Is Leaderless the New Green?

Exploring the role of Collective Leadership in shaping Degrowth Businesses

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Abstract

This study explores the role of Collective Leadership in shaping Degrowth Businesses with the overarching aim of understanding how we can create a sustainable society for all. An increasingly growing body of research suggests degrowth, meaning scaling down production and consumption and shifting focus toward enhancing wellbeing. Such a society requires a radical shift in how companies operate, meaning strong leadership is crucial in the coming years. The opinions on what type of leadership that drive sustainble development is split. As leadership by a few single leaders has been increasingly questioned, leadership by the many (collective leadership) is suggested.

As such, the aim of this thesis is to increase the understanding of leadership for sustainable development in businesses. More specifically, it looks at collective leadership, and sustainable development to understand the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth businesses. In order to do so, I have two research questions: (1) *What does collective leadership look like in practice?,* and (2) *What is the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth business characteristics?*.

The theoretical framework encompasses a discussion on views of leadership (Haslam et al., 2024; Alvesson, 2019; Bendell et al., 2017; Metcalf & Benn, 2013), and perspectives on degrowth based on Nesterova (2020), Froese et al. (2023) and Hankammer et al. (2021).

To answer the research questions, interviews were conducted with members of an organization which has adopted collective leadership. Several degrowth business characteristics were found, and the role of collective leadership in shaping them was analyzed. The analysis found that three different mechanisms played a role in shaping degrowth business characteristics: (1) *Prioritising workers' interests* , (2) *Perspective sharing and critical thinking,* and (3) *Individual empowerment and freedom*.

The study found that the main driving mechanism for shaping degrowth characteristics is *prioritising workers' interests*. This is facilitated by the fact that all members are equally invited to lead and shape the direction of the company, rather than just a few with authority who serve the shareholders through hierarchical structures. This mitigates the unsustainability of prioritizing the interests of profit-oriented shareholders, which often is the case in today's companies.

Keywords: Leadership, Collective Leadership, Degrowth, Degrowth Business, Sustainable Development

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1. Introduction

In this chapter I first present a background of the urgency of sustainable development, and the role organizations play in enabling this. This is followed by the identified problem about the role of leadership in this process, and lastly concluded with the aim and research questions of the study.

1.1 Background

It is no secret we are facing the great challenge of re-thinking societies in order to address the prevailing environmental crisis and social inequalities (Nesterova, 2020; Degrowth.info, n.d.; Bendel et al., 2017). Stockholm Resilience Centre (2023) stated that six out of nine planetary boundaries are crossed, conveying the message that humankind are operating far beyond the capacity of the earth. What's more, one out of ten people are currently living in extreme poverty (Stockholm Resilience Center, 2023). The great question of our time remains, how do we address this? How can we create a sustainable society for all? If you ask researchers Bonnen dahl and Heikkurinen (2019), the answer is degrowth.

Degrowth is defined by Schneider, et al (2010) as scaling down production and consumption and shifting focus toward enhancing wellbeing. It is a concept that has risen as the desirability and possibility of economic growth has been increasingly questioned (Nesterova, 2020). More specifically, the political collective site Degrowth.info (n.d.), explains how the concept of Degrowth *"critiques the global capitalist system which pursues growth at all costs, causing human exploitation and environmental destruction".* Within the current capitalist system, the spotlight is repetedly put on economic growth as the main political goal (Nesterova, 2020). We tend to blindly measure success and value in terms of countries' BNP, companies' revenue, or peoples' salary or material possessions. This unproportional focus on economic growth has led us into overconsumption and today's ecological degradation (Klitgaard, 2013). The current societal system is foundationally flawed as infinite economic growth simply is not sustainable, since natural resources are limited (Nesterova, 2020).

So, if not the current system, then what? Degrowth.info (n.d.) envisions a society where social and ecological wellbeing is prioritized, free from harmful profit-orientation and over-production. Nesterova (2020) presents three elements necessary for realizing the vision of a degrowth society: *Downscaling* (of production and consumption), *wellbeing* (of not only humans, but also non-humans and nature) and lastly, *radical shift in values*. As such, degrowth can be seen as one idea of what sustainable development looks like in order to reach a truly sustainable society (Nesterova, 2020; Bonnendal & Heikkurinen, 2019). This is the view of sustainable development that will permeate this thesis.

Degrowth is clearly a vision that calls for big shifts in society, requiring that we also re-think how we do business (Nesterova, 2020; Houstonite, 2016). Nesterova (2020) defines degrowth businesses as those that adhere to the three elements of *downscaling*, *wellbeing* and *radical shifts in values*. In order to do so, leadership is key (Bard, 2024). The next decades will be critical in human history, which is why thoughtful action is crucial (Bard, 2024). This means organizations are faced with increasingly complex and multifaceted challenges (ibid.). But, what type of leadership is needed to navigate through this critical and complex time? This is a well-debated question with many answers (Bard, 2024; Ramakrishnan, 2023; Bendell et al., 2017; Metcalf and Benn, 2013).

On the one hand, the prevailing idea is that we need empowering leaders and managers (Haslam et al., 2024). Although managers are not always spoken about in an all positive way, Logemann (April, 2023) argue we do need them:

"*During my two decades as a CEO, I have learned that everyone needs a manager, even me. Managers provide strength, guidance and acceptance (at least good managers do). Even bad managers drive, test and empower their employees—perhaps ultimately to leave*." – Logemann (April, 2023)

On the other hand, not everyone is convinced about the importance of a manager (Bendell et al., 2017; Haslam et al., 2024; Fredriksen, 2022). Although the status quo is to assign the act of leadership to a few people, this is something up for debate, a debate that has increased in intensity in recent years (Bolden, 2011). One who has entered this debate and criticize the status quo is management consultant and TED-talker Gitte Fredriksen (December, 2022):

"*I believe that leadership by the few, it's not going to help us solve the problems ahead. These problems are complex and coming at us faster and faster. So we really need to get many minds together, more resources, more capabilities*." – Fredriksen (December, 2022, 0:25).

She continues by posing the question "*What if leadership can be for the many?"*. – Fredriksen (December, 2022, 0:46). Bendell et al (2017) pose similar ideas as Fredriksen (December, 2022) as they argue that current shared dilemmas connected to sustainable development call for a different view of leadership: Leadership as a behavior that anyone can tap into from time to time, rather than something assigned solely to those with authority.

"Leadership by the many", as expressed by Fredriksen (December, 2022), is a concept that has been labelled with several different terms in academia, such as *distributed, shared* and *co-leadership* (Bendell et al., 2017; Bolden, 2011; Zhu et al, 2019). Ospina and Foldy (2020) use the term *collective leadership* as an umbrella concept focused on relationality which "*reveals the individual as a node where multiple relationships intersect: people are relational beings*" (Ospina and Foldy, 2015: 492). Based on the relational focus of the term collective leadership, some use it to include distributed, shared and co-leadership, as they all include a focus on complex relations between individuals (Bendell et al., 2017).

As such, this study will explore the role of collective leadership for sustainable development, by using degrowth as a perspective of sustainable development that advocates for a radical shift in society.

