Emerging visions of leadership: relevant concepts for international development support organizations?

Abstract

Applying the leadership concepts presented by most of the literature on the theme may be problematic in the case of third-sector and non-profit or public organizations, which act in specific contexts or in more fluid territories and other organizational spaces. This work aims at identifying emerging visions on the leadership concept and analyzes their usefulness for the work of international development support organizations. The case study was built on data related to a region that produces “sisal”, located in the semi-arid part of Bahia state, Brazil, an area gaining attention for the emergence of a great number of grassroots activity in the place since the 1970s, with community organization and economic development activities involving small rural producers, generally supported by international organizations.

Key Words: Leadership, Development NGOs, Social Constructivism, Power Relationships.

Introduction

A leadership role can clearly appear in any person, as they may influence individual and organizational actors, even though this role generally appears in specific contexts and cannot be isolated from other characteristics. Therefore, it is important to study the abilities and knowledge people have and how they can contribute to wider leadership processes.

When the notion of leadership extracted from studies of industrial organizations is applied to inter-organizational studies or to analyze the development context of territories
or communities, there may be a gap because these studies neglect many fundamental variables in order to understand how leadership emerges and develops in situations of democratic representation and deliberation and of international cooperation.

Therefore, most of the traditional literature on leadership does not apply to the public sector or to non-profit organizations, which have their work focused on specific problems that generally involve a specific context and a more fluid concept of territory and organization.

This paper focuses on identifying the direct and indirect forms of leadership support in the Sisal Region, a semi-arid area located in the state of Bahia, a region characterized by the intense action of many grassroots organizations that have been established since the 1970s. These organizations have been carrying out community organization and economic development support activities, targeting the small rural producers of the region. The support of international development organizations in this area has been central for the emergence and growth of these grassroots organizations and, even though international cooperation organizations have been gradually phasing out their investments in Brazil, there are still a significant number of them in the Sisal Region. (Sorj, 2005; ALOP, 2004).

Among the activities financed by international cooperation organizations is the support to the work of local leaders by investing in individuals and organizations through the granting of scholarships, congresses’ participation fees, support for participation in thematic networks and projects in general. These actions enabled different networks to connect locally, nationally and internationally, improving the access of individuals and organizations to new resources, as well as knowledge sharing between them and international organizations and different government levels, especially the Federal Government.

This work intends to analyze these forms of aid and their impact on local leadership development, adopting emerging socially developed leadership visions (Drath, 2001; Ospina and Shall, 2001, Heifetz, 1994) as conceptual references. These considerations may have implications on projects’ beneficiaries and supporting agencies, shedding some light on the discussion about new ways of supporting and strengthening local leaderships.

The Sisal Region and its distinctive elements

One of the sub-regions of the semi-arid region in Bahia is the Sisal. This sub-region is known for its sisal production, a very resistant plant that can survive in dry climates and is originally from Central America.

In the Northeast region, the sisal is also known as “agave” and its fibres are used to make ropes, tapestry, bags, hats, ribbons to tie hay together, jewellery packaging and other craftwork. To avoid any waste, the byproduct of the process of extracting the fibres from the sisal leaf is used for animal feed. (MOC, 2007).
The Sisal Region has a population of approximately 55,000 inhabitants, mainly living in rural areas (63% of the total population) and has around 52,000 families working in agriculture. The demographic concentration is 80 inhabitants per square kilometre, which is a concentration considered to be typical of rural areas in many countries. (IBGE, 2000).

Strong cultural and economic similarities can be observed in the area. Land concentration is still reflected in the socioeconomic indicators. Child labour is one of the themes deserving special attention in the area, for example, and the national policy for the eradication of child labour was born there. The high rate of land concentration favours a political environment that makes it easier for conservative parties and “coronéis” (a sort of local dictator) to keep the power in their hands. Furthermore, difficulties in finding solutions for the long drought periods (i.e., poor water storage system for the short periods when there is rain), the low technical level of the productive structures for sisal and other cultures, and the difficult access to credit are some other factors that do not contribute to the development of the Sisal Region.

