension on personal values, we used the often-used distinction made by Steg (2016) and Bouman et al. (2018) between biospheric (caring about the environment), altruistic (caring about others), egocentric (caring about personal resources) and hedonic (caring about pleasure and comfort) values (Table 3). To operationalise the WE-dimension we drew on the literature that suggests specific values play a role in mobilising others and creating trust among community members in collective action (Table 4).

**Table 2.** Prioritisation of values by respondents via scores from 1 to 10, from least to most important.

Values	Respondent						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
That every person is treated justly	10	10	10	9	10	9	10
To take care of those who are worse off	10	10	10	8	10	10	7
To be helpful to others	10	10	10	9	9	10	7
To protect the environment	9	10	10	9	8	9	9
To respect nature	10	10	10	9	6	9	9
That every person has equal opportunities	10	10	10	8	9	7	8
To prevent environmental pollution	9	10	10	9	6	9	8
That there is no war or conflict	10	10	9	10	2	9	10
To be in unity with nature	9	10	10	10	3	8	9
To do things he/she enjoys	8	8	8	6	10	8	8
To have fun	7	8	7	6	10	7	7
To enjoy the life’s pleasures	6	9	8	7	8	6	8
To work hard and be ambitious	7	5	10	7	5	7	4
To have money and possessions	5	8	3	7	6	8	5
To have authority over others	4	2	8	4	2	5	1
To have control over others	2	0	0	7	2	5	0
To be influential	2	2	0	5	0	4	0



**Table 3.** Motivational personal values.

<b>Altruistic:</b>	<b>Biospheric:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Every person has equal opportunities</li> <li>• Every person is treated justly</li> <li>• There is no war or conflict</li> <li>• Be helpful to others</li> <li>• Take care of those who are worse off</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevent environmental pollution</li> <li>• Respect nature</li> <li>• Be in unity with nature</li> <li>• Protect the environment</li> </ul>
<b>Hedonic:</b>	<b>Egocentric:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have fun</li> <li>• Do things he/she enjoys</li> <li>• Work hard and be ambitious</li> <li>• Enjoy life's pleasures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have control over other's actions</li> <li>• Be influential</li> <li>• Have authority over others</li> <li>• Have money and possessions</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' adoption of material from Steg (2016) and Bouman et al. (2018).

Based on the literature, we have also captured the diversity of leadership roles within local initiatives (Table 5). Leaders were asked which roles they considered most important in their context and if any roles were missing.

Data coding was derived from the conceptual framework. All respondents signed a letter of consent in which we agreed to identify their organisation and to use their first name in writing up the research. To make sure the quotations were correct, the respondents were given the opportunity to check the transcripts before we conducted the coding. Anonymity was waived as local leaders wanted recognition for the work being done by their organisation.

**Table 4.** Key leadership values and those needed to support community trust.

<b>Leadership values</b>	<b>Values needed to create community trust</b>
Authenticity	Authenticity
Belief in human development	Caring
Courage	Credibility
Humility	Experience
Integrity	Fairness
Making a difference	Honesty
Personal development	Knowledge
Respect (for oneself and others)	Openness
Respect of teamwork	Performance
Self-discipline	Reputation
Service	Skills
Positive psychology	Transparency
Wisdom	

Source: Authors' interpretation of the literature on leadership.

**Table 5.** Leadership roles in local collective action.

<b>Leadership roles and activities</b>	
Organise	Organising and coordinating within and beyond the community
Connect	Connecting and bridging between different people and organisations
Create	Create awareness about (urgency and need for action on) particular issues
Support	Support trust, solidarity and strong relationships
Develop	Develop and use skills and capacities
Share	Sharing information and knowledge
Mobilise	Mobilising people to participate in activities
Stimulate	Stimulating a shared understanding, vision and vocabulary
Communicate	Communicating and promoting the vision, purpose and/or the identity of the organisation and associated community

Source: Authors' interpretation of the literature on leadership roles.

## 5. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

### 5.1. The I-dimension: willingness

#### 5.1.1. Motivations

The respondents were all, to different degrees, veterans of activism and many struggled to remember exactly when they got involved in organising activity. As Chris put it:

I've always been very environmentally conscious. And it's always been kind of, you know, something in the back of my mind as I want to try and reduce as much of my personal impact on the environment, for many reasons.