1.2 Problem

Despite increasing attention to sustainability in both research and practice, the question of *what form of leadership is needed to advance sustainable development* remains widely debated. Existing literature presents two contrasting perspectives: one arguing that sustainability requires strong, exceptional individual leaders, and another proposing that leadership should be distributed collectively to enable wider participation, critical reflection, and long-term responsibility (Metcalf and Benn, 2013; Bendell et al., 2017). At the same time, degrowth scholars calls for a fundamental reorientation of organizations toward wellbeing and ecological balance rather than continuous growth, highlighting democratic governance and shared decision-making as key characteristics of businesses aligned with this vision (Nesterova, 2020). Yet, while previous research outlines theoretical characteristics for degrowth enterprises, the role of leadership within such organizations remains insufficiently understood.

This gap raises a central problem: although collective leadership aligns conceptually with degrowth values, we lack empirical knowledge about how leadership actually shapes and sustains degrowth practices inside organizations, and why this matters for real business contexts navigating sustainability challenges. The following section develops these ideas further by outlining the theoretical and empirical problems.

1.2.2 Theoretical problem

Having presented the two central pillars of this thesis (Leadership and Sustainable Development, conceptualized through the lens of Degrowth), this section turns to the well-debated question concerning what *forms of leadership* is necessary to advance sustainable development. While this thesis aligns with *degrowth* as its guiding framework, it is important to acknowledge that sustainable development is understood and defined in several, sometimes conflicting, ways. Rather than excluding alternative interpretations, the purpose of this chapter is to showcase the variety of perspectives that shape current discussions on leadership for sustainable development. These different ideas can be divided into the two groups of *leadership by the few*, and *collective leadership.*

First, there are several scholars talking about leadership for sustainable development in terms of *leadership for the few* (Campbell, 2006; Waldman and Siegel, 2008; Angus-Leppan et al., 2010; Metcalf and Benn, 2013). First, Campbell (2006), highlight the importance of altruism in business leaders conveying sustainability messages. Second, Waldman and Siegel (2008) found a connection between the intellectual stimulation competency of transformational leaders and strategic CSR (where strategic CSR is defined as a way to strategically benefit the firm by incorporating sustainable practices). Lastly, Metcalf and Benn (2013) argue that because of the complexity with understanding how an organization can be sustainable, leaders need to have extraordinary abilities (Metcalf & Benn, 2013). They continue by listing abilities these leaders should possess, such as thinking through complex problems, having high emotional intelligence and engaging groups in dynamic organizational change (ibid.). As such, the researchers mentioned in this section all come from a standpoint of a focus on single leaders when discussing leadership for sustainable development.

On the other hand, several scholars argue that sustainable development is best achieved through collective leadership (Bendell et al., 2017; Fang et al., 2022). Bendell et al. (2017) critique views of leadership as powerful individual action, arguing that such perspectives have supported harmful growth and exploitation. Instead, they propose understanding leadership as a label and behaviour that anyone can adopt from time to time, rather than a fixed quality of a few individuals. This view enables broader empowerment and the development of leadership capacity across organizations (Bendell et al., 2017). Moreover, collective leadership allows for multiple perspectives to emerge, fostering critical thinking and creating space for discussions about sustainable futures (Evans, 2011). Similarly, Fang et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of stakeholder participation for balanced decision-making that serves wider societal interests. To facilitate such participation, they promote shared leadership, a concept that falls under the broader umbrella of collective leadership.

To conclude, there are different views on what type of leadership is best suited to enable sustainable development. Two major views are *leadership for the few,* or *for the many* (collective leadership). Whereas some argue that leaders with exceptional abilities are needed, others argue that such a view of single leaders took us into the unsustainable society of today, and what is needed is leadership for the many, meaning collective leadership (Bendell et al., 2017). The relevance of collective leadership becomes clearer when examined in relation to degrowth, a movement that similarly emphasizes democratic participation and shared decision-making (Nesterova, 2020; Hankammer, 2021; Froese, 2023).

The degrowth principles promote shifting societal priorities from economic growth to collective wellbeing, and while often discussed at a macro level, scholars highlight the need to understand how this vision connects to business (Nesterova, 2020). Nesterova (2020), Hankammer et al. (2021), and Froese et al. (2023) explore what businesses aligned with degrowth might look like, commonly emphasizing democratic principles. Nesterova (2020) advocates for democratized decision-making and reduced hierarchy, while Hankammer et al. (2021) support democratic governance primarily through ownership models such as crowdfunding, though still within hierarchical structures. Froese et al. (2023) similarly emphasize democratic, purpose-driven governance by critiquing power imbalances and promoting collective, inclusive decision-making as essential for value creation in a degrowth context.

Looking at the previous research mentioned in the section above, elements connected to collective leadership, such as involvement and democratization (Bendell et al., 2017), are argued to be a part of degrowth businesses. What is left out of scope in this previous research however, is the *role* that such leadership plays in shaping degrowth businesses. For example, how does the characteristic of democratic decision-making affect the other degrowth business characteristics presented by Nesterova (2020), such as deviation from profit maximization, wellbeing and environment? What is the role of collective leadership when it comes to building and maintaining such unconventional characteristics of a business? In this thesis, I will examine just this, or more specifically: What is the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth businesses? By doing so, a bridge is built between the two concepts of collective leadership and degrowth businesses. Thereby, more knowledge is gained on both the topic of *leadership for sustainable development* and in the field of *degrowth businesses*.

Drawing from the split and contradicting views of what leadership is suitable for sustainable development, I aim to expand the knowledge of the topic of *leadership for sustainable development*, providing a piece in the puzzle of understanding what mechanisms of leadership is necessary to solve the major societal challenges we are faced with today.

1.2.2 Empirical problem

Although research has begun conceptualize what degrowth-oriented business might look like, we know little about how leadership works in practice within such organisations (Nesterova, 2020; Hankammer et al., 2021; Froese et al., 2023). Democratic principles are pointed out as necessary, but in the leadership litterature, little is known about how such collective leadership could be manifested in practice, although a growing body of research is highlighting its potential to drive sustainable development (Bendell et al., 2017). It is no secret companies are facing increasing pressure to align with expectations on sustainability. This together with an an ever-more interconnected world with information-flow that can take down the reputation of a company in a few hours, transparency and thoughtful action becomes key in staying legitimate (Baumgartner et al., 2022). At the same time, the business environment is rapidly-changing and increasingly complex as it is no longer enough to focus solely on the one stakeholder group of shareholders (ibid.). However, without empirical understanding of how collective leadership is enacted in real organisational settings, it is difficult for businesses to know how to implement participatory structures, manage decision-making processes, or maintain values such as inclusivity, purpose-driven work, and long-term ecological responsibility. This creates a practical knowledge gap: organisations may be inspired by degrowth principles yet lack guidance on the leadership mechanisms that enable such principles to function in daily operations. By empirically examining how collective leadership shapes and sustains degrowth-oriented business practices, this thesis contributes insights that can help organisations understand what leadership arrangements support transformative sustainability efforts in reality, rather than only in theory. Instead, to stay legitimate, it is necessary for companies to take all stakeholder groups into account, which comes with conflicting interests that needs to be weighted and considered.