It is important to note that the Sisal Region has distinctive characteristics from other northeastern semi-arid areas. The Catholic Church introduced something unique in the Sisal communities through the work of ecclesiastic communities (CEBS): a mobilization that generated a social network and new ways of economic organization in the region, being the most interesting of them the APAEB\(^1\) - Associação dos Pequenos Agricultores do Município de Valente (Magalhães and Abramovay, 2007)

Among the successful cases in the region, it is clear that most of the leaders and associates of the numerous organizations established there had some connections to the political and assistance work of the Ecclesiastic Communities (CEBS). These leaders succeeded in preserving the basic values associated with the social doctrine of the Church, and the organizations to which they belong try to bring together a rational and “professional” management and a social and political project to guide their activities in between these two poles, which frequently change.

Partnering with the local church, the Movimento de Organização Comunitária –MOC\(^{ii}\) (Community Organization Movement) started to develop an educational work to support community organizations and trade unions arising from the political opposition. Both MOC and APAEB were, and still are, heavily financed by international development and aid organizations.

**Methodology**

This work tries to capture the different visions on leadership of development and support organizations that are active in the SISAL region. A documental and web site research was carried out and all materials, support programs and lines of action were observed and analyzed in order to achieve this goal. Moreover, 12 local leaders were interviewed and questioned about the contribution of those support organizations to their regions and to their personal development.
Based on these data, a matrix was built to help analyzing the following questions:

- Is leadership a central question in the work of support organizations?
- What are the most accepted leadership visions among these organizations?
- How does the support to community leaders work?
- What role do the support organizations expect these community leaders to play?

Finally, the matrix was matched to the emerging leadership theories in order to demonstrate that some of the new ideas on leadership principles, functions and role in mediating conflicts and in new visions’ formation may actually offer an interesting basis for reflection about support and development organizations.

The Field of Leadership Studies

Business Administration publications generally approach leadership as something related to specific individual characteristics, which one could develop and apply in order to be more efficient at work. Many times the concept of leadership, in the Business Administration field of studies, is linked to what could be defined as a good management practice.

The literature on leadership focuses on people or on the characteristics of their position and bases itself on a general framework, almost always related to management processes inside organizations, designing competences and behaviour models based on individuals. Therefore, leadership notions that are very particular to relatively closed and hierarchical systems emerge from this literature.

However, the leadership concept is much wider and is relevant in areas other than Business Administration. These different concepts try to evade from individual analysis and to treat the phenomenon as a social process.

When a literature review on the theme began, it was realized that the leadership research available did not constitute an institutionalized field of study and that there were some issues for which leadership analyses were more complex than it was initially thought and, therefore, the dichotomy individual/social concept did not apply in a satisfactory way.

The academic production on leadership involves a wide range of disciplines such as Education, Social Psychology, Political Science, Sociology, International Relations, Theology and History, among others. However, research on leadership is still predominant in the Business Administration field.

Two compendiums on leadership were the base for the initial mapping of the field: Burns (1979) and the Handbook of Bass (1981), which updates the consistent work of Stogdill (1974). The work of Rost (1993), which updates and critically comments the stages of the current leadership studies, was also an important material analyzed. Together, these
works reveal an extensive mapping of the Field, since the beginning of the century until the 1990s.

It is clear that there is no consensus, irrespective of the area in which the studies are developed. Stogdill notes that “the endless accumulation of empirical data has not produced an integrated understanding of leadership” (apud Bass, 1981, p. xii), and Burns (1979) adds: “if we know all much about our leaders, we know far too little about leadership” (p. 1), concluding that “leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth” (p. 2).

Rost points out that the knowledge on the theme does not go forward because the current studies emphasize the periphery of the leadership phenomena, meaning the ideas and information that leaders and followers in a specific career field should know in order to be able to influence each other. The focus is on personal characters, capacities, group facilitation, effectiveness, contingencies, good practices, styles, and above all, the management of public or private organizations. This allows academics and practitioners to prescribe certain behaviours in their definition of leadership is or in its development. The focus should be on central aspects of leadership: its relational nature as a dynamic process.