Some became active to provide a better future for their children, while others started an initiative when becoming more aware of the environmental crisis at a particular time in their life. As Kitty told us:

It's just because over the years, I've seen the impact of flooding on communities, how devastating the impact has been, in terms of people losing everything, and they've lost their homes, they've lost their personal possessions. They've lost valuable memories like photographs and things that they've treasured.

People reported being influenced by inspiring people (such as Greta Thunberg), alarming papers (Bendell, 2018), scientific reports (e.g., the reports published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – IPCC) or books (and more than one respondent mentioned *The Limits to Growth* published by the Club of Rome in 1972; Meadows et al., 1972).

#### 5.1.2. Personal values

When we asked respondents before the interview to rank our list of personal values in relation to their activism,

there was a significant degree of overlap between them. The altruistic and biospheric motivational values were universally considered to be very important. Examples included: treating every person justly; taking care of those who are worse off; to be helpful to others; and protect the environment. Issues such as equal treatment and social justice were also considered key to their work. As Katharine explained:

we started looking at how we address our own resilience, because we can't keep doing what we've been doing. And ... we agreed to stop, take time ... and celebrate, to have fun. Because we had just been working so hard.

There is a need to balance the hard work with pleasure, referring to the relevance hedonic values.

'To be influential' was collectively considered to be the least important value, which might seem surprising as these leaders clearly aimed to make a difference. However, respondents often suggested that 'power *to*' was more important than having 'power *over*', and it is the former that is usually seen as being critical to having influence.

## 5.2. The WE-dimension: mobilisation

### 5.2.1. Mobilisation

As might be expected, leadership was not without its challenges. One of the respondents reported starting an initiative, working for three years and up to 60 hours a week (including three days a week in teaching). She had to step down when she got burnt out and told us:

I know that what I'm doing is just a drop in the ocean, there will always be more work to do than I can ever do. So how do I find a way to sustain myself? So that I can keep going, and not get burned out.

A main challenge is to mobilise and engage other citizens and listen to different opinions, as Kitty declared: 'That is the hardest bit, pulling the communities together to work together in order to produce the (flood)plan.' The respondents argued that for mobilising others it is especially important to come across as an open, trustworthy and credible leader.

### 5.2.2. Values to create community trust

We found that values were not just relevant in terms of motivation but also to mobilise others and a number of respondents emphasised the importance of manifesting personal values. As Katharine explained: 'it starts with having respect, [and] other values such as integrity and authenticity, follow from there'. Respect for teamwork and personal humility seemed to be especially relevant in the context of volunteering work. Furthermore, Manda referred to the following values:

courage and ... humility will generate trust. If somebody sees that you are brave enough to do something, and that you're taking it on yourself first, that you're not asking anybody else

to do anything that you're not willing to do, that will generate trust in you.

This illustrated that values were also seen as relevant to generate trust.

### 5.2.3. Framing climate change

More than one respondent noted the heightened sense of urgency driving their action. When several publications were published within six months in 2018, including an IPCC (2018) report, a biodiversity report (World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), 2018) and a paper on 'societal collapse' (Bendell, 2018), people felt the need to come together. In Cornwall, this triggered some activists to initiate the 'Good Companions' network of local leaders as mentioned above.

The respondents were asked how they framed environmental change and the need for action and in general, they communicated about it from an integrated perspective, as a crisis with multiple causes. They also emphasised the political dimension, although this was considered insufficient in relation to the scale of the crisis. As Chris suggested, 'at the moment we're not going to get where we need to be, unless we're changing hearts and minds', indicating the belief that changing mindsets was as important as physical change.

Respondents also reported having to deal with the fact that the future does not look very positive, and in this context they had to work hard to demonstrate a sense of hope. They argued that hope is needed in order to prevent paralysis, and as Manda explained:

hope is not a delicate ephemeral thing made of whispers and spiders webs. Hope has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles, the grit of the cobblestones in her hair, and she just spat out a tooth as she rises for another go.

Peter added to this saying, 'every fraction of a degree we can keep under [the limit] is better. Every fraction of equity and justice that we can achieve before the system's collapse mean that the recovery or what happens next, will be better'. This illustrates a certain scepticism that did not prevent their leadership actions.

## 5.3. The IT-dimension: place-shaping practices and leadership roles

### 5.3.1. Practices

Our sample organisations included a variety of organisational foci and forms. While Helston Climate Group and the Bude Climate Partnership are forms of voluntary community action, The Wadebridge Renewable Energy Network (WREN) is not just a community initiative but also a not-for-profit company. The initiatives started by Manda Brookman are (online) networks, while the Community Flood Forum is a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). Community Energy Plus is different again, being a community interest company (CIC), combining elements of a charity and a social enterprise. Transition Towns is a social movement and global network.