So, what type of leadership is necessary to handle the complex business environment of today, and to build companies that help create a sustainable society for all, rather than the opposite? This thesis aims to increase the understanding of just this, as I dive deeper into collective leadership, and the role it plays in degrowth businesses. What's more, as voices are increasingly raised about the benefits of collective leadership when it comes to balanced decision making and sustainable development, it is interesting to learn more about how it actually works in practice. Bendell et al., (2017) point out the need for further research on effective collective leadership in order to address shared dilemmas connected to sustainable development. Gaining such insights is part of this thesis, as seen in the research questions stated in the next section.

1.3 Aim and research questions

Drawing on the discussion above, the overarching aim of this thesis is to increase the understanding of leadership for sustainable development in businesses. More specifically, I will look at *collective leadership (CL)*, and sustainable development will be viewed in the form of *degrowth*. Putting this together, I will explore the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth businesses. In order to do so, I will answer the following research questions:

1. How does collective leadership work in practice?
2. What is the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth business characteristics?

The first question lays a foundation that makes it possible to answer the second question, because before examining the role of the leadership in the chosen organization, it is necessary to first understand what it actually looks like in practice. Also, the first question is interesting in itself as it addresses the scarcity of research on "*group dynamics for democratic deliberation and decision-making*" (Bendell et al., 2017, p. 25), increasing the understanding of collective leadership.

To sum it up, the study will explore the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth businesses by answering the two research questions above. Not only will this examination build a bridge between the two concepts of *collective leadership* and *degrowth businesses*, but also address the scarcity of research of the two concepts (Bendell et al., 2017; Nesterova, 2020; Joutsenvirta, 2016; Hankammer, 2012; Froese, 2023). Ultimately, this examination targets the overarching aim to increase the understanding of leadership for sustainable development in businesses, providing guidance for organizations to address the societal challenges we are faced with today.

2. Conceptual framework

In this chapter, the conceptual framework is presented, which consists of the concepts of (1) *Leadership*, and (2) *Degrowth*. In the section about leadership, I will present what leadership is, the dominant view about leadership (with a critical lens), and lastly collective leadership. In the section about degrowth, I will present an overview of the concept, and then look at how it can be applied to businesses and what the degrowth literature say about leadership. Lastly, I will summarize the two concepts and discuss the relation between the two areas.

2.1 Leadership

The task of defining leadership is one that many researchers along the years have tried to take on. Yet, a unified definition of this abstract term seems to be as difficult as defining the word *democracy* or *love* (Northouse, 2013). Whereas many may have an instinctive understanding of what leadership is, putting it into a unified explanation with words is clearly a challenge (ibid.). However, according to Haslam, Alvesson and Reicher (2024), there is a common ground of the several definitions that have been developed over the last thirty years (e.g., Goethals et al., 2004; Rost, 2008; Smith, 1995). Haslam et al. (2024) summarize this consensus of the term leadership as: "*The process whereby one or more people motivate one or more people to contribute to the achievements of collective goals (of any form), by shaping beliefs, values and understandings in context rather than exercising stick-and-carrot behavioral control*" (p.3). This definition of leadership has some key features. First, leadership is viewed as a *process* grounded in connections and relationships between leaders and followers, rather than being a solo process (Avolio, 2007; Kellerman, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Second, the ultimate proof of leadership is *what the followers do*, and not what the leader is like (Bennis, 1999; Hollander, 1992). Third, leadership is not about making people do things, but rather to make them *want* to do things (Smith & Smith, 1994). Turner (2005) highlights this with the statement that leadership is less about power over followers, and more about *power through them*. This means that followership needs acceptance of the leaders' definition of reality (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Fourth, to conclude, Haslam et al. (2024) argue that "*leadership is a group process and ultimately about the activities of collectives, not just individuals.*" (p.3).

In contrast to the view of leadership as a social group process, the perspective we come across in everyday life is predominantly focused on the single leaders who are put on a pedestal thanks to their 'unique' qualities, skills and behaviors (Haslam et al., 2024). Not only is this view of leadership dominant in media, popular books, and among policy makers and consultants, but also among certain academics (ibid). However, this way of looking at leadership lives on not because empirical evidence, but because it appeals to the elites (ibid.). Haslam et al. (2024) refer to this as 'zombie leadership'.

One common view of leadership that belongs to the notion of 'zombie leadership' is that it is all about the leaders alone (Maskor el al., 2022). You often find popular leadership texts discussing leaders' behaviors, traits, skills, communication, and other topics where the spotlight is solely on the leader (ibid.). Thus, the analytical focus of the group which the leader is leading is most often overlooked (Haslam et al., 2024).

The focus on leaders alone comes with two assumptions: (1) That leadership is limited to those with formal authority, and (2) That we can understand leadership just by looking at these specific people, and although there might be other people lower down the hierarchy who also do leadership (such as department managers), their efforts are rarely appreciated in the same way (Tourish, 2014). Not to mention the foot soldiers and their overlooked work (ibid.). However, researchers have repeatedly concluded that people are more affected by the leadership of their immediate supervisors than by those with formal leadership positions (Haslam et al., 2024). For example, Einola and Alvesson (2021) found that junior investment banking employees had a difficult time pinpointing who their leader was and who as doing the leadership. As far as their awareness of leadership went, they pointed out their more experienced colleagues who gave them guidance in everyday operations, rather from those with formal higher leadership responsibilities (ibid.). Smith et al. (2018) and Fransen et al. (2023) reported similar findings, where actors further down the formal hierarchy were identified as perceived leaders. Moreover, they also found that this informal leadership was a strong driver for the success of the studied groups (Smith et al., 2018; Fransen et al. 2023).

On the theme of leadership being focused on a single person, Haslam et al. (2024) finds that a common way to analyze these leaders is by looking at their specific *qualities*. "Are leaders born or made?" is a question most of us has heard of (Boerma et al., 2017; Goldsmith, 2008). In efforts to answer this question, Winter (1987) argues that what makes a president good comes down to their motivation, whereas Rubenzer et al. (2000) says it is about personality. What those personality traits would be, however, differs depending on who you ask. For example, Plato (1993) claims courage and learning are crucial, whereas more modern ideas are pointing towards sensitivity, humility and openness (Jia et al., 2018; Mast et al., 2012; Schein & Schein, 2018). In the context of leading towards sustainable development, Metcalf and Benn (2013) argue that leaders need the ability of thinking through complex problems, having high emotional intelligence and engaging groups in dynamic organizational change (ibid.). Looking at the next research on this topic, Campbell (2006) stress the importance of altruism in business leaders conveying sustainability messages. What's more, Waldman and Siegel (2008), on the other hand, found a connection between the intellectual stimulation competency of transformational leaders and strategic CSR (corporate social responsibility). Looking at the almost infinite different suggestions of the traits of a good leader, there is probably no positive trait that has at some point been mentioned (Haslam et al., 2024). What's more, this focus of leadership is part of the focus on single leaders, which is already problematic as it is, as seen above.