If there is any consensus among leadership scholars, it is around its definition within the context of industrial organizations. Rost defends the need to improve the notion of leadership, which can be considered in different contexts, thus evolving according to a different societal model, no longer inspired by the industrial paradigm only.

Studies about leadership considering the industrial organization paradigm have been concentrated by management and social physiologist scholars. It is possible to identify some phases and trends in their production:

- Beginning of the twentieth century – “great men” theories. Only great men, and almost no women, would have a gift that would allow them to become great leaders.
- From 1930 to 1940 – “Group Theory”. Developed by social psychologists, it raised the possibility that effective democratic leadership could emerge inside groups.
- From 1940 to 1950 – “Trait theory”. This theory studied leadership adopting an individual level of analysis, basing leadership on character traits and personality peculiarities of individuals. This was an influential theory in the military environment.
- From 1950 to 1960 – Behaviour theories. Focused on the study of leadership as a set of behaviours that, when combined in specific ways, would lead to effective leadership.
• 1980 – Excellence Theory. Leadership can produce exceptional organizations. Most studies following this line of research were a byproduct of the association between Business and Education researchers in order to find better ways to train leaders.

Bergamini (1994) highlights three different visions of leadership that may be applied to the context of industrial organizations. The first one describes what it means to be a leader and the character traits that define his or her personality. This definition is aligned, to a certain degree, with the theories predominant until the 1950s, especially in the periods between the two world wars. The author points out that those studies are focused on the analysis of psychological and even physical characteristics of some leaders:

Leaders’ characteristics start to be studied in a universalistic perspective, as isolated and self-sufficient elements, independently of the context and other variables surrounding them. (Bergamini, 1994, p. 29)

As leadership was considered the sum of personal characteristics, not taking into account its interdependence and relation with the context, it was difficult to find practical applications for these studies.

The second waves defined by Bergamini are the behaviourist studies associated to different leadership styles. The author highlights studies carried out by Kurt Lewin and Rensis Linkert. During this phase, the direct concern with the organization’s day-to-day management and its routines begins. And it was just inside the organization, relying on a wide empirical basis, that scholars observed certain behaviours that produced satisfactory results.

Important distinctions are made between task-oriented leadership and people-oriented leadership. The first style refers to leaders that are more efficient in following goals, while the second group refers to leaders that emerge from interactions with people.

A considerable amount of work was used to design training programs, each one proposing to enhance certain leadership styles that were more appropriate to different situations. At this point, another important element for leadership studies appears: the followers. Hence, leadership is a sort of relationship between leaders and followers, in which everyone strives to attain mutual goals (Burns, 1978).

And the third wave focus on situational studies, which add a significant number of variables to the leadership analysis, starting to consider contextual elements yet not ignoring what the previous behaviourist studies had identified.

Bargamini highlights some approaches inside this last group: Hollander’s exchange Theory; Fielder’s contingency approach, which combines sophisticated correlations with
styles and situations; the Path-Goal theory, which combines the analysis of leadership and motivation; and the decision-making approach developed by Vroom-Yetton.

In his leadership compendium, Rost (1993) concludes that, looking at the leadership phenomenon, the main theories demonstrate a similar basis: the prevalence of the structural-functional paradigm, with a strong orientation towards management and goals; excessively personalistic on the leaders analysis, specifically male leaders; rationalist, technocratic, and linear; concentrated in individual-to-individual relationships or in small and relatively closed groups. The authors point out new studies that are able to propose alternative definitions to leadership and are more holistic and centred in broader processes.

Emerging Visions of Leadership

As discussed before, it is important to establish a notion of leadership that allows a wider application and is not restricted to an industrial organization context. Selznick’s (1972) ideas are an important first step in this direction. Selznick’s theory on leadership indicates that this is a function directed towards the construction of an institutional integrity.

Some public organizations are able of forming a coherent basis of values, while others are not. The capable ones manage to consolidate their values into technical capacities, thus developing an important role in solving society’s problems. Selznick refers to this process as institutionalization.