Manda can be considered as an initiating subnational leader as she brought together the ‘good companions’ network in Cornwall which led to several community initiatives such as the groups in Helston and Bude. She also initiated the Wildly Brilliant network to mobilise around permaculture that later widened to include a focus on sustainable tourism. Her Café Disruptif network started off with a focus on refugees and migration, but it later broadened: ‘to look at the psychology of change in detail. ... It’s about creative disruption ... kicking the tyres of what other systems or institutions or habits that we’ve got’. Manda thus illustrated the importance of combining personal and institutional change.

In terms of climate action plans, the Helston and Bude Climate Partnership are frontrunners in place-based community-oriented climate and environmental action in Cornwall. The Helston group asked the local council to declare a climate emergency and as a next step, they calculated their carbon footprint. The community members were engaged intensively in a process which resulted in a detailed Helston Climate Action Plan including community action projects such as Incredible Edible (green spaces and community gardens; Collins et al., 2022b), forest and nature restoration projects, a repair cafe, local food hub and community larder, a climate crisis conversation workshop and climate cafes. The initiative planted over 2000 trees in the community – the equivalent of one tree per child in Helston – and 1000 native trees in local gardens alongside saving 100,000 litres of water. Helston’s footprint team calculated they saved 11 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> by making adjustments in travelling, eating, heating, finances and leisure (Otokiti et al., 2024). The Bude Climate Partnership also implemented a climate action plan emphasising their partnership with other organisations. Rob mentioned that they collected personal stories as part of this work: ‘providing the starting points for exploring the Bude area’s heritage, culture and environment, empowering us to protect it for future generations’.

Coming from a different starting point, the Transition Network is an established international social movement with shared principles and values that supports its members (transition towns) to develop their own place-based action. In his role as co-chair and trustee, Peter mentioned that: ‘it’s about inviting that response from people, but it’s also about showing them they’re part of something bigger ... a bigger movement’, emphasising the relevance of the Transition Network in supporting local activity.

WREN is engaged in increasing the take up and sharing the benefits of renewable energy in the Wadebridge and Padstow area. It is led by volunteers and has over 1100 members focusing on ‘changing hearts and minds [with the] aim to help the community towards net zero’. By collaborating with Exeter University to contribute to international research projects, they have also been able to share knowledge and learning beyond their community.

### 5.3.2. Leadership roles

The roles of leaders in the initiatives covered the activities listed in Table 2. Respondents explained how they

performed these roles in their specific context, highlighting the need to create awareness and mobilise community members. Rob, for example, told us how the Bude initiative made toolkits with games and nine films which engaged people about climate change and their attachment to place. They specifically targeted people over 65, addressing their values, saying: ‘we gave them a questionnaire and asked them about their values and what they were doing, what they thought, what their fears were and their hopes’. This illustrated the wider importance of values, emotions and feelings in this activity, incorporating and exceeding the leaders themselves.

Some of the leaders we interviewed were (at least partly) paid, based on lottery-funded projects or by receiving a salary as a director of a non-profit organisation. However, leadership was very much focused on volunteering, and encouraging others to volunteer. This further reflects the extent to which leadership is understood as a collective responsibility within established activist groups. This explains partly why some respondents did not describe themselves as a leader and instead emphasised the notion of collaborative leadership. Manda explained this most clearly saying: ‘I think what we’re trying to develop is ... more distributed horizontal leadership, and people can step up and then step back. ... So I think we are all at different points, able to lead.’

## 5.4. The THEY-dimension: collaboration

### 5.4.1. Networking

The leaders were well networked and collaborated with a variety of organisations on different scales, depending on their purposes and goals. Examples of partners included local government, academia, other civil society initiatives, charities and organisations with overlapping aims on the regional and national level, as well as businesses. Past experiences and competences of the leaders helped to bridge ideas, people and provide inspiration. The respondents also made the link between interrelated issues such as energy and health, or nature and waste. The Climate Action Network in Cornwall (Climate Kernow), in which several respondents had a leading role, also aims to support this collaboration by bringing climate and environmental groups together to share resources and support each other.