In the search for the traits that make a good leader, many researchers changed track and started looking at their *behaviors* instead (Schreisheim & Bird, 1979). The assumption behind this body of research is that there are specific things that all great leaders do (Haslam et al., 2024). Schreisheim and Kerr (1974) pointed out consideration and initiation to be two core classes of behaviours that determines the success of a leader. Haslam et al. (2024) criticize this since the desired behaviour that constitutes for example consideration differs depending on the group, and second, Alvesson (2019), and Phillips and Lord (1986) shows that the followers' *perception* and *assessment* of their leaders' behavior matters far more than their leadership behavior. And, of course, this focus on leaders' behaviors is part of the already criticized focus in single leaders alone (Halsam et al., 2024).

The focus on the single leader continues as McGill and Scolum (1998) argue that leadership is an elite activity limited to a few talented people with special skills. For example, Metcalf and Benn (2013) argue that leaders need *exceptional* abilities to navigate through the complexity of sustainable development in organizations, implying that the leader has something that the followers do not, creating an 'otherness' between them and their followers. Haslam et al. (2022) point out a few problematic points about this view. First, it has created an immense inequality in reward and praise between the leaders and those who they lead. This gets clear looking at salary gaps, for example, American CEOs of leading companies enjoy 400 times higher salary than the average worker (Berger, 2022). Second, putting leaders on a pedestal has created an idea that companies need to put heavy investment on their leadership positions since the benefits will flow down to the rest in the organization (Gladwell, 2002). Lastly, the belief that leadership is something for the few chosen ones has resulted in a sense of grandiosity among leaders and the industry surrounding them, where they are viewed as a societal elite (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2016). But let's say these leaders are effective leaders bringing benefits to all, don't they deserve to enjoy the praise, higher salary and fancy events? The problem here is, there is a mountain of research showing that this is not the case (Haslam et al., 2024). For example, Hollander (1995) shows that putting leaders on a pedestal creates a psychological distance between the leaders and the followers, generally making their leadership less effective. For example, it makes the followers less willing to suggest new ideas and initiatives (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Wilkinson, 2023). What's more, Haslam et al. (2024) point out that, when a space of otherness is created between leaders and followers, it undermines trust and influence, which is what effective leadership is all about. It dooms the leadership to fail as it makes the followers less susceptible to work towards the leaders' goals (Aaroma et al., 2019). But it is no wonder that the idea of supremacy among leaders lives on, as the ones who are already holding this societal power are laughing all the way to the bank (Haslam et al., 2024).

A general perception of leadership found in modern society is that leadership is something that is good. When different leadership styles are discussed, they are often assumed to be "*a source of 'goodness' for them, for the groups that are led and for society as a whole*" (Haslam et al., 2024, p. 7). Although most of us can recognize that leaders sometimes lead towards bad things, it is frequently viewed as something outside the normal that unfortunately happens every once in a while (Haslam et al., 2024). By labelling bad leadership as 'dictatorship' or 'bullying', it is further 'othered' from the precious view of leadership as a force for something good (Hannah et al., 2004). Haslam et al. (2024) continue to criticize this view by pointing out that we don't live in a consensus world where interests never clash. What is good for the leader and the organization is not always good for the individual and the society (ibid). For example, an organization and a leader might benefit from increased profitability, but this may mean worsening working conditions for employees and/or environmental destruction. Also, even though a leader may be effective in creating enthusiastic followership in one group, this may be at the expense of other groups, a phenomenon named 'the Hitler problem' (Ciulla, 1995).

Lastly, maybe the strongest view held about leadership is that at least people do need leaders in order to organize effectively (Haslam et al., 2024). Many would assume that having someone lead a group towards its goals would increase effectiveness and productivity (Bregman, 2020). These assumptions are so strong that, when people organize without an apparent leader, it is assumed to be some kind of invisible hand leading them (Reicher and Stott, 2011). However, when trying to find the agitators of the US Urban riots of the 1960's, no such hidden leadership could be found (ibid.). It appeared to be the shared sense of identity and purpose that allowed these groups to effectively organize (Reicher, 2001). Looking at this mechanism in organizations, Kerr and Jermier (1978) found that things which can be traded with leadership is followers' professional orientation, intrinsically motivating tasks and high group cohesiveness.

Taking this a step further, Haslam et al. (1998) showed that not only can people organize without leadership, but also that leadership can even interfere with group functioning. The authors saw that when groups were asked to resolve a collective task, they performed the worst when they had a leader who was formally selected based on traits associated with long-term managerial success (such as planning skills, verbal skills and social awareness). The groups performed better (on measure of performance and cohesion) under the two other conditions under which they were observed, namely having no leader and having a randomly chosen leader. A major reason for this is that, when participants had the chance to leave their commitments, the groups with formally appointed leaders were the most likely to do so.

Looking closer at the psychology behind why assigned leaders may disrupt group performance, Peters et al. (2019) argue that the idea of 'you need a leader' is a subtle insult to the rest of the group which sets them apart from the leader. Another reason may be that, being pointed out as 'special', leaders may seek to assert their presence with unproductive behaviour that is seen as toxic or interfering (Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Franken & Plimmer, 2019). Lastly, when leaders are set on a pedestal as chosen and exceptional, their followers may rely less on their own ability and too much on the leaders', as if thinking to themselves "okay if you are so great, go on and do the work" (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). To conclude, the view of leaders as exceptional saviours that have something that the rest of the group doesn't, sets them apart from their group (Haslam et al., 2024). *"It creates or reinforces alienating notions of hierarchy*" (Haslam et al., 2024, p. 8). Also, it ignores the fact that the ability or skill to influence a group is generally a matter of degree, rather than a question of 'you have it and you don't' (Haslam et al., 2024).

So why does this 'zombie leadership', as Haslam et al. (2024) call it, continue to dominate our society? Reicher and Haslam (2006) points out that it serves not only the powerful, but also the powerless who has been zombified followers with no belief in their own ability to direct their life. But what do we do to stop this apocalypse? Haslam et al. (2024) suggest that one key priority is to "*champion approaches that see leadership as a process to which everyone can, and needs to, contribute*" (p.10). This can be connected to the concept of collective leadership (CL). As mentioned in the previous chapter, collective leadership is a view of leadership as not being limited to a few with authority, but rather as something for anyone in the group to adopt (Bolden, 2011). Similarly, Uhl-Bien (2006) describe it as a collective social process involving many individuals interacting together. This goes in line with the definition of leadership used by Haslam et al. (2024), "*The process whereby one or more people motivate one or more people to contribute to the achievements of collective goals, by shaping beliefs, values and understandings in context*" (p.10).

Simialar to Haslam et al. (2024), Bendell et al. (2017) raise critique towards leadership as powerful individual action, arguing it has been used to support harmful growth and exploitation. The authors point out the so-called un-sustainability of "*Assuming that 'leader' is a continuing quality of a person rather than a label"*- Bendell et al (2017, p. 21). Instead, they propose that leadership or 'leader' should be seen as a label and a behaviour that anyone can tap into from time to time. This *"provides a valuable opportunity for developing overall leadership capacity within organisations, rather than mistakenly seeing it as the domain of a chosen, or emergent, few*." - Bendell et al. (2017, p. 22). Thus, the approach of leadership as a label for the many enables empowerment for anyone to develop their leadership abilities and make the most of their potential (Bendell et al., 2017), which offers a solution to the inequality and ineffectiveness of Haslams et al. (2024) concept of 'zombie leadership'. What's more, collective leadership also allows for more perspectives to arise, which fosters critical thinking (Bendell et al., 2017.). In turn, this creates spaces for discussion about future possibilities for sustainability (Evans, 2011). What's more, Fang et al. (2022) stress the importance of stakeholder participation for balanced decisions that can serve the wider society and result in sustainable development. In order to facilitate stakeholder participation, the authors promote collective leadership (Fang et al., 2022).