He makes a distinction between organization and institution. Institutions are organizations that were embedded in informal values and norms that became preponderant variables on decision making processes and individual behaviours.

An institution affects the manner in which the members of an organization perceive their environment, understand their roles and reach solutions and decisions. The institutionalization is presented as an unexpected consequence of informal processes. Despite this, leadership can considerably influence the way some processes are going to change and to consolidate certain doctrines that will socialize the members of an organization with certain norms and values. Leaders make critical decisions that might clash with certain routines and that are essential to develop an institutional identity, which will provide normative and cognitive guides to the organization’s members (Boin and Christensen, 2004).

Selznick identifies three main tasks that leaders are required to undertake in order to improve the institutionalization processes of an organization:

- Definition of mission and organization roles. Public organizations tend to pursue multiple and contradictory goals, making it difficult to understand and implement them. Leaders need to understand and to translate these goals.
• Definition of means to reach goals, using formal and informal tools. Formal tools include planning and control systems, while informal tools include the construction of a shared vision.
• To preserve the institution’s integrity, be aware of environmental changes.

This concept of leadership focuses on a set of processes designed to influence people, having, in general, low levels of analysis. The first one is the individual’s actions and behaviours and the second one is the process of inter-organizational coordination, which includes the individual, but as a part of an organization.

Some of the most recent proposals about new leadership understandings are coming from practitioners, research studies and observations that look at leadership as a socially constructed process, considering contexts other than industrial organizations. These scholars and practitioners see leaders as immobilizers of action (Drath, 2001; Ospina and Shall, 2001, Heifetz 1994).

Drath (2001) derives his insights from the experience of the Centre for Creative Leadership while seeking to broaden research boundaries about leadership studies. In order to understand what a community or a certain group of people refers to when they talk about leadership it is necessary to examine the underlying principles they are familiar with in order for a certain phenomenon to make sense. These principles are:

• **Personal Dominance.** Linked to the leader’s vision and abilities that are recognized and legitimated by others. This principle has historically been the one most frequently adopted in leadership studies.
• **Interpersonal Influence.** Originated by interactions, from which a person or a group emerges and undertakes leadership functions. Leadership is not associated to one person, but to individuals or groups that acquire more influence through negotiated and legitimated processes.
• **Relational Dialogue.** Leadership occurs when people use the dialogue and the collaborative learning to create conditions to reach common goals that need to overcome lines separating different visions of the world. According to this last principle, leadership is a ‘property’ of a certain social system. If there is an individual leader, they will act as a part of a process, not as leaders in themselves.

These principles correspond, in a broad way, to the mainstream visions of leadership that exist in different academic fields. Drath also identifies three roles that must be played inside any of these principles, in order to reach any collective goals: direction, commitment and adaptation.

Direction means to guide articulate goals and to provide them with meaning. Commitment helps to maintain cohesion and coordination, while adaptation provides the opportunity of sustainability and continuity of the group’s actions. (Ospina and Shall, 2001).

**Table -1- Summary of the Main Leadership Principles and Functions**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Personal Dominance</th>
<th>Interpersonal Influence</th>
<th>Relation-based Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>Unify; give a clear direction based on the leader’s visions.</td>
<td>Direction giving is based on the negotiation of different points of view, mediated and integrated by the leader.</td>
<td>Direction giving is multiple and may happen through differentiated channels.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Personal commitment to the leader.</td>
<td>Commitment to the integrative vision of the leader.</td>
<td>Commitment based on possibility sharing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>Adaptation depends on the leader’s will.</td>
<td>Adaptation may happen through the renegotiation of influences.</td>
<td>Adaptation happens through dialogue between different visions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Under the principle of relational dialogue, leaders may occupy positions similar as those of followers. Their leadership notion is not defined in terms of positions, but in terms of activities that might be done by any citizen who seeks to mobilize people to do something, including fighting legitimated authorities or systems of authorization. In this sense, leadership requires adaptation and learning to overcome conflicts that will arise when people’s values are questioned (Heifetz, 1994).