### 5.4.2. Responsiveness

The first action that the ‘Good Companions’ took in 2018 was trying to convince Cornish town councils to declare a climate emergency in their town. Though the Helston Climate Initiative was able to achieve this in three months, they were quite frustrated about how the local and county-level councillors and officers responded. As Katharine reported:

We asked our councillors ... to be trusted messengers and to talk publicly about the steps that they were taking with the hope that that would bring other people with them. But they didn’t do that ... I think they’ve never owned it.

There are lots of things that we've asked them to do and they've not done.

This frustration led her to stand in the local election. Manda was similarly sceptical about the role of governments: 'I work with local governments as far as they allow [but] they don't really have good connections with community activists as they tend to be seen as a threat.'

A number of the other leaders were less negative and this might have been partly to do with the fact they have worked in government or related organisations in the past, or were less reliant on local councils for action. However, another factor might be that charity and other funded organisations are expected to be politically neutral. While they are equally passionate, these leaders have to be more nuanced in public, and as Tim explained: 'I have to be slightly careful because running the charity, I have to be politically neutral.' Also, the Cornwall Community Flood Forum is not allowed to articulate political arguments, as Kitty told us: 'we are funded for a specific task. And that's to help our communities to be better prepared for flooding, and [to become] more resilient. We're not funded to become ... environmental campaigners. We're not funded to influence government either'.

While most of the initiatives reported collaborating with governments, they had to carefully 'pick their battles' by spending energy and time selectively. All respondents were very critical about local and national governments and associated policies on multiple levels. While the lowest tier of local government was considered too weak, the regional and national governments were seen as less willing, being too slow or fragmented to take sufficient action in the field of environmental change.

## 6. LEADERSHIP AND SCALING

Transformation depends not just on local action and leadership, but also on the potential for sharing successful

practices with those in other contexts as well as changing institutional rules and regulations. We refer here to scaling, not just through 'things' (e.g., technologies, behaviours, projects) but also as a quality of agency based on values (O'Brien et al., 2023). We make a distinction here between scaling out, up, deep and within (Omann et al., 2020; Schreuder & Horlings, 2022):

- Scaling out an initiative to impact more people and places.
- Scaling up to increase impact by supporting changes in institutions, regulations, policies and resource flows.
- Scaling deep to increase impact by changing people's values and motivations.
- Scaling within to increase the impact within a specific initiative either through stabilising the group or initiative by embedding activities in places, and by speeding-up activities and innovation.

### 6.1. Scaling out

For all the initiatives, scaling out was really important to facilitate learning from others so they did not have to reinvent the wheel all over again. Leadership values positive influenced scaling out by motivating people to take action beyond the local context. Leaders thus connected the I- and IT-dimensions on different scales from the community level up (line A1 in Figure 2). Getting and providing support was key to the success of all the community initiatives in Cornwall. In addition, we found that learning was not just relevant on the scale of Cornwall or even the UK, and it stretched across national borders as well. An example is the Helston Climate Action Plan which was developed over six months before being published open source so that other communities worldwide could use it.

So-called 'umbrella' organisations also helped to scale out lessons learned to others, and these can be a helpful



Figure 2. Leadership and scaling.

vehicle for influencing policies on higher scales. Furthermore, collaboration with knowledge institutions can be helpful for scaling out internationally (line A2 in Figure 2). The local Wadebridge Energy group, for example, participated in an international research project on energy transition led by Exeter University to develop new knowledge, allowing their place-based work to be transferable to other contexts.

### 6.2. Scaling up

This refers to changing policies, rules and regulations, based on successful practices, linking the IT- and THEY-dimensions of leadership (line B in Figure 2). Values play a role here by framing environmental issues in a specific way. For example, leaders in Helston and Bude asked Cornish town councils to declare a climate emergency in their towns. Though changing policies is not the primary focus of community-led action, most of the initiatives tried to influence policymakers through a mixture of methods including organising workshops and conferences (community flood forum); lobbying, consulting and pushing for democratic elections (Bude Climate Initiative); offering training (Helston Climate Action Group); and collaborating with other initiatives. While on the local level the initiatives had some success, a lot of frustration was felt towards the national government and its policies that were sometimes inappropriate and always too distanced from local action and needs.

### 6.3. Scaling deep

All the organisations supported scaling deep in some way, by creating awareness, framing and sharing stories, thus strengthening the links between the I- and WE-dimensions (line C in Figure 2). The Transition Town network was most explicit about deep scaling, using a '3D framework' for scaling, referring to the dimensions of depth, width and length. Although in general, initiatives were quite independent in relation to the themes they considered important, elaborating on underlying values played an important role in scaling deep in every case. Being able to talk about grief, fear and anger was considered as an important form of emotional literacy.