To sum it up, seeing leadership as something *for the chosen few*, that is *good* and *needed* is how most of us view leadership today. As we have seen, Haslam et al. (2024) raise critique against this view of leadership as it has not only been shown to create inequality and elitism, but also been proven ineffective. Collective leadership is an alternative to this 'zombie leadership' (leadership for the few) which dominates society today, offering a way to distribute responsibility, include diverse perspectives, and challenge hierarchical power structures that reinforce unsustainable practices. In a world where interests so often clash, it is impossible to deem leadership as good without posing the question 'For whom and for what?'. This becomes particularly relevant when viewed through the lens of degrowth, a framework that likewise questions dominant growth-oriented logics and instead advocates for more democratic, inclusive and sustainable forms of organising.

2.2 Degrowth

Degrowth is both an academic concept and a socio-political movement that fundamentally challenges the dominant paradigm of continuous economic growth as an inherent societal goal (Nesterova, 2020). Instead, degrowth scholars argue that the focus on ever-increasing production and consumption has led to today's social and ecological problems, and that a planned reduction of production and consumption is necessary to achieve long-term sustainability and justice (Kallis, 2017).

Kallis (2017) emphasizes that degrowth is more than a critique of growth. It is about reframing how society measures prosperity, and move towards prioritizing wellbeing and ecological balance over GDP expansion. The concept also highlights the importance of democratic governance and equitable distribution of resources. This, together with reducing overconsumption, are seen as central to avoiding the social and ecological crises perpetuated by growth-oriented models (Froese, 2023; Kallis, 2017; Nesterova, 2020).

Although the concept of degrowth is frequently discussed on a macroeconomical level, researchers are increasingly thinking about how businesses could fit into a degrowth society (Nesterova, 2020; Hankammer et al, 2021; Froese, 2023). In order to reach the vision of a society focused on wellbeing rather than economic growth, it is highly necessary to further explore the link between degrowth and business (Nesterova, 2020). Nesterova (2020) explores just this, and identifies potential elements of a degrowth business. As a starting point, the author translates the three societal elements necessary for transitioning towards degrowth (downscaling, wellbeing and radical shift in values) into a company context (Nesterova, 2020). They then become (1) *Environment*, (2) *People and non-humans* and (3) *Deviation from profit maximization imperative* (ibid.). They all represent one group each, containing several characteristics connected to their specific theme.

As expected, under the category of *environment*, factors connected to minimizing negative environmental impact is found. Examples here include operating within planetary boundries (Klitgaard, 2013) and under circular principles (O'Neill et al., 2018), as well as encouraging pro-environmental behaviour among employees (Moriarty and Honnery, 2013).

In the group of *people and non-humans* Nesterova (2020) list characteristics such as decreased productivity (Latouche, 2009), democratisation of decision making (Barca, 2007), and orientation towards workers' wellbeing (Jackson, 2017). The latter, workers' wellbeing, can be achieved by de-specialisation (Kallis, 2017), development of human potential and pursuit of fulfilment (Gorz, 2012), and a feeling of meaningfulness towards ones job (Fournier, 2008).

Lastly, *deviation from profit maximization imperative* includes principles such as sufficiency and non-growth, as well as developing alternative business models and ownership patterns (Nesterova, 2020).

Drawing from these insights, in this thesis I will define the concept of a degrowth business as one that adheres to the principles discussed in this section: environment, people and non-humans and deviation from profit maximization imperative.

Nesterova (2020) is not the only researcher looking to explore the businesses' role in a degrowth society. Also Hankammer et al (2021) and Froese et al (2023) join her on this exploration. All three articles include 'democracy' as a principle for businesses that are to fit into a reality of degrowth. As mentioned above under the category of *people and non-humans*, Nesterova (2020) suggests *democratisation of decision making* as a principle of governance. She further argues that a facilitating factor to achieve this can be by deviating from hierarchical structures.

Similar to Nesterova (2023), Hankammar et al (2021) argue that organizations that are approaching degrowth is also one that implement democratic governance. However, Hankammar et al. (2021) discuss democratic governance in the sense of ownership, for example through crowdfunding, but stick to the idea of hierarchical structure as they highlight the importance for the top management to stay committed to the corporate values.

Froese et al (2023) raise critique toward hierarchical structures and power imbalances in organizations. They write about what value-creation looks like in the context of degrowth, and one of the patterns found is democratic and purpose-driven governance. The authors argue *"...that in many organizations, profit-oriented equity owners have a strong influence on an organization's direction and decision-making*" (Froese et al., 2023, p. 18). They continue to state that this can undermine sustainability goals as they conflict the so-often overemphasis on short-term financial goals that are prioritized when equity owners' interests permeate the direction of the organization (ibid.) This problem is fueled by steep hierarchies (ibid.). To address such unsustainable profit-orientation, Froese et al (2023), suggest the following as a solution: "*Applying democratic and inclusive management methods in order to promote and live a shared vision, inclusive decision-making, reciprocal relationships, transparency, and continuous (organizational) learning*". – Froese et al (2023), p. 18). The authors conclude their suggested solutions by recommending *collective decisions*, *involvement and inclusivity* and *long-term multi-stakeholder orientation* (Froese et al., 2023). These recommendations go in line with the notion of collective leadership (Bendell et al., 2017; Haslam et al, 2024).

It can be concluded that Nesterova (2020), Hankammer et al (2021) and Froese et al (2023) all talk about the necessity of organizational democracy for degrowth in one way or another, whether it be in *ownership-structures/legal form*, *governance* or *decision-making*. Thus, elements connected to collective leadership (such as involvement and democratization) are argued to be a part of degrowth businesses. However, the studies mentioned above are made on small to medium-sized organizations in sectors such as manufacturing, consumer goods, and services. Thereby, the applicability of collective leadership is context-dependent and may be limited in highly hierarchical or time-critical settings.

2.3 Summary

To conclude, the conceptual framework of this thesis consists of *leadership* and *degrowth*. Leadership is viewed as a process whereby one or more people can motivate one or more people to contribute to a common goal (Haslam et al., 2024). Leadership is seen as a label free for anyone in a group to adopt (Bendell et al., 2013). However, the dominant view of leadership in today's society is quite the opposite, namely something for the few extraordinary people. This so-called 'zombie leadership' has been shown to not only be uneffective, but create inequality and be a driver for 'un-sustainability' (Haslam et al., 2024; Bendell, 2013). Collective leadership offers an alternative to this, as it fosters balanced decision making (Froese et al., 20) and critical thinking (Bendell et al., 2013), which is argued to drive equality and sustainable development (ibid.). It is therefore no wonder the degrowth literature advocates for principles of collective leadership in degrowth businesses. Degrowth businesses are defined as a business that adhere to the principles of *environment*, *people and non-humans* and *deviation from profit maximization imperative* (Nesterova, 2020). Among these principles we find the sub-principle of democratisation of decision-making. Also Hankammer et al. (20201) and Froese et al. (2023) stand behind the importance of organisational democracy in degrowth businesses.