The inclusion of conflicting values and the activation of conflicts are essential to the adaptation processes and to the construction of shared visions. These shared visions emerge from problems and can rapidly be converted into strategies and goals, which are also adaptable.

Most problems described by Heifetz require adaptation. The adaptative challenges emerge from problems that lead to an initial confusion, disagreements about its nature, level of significance or sometimes even disagreements on whether the problem really exists.

Others contemporaneous definitions of leadership appear in the works of Lambert et al (1995), where it is defined as the reciprocal process that enables participants in [a] community to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose (p. 50, apud Ospina and Shall, 2001).

Some definitions are close to the relational dialogue proposed by Drath, with specific application in the public sector, communities and NGOs. Hailey (2006) discusses leadership in NGOs and says that these processes depend on the participants’ experiences, their forms of learning, motivation and the ethos of the organization they are in. Three fundamental questions are raised to the understanding of leadership:

1. Understand personal demands from each one and how they can be adjusted to allow the person to continue to play a role in the leadership process.
2. Understand the entrepreneurial nature of leadership and how individuals use information and knowledge to bring about changes.
3. Understand the networking role of leadership and how actors expand their boundaries in building inter-organizational contacts, developing alliances and coalitions.
Hailey’s notion is designed to analyze leadership processes in non-profit organizations, moving away the vision of personal dominance leadership and getting closer to the idea of interpersonal dominance.

In addition to non-profit organizations, this notion of leadership is broadly used in other contexts, such as communities, public sector, social movements, networks engaged in the promotion of citizenship.

Hartley and Alison (2000) state the importance of leadership in building support to broader processes in a community, referring to the concept of community leadership and civic leadership. Borins (2002) highlights the role of leadership on innovation in the public sector, pointing out that leadership finds some specifications inside public organizations, such as centralization, contracts, corruption, monopolies and non-competition in many situations. Bryson and Crosby (1992) suggest that the current global society interdependence requires a different form of leadership to enable facing public problems in a more collective way, moving away from individual forms.

The Support Organizations in the SISAL Region

There are numerous support organizations financing leadership development projects in the Sisal Region. The following categorization is suggested in this paper:

1. Religious-based organizations: CESE, Misereor, Bread to the World

In the first group are the organizations that have any religious basis and are strongly oriented towards protection of human rights and work mainly with excluded populations. They were the first ones to support development activities in the Sisal region, some of which helped to create the MOC in the late 1960s. This group interprets leadership as a process that seeks to strengthen social connections, in a notion of leadership that resembles the definition of relational dialogue presented by Drath (2001). An important point to highlight here is that while stimulating leadership development, this view did not ignore the micro-power relations that exist at the local level and the links that these micro power relations have with other societal levels. Many trade union leaders are encouraged by the work of these organizations, having sometimes a radical orientation.

The second group of supporters shows many similarities with the first group, but, in general, the projects supported and the visions of these organizations incorporate an increasing concern with the “instrumentalization”, adoption of techniques and classifications of development fostering. Some supporters from this group evidence local inequalities while trying to build a relational dialogue. The supporters that are only
focused on building technical capabilities usually alternate between a leadership vision of personal dominance and interpersonal influence.

Finally, the third group is that of supporters with business links, arising from philanthropic actions of businessmen. Leadership views on these cases tend to be more technical, focusing on training and mentoring of leaders. Instead of formulating or stimulating radical demands of social transformation, their support looks for best practices of participatory development that can be universalized and disseminated. Their vision of leadership also alternates between personal dominance and interpersonal relationship. They also consider the network role of leadership, highlighted by Hailey (2006), encouraging the actors to broaden their connections by making new contacts, stabilising alliances, partnerships and coalitions. The most common risk associated to this kind of support is to ignore local inequalities that exist in the communities that could jeopardize the absorption of external ideas and the dissemination of local experiences.