### 6.4. Scaling within

Stabilising the initiative or speeding up activities within the group were found to link the WE-dimension to the IT-dimension of civic collective action (line D in Figure 2). First, this was done by a level of professionalisation. Though the groups relied on volunteering work, they made a distinction between different roles or divided the work into different themes with a variety of working groups. Second, building internal connections also strengthened the initiatives and supported new leadership development. Values played a role here by acknowledging and mobilising 'positively deviant' people who learn and then support change in others, amplifying their impact in and across the community.

## 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Environmental challenges and climate risks urgently call for transformation. Key to such transformation is leadership that can initiate and support local collective action. This paper addressed the question what such leaders do and why they engage in local collective action in response to environment and climate change.

We developed a framework to understand the role of place-based leadership in local change organising our findings around four overlapping dimensions of activity: (1) willingness (I), (2) mobilisation and framing (WE), (3) place-shaping practices and leadership roles (IT) and (4) collaboration and responsiveness (THEY). The framework proved to be a useful fit for analysing our empirical data and it helped to illuminate the importance of leadership roles and values in each dimension, as well as when scaling the action in and beyond place.

The leaders we interviewed were guided by strong altruistic and biospheric values. They were well-informed about the urgency of environmental and climate risks and sought to find a balance between being hopeful and sceptical, not least because they sought to mobilise others. They often framed environmental change from an integrated perspective, as being caused by a variety of inter-related factors such as a lack of personal responsibility, political attitudes, economic failures and a disconnection between humans and their environment, all of which resonated with different groups of people on the basis of their own experiences and situation. Our findings contribute to the debate on place-based leadership by illustrating the importance of (inter)subjective aspects such as values and framing, while also confirming the obstacles leaders face when collaborating with governmental actors to support sustainable local and regional development (Sotarauta et al., 2012).

Several of the community initiatives we looked at can be considered as frontrunners in place-based environmental action. Examples of activities included the calculation of local carbon footprints; food and nature restoration; innovations in energy transition; and preparation for flood risks. Leaders were found to play a variety of roles such as creating awareness, mobilising community members, organising and coordinating activities, connecting actors across scales and communication in and beyond their communities.

Our results show that place leadership plays a critical role in underpinning collective action on the subnational scale, and in our case, to respond to environmental change (Gram-Hanssen, 2021; Hambleton, 2015). We found that values were important in triggering and sustaining leadership as well as underpinning collective dynamics. The results confirm academic debates about the relevance of the personal or interior dimensions of transformation (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2019) and the importance of (inter)subjective aspects of agency (Grenni et al., 2020; Horlings, 2015). Our results further reinforce the view that place-based leadership is collaborative, reflecting the

context and perceived characteristics of places, while also being networked across space (Sotarauta et al., 2012).

Often, the role of small-scale, local, and contextualised actions, and particularly the role of individuals in scaling transformations is underestimated in transformation (O'Brien et al., 2023). However, we developed insights about the wide range and scale of actions being taken by local leaders as part of organising activities. Local leadership can provide the seeds of change, fostering a collaborative spirit, and resulting in an expanding spiral of engagement, new alliances and new (institutional) arrangements (Horlings et al., 2018). The success of civic and community initiatives tends to be associated with responsive governance, functional place-based institutions (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Wills, 2016), resourceful communities (Franklin, 2018) and ongoing capacity building (Hölscher, 2020). Furthermore, as our results confirm, there is a need for policy discourses that acknowledge the relevance of values, emotions and mindsets as conditional for people's willingness to change as well as take up leadership roles (Gubbins & MacCurtain, 2008).

Our results enrich the literature on the scalar dimensions of leadership (Ayres, 2014). The effectiveness of leadership ultimately depends on how they strengthen links between the four dimensions of leadership, thus supporting different scaling processes, such as transplanting and sharing successful practices to other contexts as well as changing rules and people's mindset. Our findings indicate that values play a role in these scaling processes, allowing ideas and actions to move from one place to another, or deepen in place over time. We suggest further research is needed to explore leadership and collective action in other institutional, thematic and cultural contexts to derive further lessons about the impact of local organisation on wider processes of change. Our research has highlighted the remarkable capacity and tenacity of local leaders; the importance of the values held by these individuals drives their actions and their impact on the wider community, but there is more to be done to understand this activity led by people in place.

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