As seen, there are several theoretical connections between the two concepts of collective leadership and degrowth businesses. In this thesis, I aim to empirically bridge the connection between these two concepts to deepen the understanding of the role of leadership in organisational sustainable development. This will be done by looking at an organization that adhere to degrowth business principles and has adopted a collective leadership approach. The theoretical framework presented in this chapter will help in understanding the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth businesses.

The figure below visualises the connection between the theoretical pillars which together constitutes this thesis' theoretical framework.

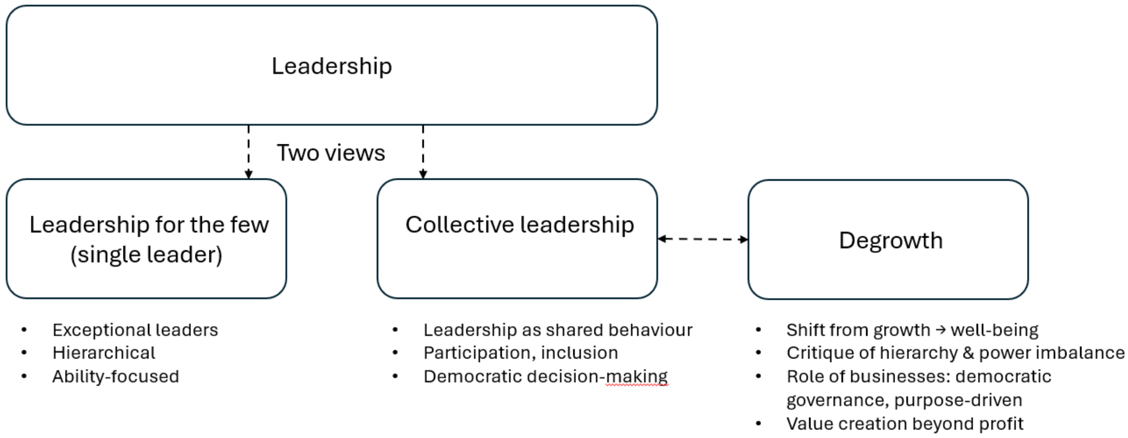

Figure 1. Theoretical framework

3. Method

In this chapter, I present and argue for the selected research design and method. By this, I disclose my philosophical beliefs of reality and how I view knowledge. Additionally, this chapter introduces how material was collected for the study, using a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews. Moreover, the qualitative research design is a case study, which facilitates developing an understanding of context-specific social processes occurring in the studied organization. The data was analyzed inductively using a thematic logic. Lastly, I discuss the choice of method by evaluating how it has affected the study, as well as discussing quality criteria and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research design

This study was carried out in an interpretivistic paradigm, where the perception of reality (ontology) is seen as something socially constructed and subjectively experienced, meaning it is colored by complexity (Saunders et al., 2019). In contrast of viewing reality as the same for everyone to experience, reality is subject to interpretation and thereby different for anyone experiencing it (Bryman et al., 2019). As I sought to to understand the reality of complex social processes of influence within an organization based on interpretations of it from people in the organization, this paradigm became a natrual fit. What's more, I acknowledge that the respondents' experiences of the organizational reality has been filtered through their subjective minds, and in turn subjectively experienced and understood by myself as a researcher (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020). I therefore highlight the fact that this thesis mirrors my interpretation of the collection of subjective realities painted to me by the respondents.

The beliefs about reality within this pradigm also shapes the epistemology, the belief about knowledge (Saunders et al., 2019). Interpretivists view theories and concepts as too simple to explain reality, since such simplification reduces the complexities that enables valuable insights into humanity (Bryman et al., 2019). Instead, the purpose of research within the interpreticvistiv paradigm is to create a deeper and richer understanding of social contexts by focusing on perceptions, stories and narratives (ibid.). This makes it suitable for me as an interpretivistic researcher to study an intermediately mature field (as discussed above). In such intermediate research fields, it is necessary to aim for inductively open-minded deepdives and acknowledge complexity, since there is still major uncertainties sorrounding the topic of interest (Saunders et al., 2019).

As a starting point, the study was approached inductively, keeping an open mind and letting theory emerge as data was collected through interviews (Bell et al., 2019; Gill & Johnson, 2010). I purposely did not know the literature in detail before the data was collected, since doing so too early may steer the researcher into a certain direction and result in prior confirmation bias (Gioia et al., 2012). However, as the data collection progressed and patterns started to emerge, I went into the literature to make sense of the emergent patterns. Thereby, the research took a more abductive logic where new knowledge started to emerge based on the insights gathered in the interviews combined with previous knowledge on the relevant concepts (Charmaz, 2009).

3.1.1 Qualitative study – a case study design

The process of a qualitative design is suitable for the aim and research questions as the reserach field is rather unexplored, and call for a deep and rich understanding of social processes (Yin, 2003; Bryman et al., 2019). Yin (2003) recommends a qualitative design when exploring partly unexplored and ambigious research fields. Both the research field of degrowth business and collective leadership lacks sufficient practical understanding as seen in Problem. Furthermore, the bridging beteen the two concepts is yet to be explored in this thesis. What's more, in order to explore the chosen topic, I sought to gain deep and rich understanding of the experiences of members of the chosen case organization, making a qualitative approach suitable (Bryman et al., 2019). Keeping in mind that the experiences described by the respondents stem from complex social contexts that by no means is generelisable, a quantitative approach is clearly ruled out (Fossey et al. 2002). Instead, Fossey et al. (2002) explain how a qualitative approach appreciates the uniqueness of different contexts, making it once again a suitable choice for this study as I aim to gain a deep understanding of different situations that emerge in the organization.

In order to explore the role of collective leadership in degrowth businesses, a case study was conducted. This allowed me to study the phenomenon of collective leadership in an organization with degrowth characteristics, and thereby explore the role of collective leadership in relation to the degrowth characteristics. This goes in lign with the statement of Yin (2003), that case studies are preferable when "*the focus is on a contemporary phenomena*" (2009, p.2). Furthermore, I conducted a single case study, which is suitable for two main reasons. First, the case is rare (Yin, 2023), very few organizations have adopted a collective leadership, and exhibit other degrowth characteristics to the same extent. Second, gaining a deep understanding of social processes and dynamics was central, which was made possible by throuroughly studying a context-bound phenomenon (Bryman et al., 2019). The chosen research design allowed me to collect rich and empirically detailed contextual descriptions of the processes and dynamics of interest. This made it possible to create a thorough understanding of the social processes making up collective leadership, and how it shapes the organization.