Table 2 shows the visions of some international development organizations that support projects in the Sisal region:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Is leadership a central point for the projects supported?</th>
<th>Vision of leadership</th>
<th>Forms of Leadership development</th>
<th>Leader's role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CESE</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Associative will and Christian orientation. Focus on the collective leadership process and on strengthening social movements.</td>
<td>Support to small projects and incentives to articulation and networking.</td>
<td>Focus on the process. Leaders build and strengthen social bonds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misereor</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Christian value of sharing. Focus on the collective leadership process.</td>
<td>Identifying and developing community potentials through incentives for participation and defence of rights. The political dimension is important and adds to the technical dimension.</td>
<td>Focus on the process. Leaders build and strengthen social bonds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread to the World</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Defence of Rights, campaigns and collective mobilizations based on Christian values of equality and sharing.</td>
<td>Indirect support, through national organizations such as CESE and FASE. In the projects directly supported, the priorities are campaigns and aids to themes related to food, security and human rights (specially protection of women and children’s rights).</td>
<td>Focus on the process. Leaders build and strengthen social bonds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Answer</td>
<td>Focus</td>
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<tr>
<td>DISOP</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Focus on political and technical formation, based on education (i.e. offering courses). Direct support for many projects in the region, including the construction of the APAEB factory and investing in leader formation. Leaders as an important part of the social articulation process.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAF- Inter American Foundation</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Support for people development projects in order to improve local economy and strengthen democratic values. Grassroots Development Fellowship Program. Masters and Doctoral Studies Fellowships in the areas of urban and rural poverty and development and evaluation of poverty reduction projects. Dissemination of the studies' results and professional and academic development of the grantees. Focus on the technical formation of leaders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action-Aid</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Various types of support programs. Adoption of a strategy for developing poor and excluded people’s capacity to know and to fight for their rights and to actively engage in changing their own reality. Leaders as an important part of the social articulation process.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORDAID</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Support to projects in the areas of Health, Quality of Life, Peace and Security and Market Access (incentives to entrepreneurs) Focus on minorities and women, supporting minor initiatives and their access to market by building a network of small producers and processors, local commerce, traders and exporters. Leader as an entrepreneur, intermediating relationships and guaranteeing networking in order to gain access to markets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Doen Foundation</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Microfinance and other lending programs. Financing of productive activities.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Heinrich Boll Foundation</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Programs related to women’s rights and gender designed to increase the social and political participation of women in society. Support for Independent Media. Formation and education of women, including advise in health and gender equality rights projects; construction of a database IT support for women networks and support to publications and events. Women as agents in the multiplication of democratic values. Support for communication projects in the sisal region mainly focused on young leaders.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Support for social entrepreneurs</td>
<td>Support for the formation of networks for the exchange and dissemination of best practices. Training and financial support for local social entrepreneurs.</td>
<td>The leader is an entrepreneur that needs to develop capabilities related to the use of management tools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ashoka</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Support for social entrepreneurs.</td>
<td>The leader is an entrepreneur that needs to develop capabilities related to the use of management tools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AVINA</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Support for social entrepreneurs.</td>
<td>The leader is an entrepreneur that needs to develop capabilities related to the use of management tools.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation La Guardia</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Support for sustainable development.</td>
<td>Leaders as bridges to knowledge exchange.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kellogg Foundation</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Support for local development projects based on young leaders' participation, articulated to local and regional clusters, mainly multidisciplinary and in selected areas.</td>
<td>Young leaders fostering community engagement and activating changes. Technical and political training of leaders.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winrock</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Research and knowledge sharing in the areas of agriculture and sustainable energy, Support for leadership development projects, focusing mainly on women and children.</td>
<td>Leaders technical training, and, in some specific projects, emphasizing gender and human rights issues, always connected with sustainable development orientation.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Information prepared by the author, based on website searching, documents of the organizations and information gathered in interviews.
Conclusion

International cooperation and development organizations constantly support leadership actions, both in a direct form, as in the case of corporate-based organizations, and indirect form, directing efforts towards strengthening of community cohesion. The insight into some emerging leadership concepts, which focus on post-industrial organizations or wider contexts (territorial, inter-organizational), may be of great value to these organizations.