3.2 Empirics

3.2.1 Selection

To select a suitable case for this study I developed selections criteria in line with qualitative case study methodology (Yin, 2003; Bryman & Bell, 2019). First, and most obvious, the organization should adopt a leadership style that goes in line with the notion of collective leadership that is mentioned in previous literature, to ensure theoretical relevance (Yin, 2023). Second, at least some prominent degrowth characteristics as mentioned in previous degrowth business research must be present. Third, the industry must be one colored by 'business as usual', meaning leadership is usually carried out by a few with authority, and degrowth characteristics are not typically adopted. This makes it possible to gain a more thorough understanding of the role of collective leadership in shaping an organization, as it deviates from the status-quo. This left me with an organization suitable for the scope of the study, hereafter referred to 'Organization X'. It is a consultancy company based in Sweden, with around 20 consultants. As such, the unit of analysis in this study is Organization X, or more specifically, the social processes of influence that occur and shape Organization X.

The unit of observation in this study is people working in Organization X. By conducting interviews with three people from the organization, insights were gained on the unit of analysis. Three main selection critera of the interviewees were developed in line with recommendations by Bryman et al. (2019). First, I selected respondents with at least one year of working in the organization in order to ensure sufficient experience with collective leadership and thereby be able to reflect on its processes. Second critera was high willingness and ability to reflect on the organizational environment, resulting in data which is rich in information (ibid.). This critera was natrually ensured as the first respondent recommended two other who he deemed to be a good fit in terms of engagement. Lastly, the three respondents were chosen to be as diversified as possible, in regards to age, career background and time working in the organization. This ensures a variation of perspecives, giving a more nuanced understanding of social phenomenas (Bryman et al., 2019). However, since all members of the organization have the same role, no diversification on the role could be made. What's more, diversification on gender was missing, as all respondents were men, due to the majority of the organizational members being men. The diversification was made to create a sample that was as representative as possible, given the number of respondents which make up around 10% of the people in the organization.

3.2.2 Collection

Before the primary material collection, secondary material from the organization's website was gathered to create a foundational understanding of the organization. This enabled me to collect valuable background information without having to spend time on such questions in the interview (Bell et al., 2019). For example, I identified degrowth principles of the organization. What's more, due to their unusual governance approach, there was extensive information on just this, enabling me to get a picture of how the collective leadership was carried out. The information that was percieved by me to be particularly interesting for the study was brought up in the interviews for further elaboration.

Bryman et al (2019), explain how meanings are effectively communicated through language, which is why the primary material was collected through in depth interviews. The interviews were semi-structures, meaning there were predetermined topics of discussion, accompanied by follow-up questions (Bryman et al., 2019). This approach enabled more in-depth discussions as it gave me the opportunity to dvelve into details that I percieved to be of interest to the study, which is a significant advantage of semi-structured interviews according to Kakilla (2021). What's more, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews goes in line with the inductive approach of keeping an open mind, as it enabled me to gather insights beyond the predetermined topics that inevitably is based on my previous understanding (Bryman et al., 2019).

To further enhance an open mindset in line with the inductive approach, I followed a semi-structured approach and designed the interviews around predefined topics which the interview circulated around. By doing so, the conversation itself natrually became more open-ended as the respondent was not directed any further than the given topic, and was thereby given opportunity to speak within a broader frame. In preparation of the interviews, I conducted a mind-map with the pre-defined topics and sub-topics. Examples of topics includes Environmental sustainability, Wellbeing and Decision making. During the interview, I made notes about what different sub-topics and topics that were covered so that when the conversation needed further guidance, it was cleas what areas I could beneficially guide the conversation towards.

Respondent:	Date	Type of interview:	Length of interview
1	2024-03-01	Video call	1:26
2	2024-03-01	Phone call	1:13
3	2023-03-07	In person	1:14

3.2.3 Analysis

Analysing the data began with a careful review of the interview transcripts generated by transcription software. I listened to the recordings in parallel to correct any inaccuracies and to gain a thorough understanding of the data. Next, with inspiration from the Grounded theory approach of Gioia et al. (2012), I conducted an open coding on the transcribed interviews. This means segments of material was labelled with codes that captures the essence of the information (Gioia et al., 2012). I developed codes on three different levels using a spreadsheet. First-level codes were developed from similarities in the relevant data. This was followed by an aggregation of the first-level codes into themes, which finally was further aggregated into global themes. This analytical approach was considered appropriate as it allows for a systematic yet flexible exploration of empirical data, enabling concepts and patterns to emerge directly from the participants' accounts rather than being imposed by pre-existing theoretical frameworks Gioia et al. (2012). The use of open coding, inspired by the Gioia et al. (2012) methodology, supports an analysis that is particularly suitable for exploratory research aiming to capture complex experiences and meanings. By closely engaging with the data through iterative coding and constant comparison, this method enhances analytical rigor and transparency while preserving participants' original perspectives. Thereby, this approach facilitates well-grounded insights that are properly rooted in the empirical material (Gioia et al., 2012). Just like the interviews, the coding was done in Swedish, as it is my native language, enabling a more precise interpretation of the data. However, the table below showcases an example of the coding process translated to English.

Quote from respondents	Code	Theme	Global theme
"We have no hierachy. Everyone can be heard."	Equal influence	Decision making	Power for everyone
"Then you really had to find alliances. So there was a risk of this thing of "if I vote yes for you now, you do the same for me in this matter."	Influencing colleagues' decisions	Internal politics	Internal hierarchies and power imbalances
"The only thing we measure is the happiness of the consultants"	Happiness most important	Members happiness	Wellbeing

3.3 Method discussion

The choice of method in this study have influenced both the type of knowledge that is generated and how the findings should be interpreted. By using a qualitative and mainly inductive approach, the study was able to capture respondents' experiences of social processes in depth, which was central to the exploratory aim of the research. This approach allowed insights into collective leadership and degrowth practices to emerge from the data rather than being predefined by theory. At the same time, the qualitative design means that the findings are closely tied to the specific contexts of the respond ents and the chosen organization, limiting broader generalization. However, this was an intentional choice, as the study prioritizes depth and contextual understanding over generalizability. Overall, the methodological approach enabled a nuanced and context-sensitive analysis, while also shaping the interpretative nature of the conclusions.

3.3.1 Quality assurance

In qualitative research, there is no universally accepted standard for evaluating research quality, unlike in quantitative studies (Bell et al., 2019). To address this, Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose an alternative framework that can be applied to assess the quality of qualitative work. This framework focuses on trustworthiness, which Bell et al. (2019) further elaborate as encompassing *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability***.**

In this study, *credibility* was treated as a way to make sure that the findings correctly reflect the participants' perspectives (Bryman et al., 2019). To achieve this, I let the respondents actively engage with their own data: after each interview, they received the transcripts and could point out if something was unclear or needed adjustment. Because the interviews and initial analysis were in Swedish, I also asked participants to review their highlighted quotes in English to confirm that the translation accurately conveyed what they had said.

Dependability was addressed by ensuring that the research process was transparent and traceable throughout the entire study (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This involved carefully documenting each step of the research process, from data collection to analysis, and providing a detailed description of the methodological choices made along the way. To allow for transparency, relevant materials such as interview guides and analytical procedures are clearly described. In addition, the interview transcripts and emerging interpretations were repeatedly reviewed and discussed with a supervisor and expert in the field.