In promoting local social change or in spreading national and regional ideas globally in a complex agenda setting global process, the concern about material resources and infrastructure should always be present, and the role of leaders and leadership processes that they help to implement is fundamental.

International NGOs have a complex genealogy in humanitarian movements and organizations established in the nineteenth century. The abolitionist movement at the end of the eighteenth century and the Red Cross in the nineteenth century were followed, in the twentieth century, by organizations focused on mitigating the impacts of wars and of humanitarian crises (Save the Children in 1932, Oxfam in 1942 and the post-WWII organizations such as Care, Christian Aid, Caritas and World Vision). However, it was only recently, in the last decades of the twentieth century, that NGOs proliferated and became relevant political actors fighting for a common global agenda (Sorj, 2005).

One important insight gained from the research of the organizations that are active in the Sisal Region is that there are relevant nuances in the actions of different international organizations. However, one rule is that, as most of the resources of these organizations come from developed countries, their agendas and strategies of support reflect the expressions of their own funding societies. Moreover, some of these international organizations understand the support for individuals and projects as a way of encouraging intellectuals and local leaders. Many critics also state that international NGOs are straying from the social and grassroots movements and becoming appendices of international financial organizations and government agencies, thus weakening the political capability of popular groups.

Nevertheless, it is important to note the increasing relevance of the notions of Social Capital and Participation as fundamental to promoting development. Leadership processes and individual actions in this direction have a strong connection with these concepts.

Therefore, studying leadership concepts that take into account wider contexts and applications is key to actually initiating transformation processes. Selznick’s work (1972) is still up-to-date and highly influential for establishing this wider definition on leadership processes, introducing, as a leadership role, the translation of the mission and objectives of the organization, which are often multiple and contradictory, forging a shared vision that can guide formal and informal planning tools.
This is a vision close to Heifetz’s considerations (1994) – that leadership requires adaptation, and learning how to face the conflicts that will emerge from the challenges to come and people’s values. Moreover, conflicting values in the discussion and settling conflicts down by facing them are essential for the adaptation process and for building a shared vision. Shared visions will usually emerge from what may seem to be a problem and will rapidly turn into strategies and objectives that are also adaptable. Draft (2001), and Ospina and Shall (2001) take the leadership role even further, considering it as a socially built process that includes each citizen, in which, by the means of a relation-based dialogue, leaders – who are not defined in terms of positions – may assume this role in different activities that focus on mobilizing people to do a variety of things, including challenging legitimate authorities or authorization systems.

Based on the research, it can be concluded that emerging concepts of leadership are useful and may be applied to international development organizations. Nonetheless, it is important to note that making it possible requires a deeper understanding of the social micro-processes in the context in which they are active, paying special attention to the social networks and existing power relations, in order to decide whether to use the current context to improve the organization’s performance or to design strategies to reorganize or overcome local power imbalances.

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The APAEB (association of peasants and small family farmers form the Sisal region) was created during the 1980s for the purpose aim of organizing small producers to eliminate intermediate traders (who explored the small producers’ work) in the Sisal chain. The association soon expanded its activities and eventually built a factory to use the Sisal fiber in the production of rugs, working both with the raw material and the final product. At the same time, the organization also encouraged production diversification in small land properties. APAEB’s actions of local oriented technical assistance and microcredit contributed to an important transformation in the views of the small producers about the semi-arid climate and natural resources. It also promoted important changes in the economic behavior of the small producers. [www.apaeb.com.br](http://www.apaeb.com.br)

**ii** Founded in 1967, MOC is one of the most active organizations working with rural poverty mitigation in Brazil. Mobilizations of this institution gave rise to the work of APAEB: [www.moc.org.br](http://www.moc.org.br)

**iii** Social Capital has become one of the most fashionable concepts in development debates. However, there are several definitions and theoretical approaches to it. For a broad mapping of the theme, see: MILANI, Carlos R. S., Teorias do Capital Social e Desenvolvimento Local: lições a partir da experiência de Pintadas (Bahia, Brasil). Organizações e Sociedade, Salvador, v. 11, n. edição especial, p. 95-113, 2004.