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which findings may be relevant in other contexts rather than statistically generalizable (Bryman et al., 2019). In this study, transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and the selection of respondents, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings. While the results are shaped by the specific context of the study, several experiences described by respondents suggest that similar dynamics may exist in other organizational settings, although contextual differences may influence how these dynamics unfold.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are grounded in the data rather than shaped by the researcher's own assumptions (Bryman et al., 2019). In this study, confirmability was addressed through a reflexive approach and by maintaining a clear connection between empirical material and analytical interpretations. Interview excerpts were used to support emerging themes, and analytical decisions were discussed with a supervisor and expert to challenge alternative interpretations. This helped ensure that the findings were transparent and rooted in the respondents' accounts.

3.3.2 Ethical considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were central. The study involved collecting information about participants' experiences and perspectives in their workplace, which could be sensitive, so it was important to clearly communicate how data is collected and stored before each interview. To ensure transparency and consent, all participants were asked to approve their involvement before the interview. Only gender was recorded as demographic information, and no names or specific organizational information were included. The participants all worked at a consulting firm with approximately 20 consultants, and this level of detail was deemed sufficient to provide context while maintaining confidentiality. By limiting the demographic data in this way, I ensured that only relevant information was collected, supporting both ethical responsibility and the integrity of the research findings.

3.3.3 Relation to sustainable development

This study contributes to societal sustainable development as the aim is to increase the understanding of how organizations can contribute to a thriving planet. I aim to understand how leadership can affect sustainable practices in organizations, or more specifically, shape degrowth business characteristics. Since leadership is present in all organizations, it is interesting and useful to explore the role which the form of leadership may have in determining the level of sustainability in the organization. By increasing the understanding of this, organizations are given tools to drive sustainable development in the form of degrowth, which is necessary to drive a broader societal degrowth trajectory (Nesterova, 2020).

4. Empirics

In this chapter, I will present the empirical insights gained from the desk research and the interviews. After giving short overarching contextual information about the chosen organization, I will dive deeper into the global themes of Power for everyone, Informal Hierarchies and Power Inbalance, and Wellbeing.

The organization that has been researched is a consultancy company based in Sweden, with a completely flat organizational structure where they have no managers, not even a CEO. Instead, they rely on self-organization and transparency where anyone can drive any decision. The organization was founded in 1999 and consist of around twenty consultants. None of them are actually employed by Organization X and Respondent 1 describes the company as a sort of a platform where consultants come together to find an in-between of being self-employed and being employed. So they all have their own independent companies, but has come together to co-own Organization X. The purpose of this is to have a secure 'home' where the consultants can learn from eachother and collaborate, while maintaining more independence than if they were fully employed. The sense of 'one-ness' is certainly there as the respondents refer to the other consultants as colleagues and employees (although they are formally not). The main purpose of Organization X is to make the consultants happy, while they strive to minimize financial value.

The figure below demonstrates the organizational structure of Organization X, showcasing how they all operate under the same brand which they co-own as a limited company, whereas also having their own independent companies as consultants:

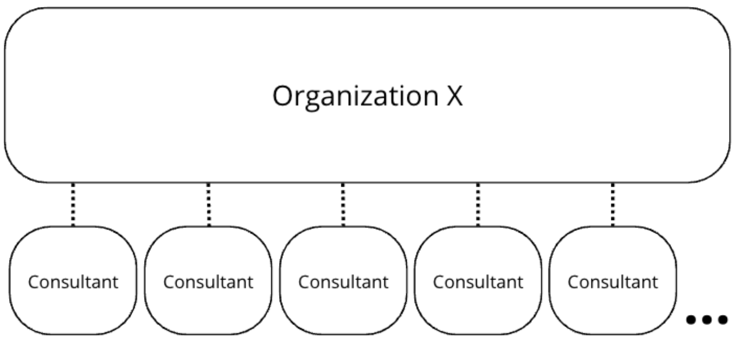

Figure 2. Organizational structure of the studied Organization X.

4.1 Power for everyone

The organizational structure and operational processes in Organization X builds on distributed power for everyone. This chapter reflects the data that conveyed information on this theme, and consists of three parts: (1) *Organizational structure*, (2) *Decision making*, and (3) *Reqruitment*.

4.1.1 Organizational structure

Organization X is a Swedish so-called 'aktiebolag', which is comparable to an English limited company. This means there are shares who has to be owned by someone. At org. X, anyone who has been at the company for two or more years can become an owner if they want to. The limit of two years exists so that there is time to get to know the person and make sure they are a good fit. There is no finiancial incentive to become an owner thanks to the 'naked in, naked out' policy, meaning they keep the stock worthless by returning the exact amount you put into the company (which is the same for everyone, the lowest legal amount).

> "We strive to minimize the financial value of the company. We've all seen consulting companies that work like pyramid schemes - where old-timers are like fat cats parasiting from the hard work of newcomers. That's exactly what we don't want to be" – Organization X documents

So there is clearly no financial incentive to become an owner, and it also doesn't give you any additional power. Despite the lack of tangible reasons to become an owner, respondent 2 explains that everyone decides to become one, and believes it's more about the feeling.

> "It is actually strange that anyone at all wants to become an owner of the company because it just means a bunch of risks. There is no advantage. But still everyone purchases their share. I think it's just a feeling, there is no economic advantage at all." – Respondent 2

So why keep the stock worthless? All three respondants are in favor of this idea, since it is a way to mitigate financial conflicts and to keep the focus on the purpose of Organization X (happiness). The company was founded to create meaningful exchange between consultants of competence, experience and clients. The purpose was not to financially grow, but after a while they did start to grow, which created a conflict where one person who was part of founding the organisation wanted to sell their share and make a profit. However, everyone else agreed that this was not the idea of Organization X. Therefore, they voted against him.

> "So there was a big conflict about the value of the company, and the guy who wanted to quit wanted compensation. So this went to court and became huge. And after that it was decided that Organization X would not have any assets in the company." – Respondent 1

After the incident, the indentity of Organization X became more clear and respondent 2 puts emphasis on how this really made a mark. They created the 'naked in, naked out' policy to avoid similar conflicts, and the discussion of "What is Organization X?" was sparked. One of the consultants decided it was time to find this out, and did so by asking every single one at the company "Why are you here?". After finding a common set of values based on that question, it was presented to the group and some modifications were made until they were all happy with their newly defined identity. The values are (1) community – We like to hang out with people who share our values, (2) freedom – we want to control our own time, (3) competence – We want to continously learn, (4) Good citizenship – Heart over wallet (money isn't the main thing in life), and (5) professionalism – We genuinely care about solving our customers problems.

The fact that the values are a reflection of the consultants was seen in the interviews as they all put emphasis on all of these values when talking about why they are at Organization X and also when talking about what they themself value. For example, respondent 3 was clear on wanting to make the world a better place, and respondent 1 put heavy emphasis on learning.

"*I'm very curious, I love to learn new things. It has to be educative and fun*." – Respondent 1

However, respondent 3 points out that there is a difference between what they say they do and what they actually do. He percieves a difference between consultants in two different areas: The engineers are more focused on staying at the client and keep invoicing, whereas the coaches generally has a drive to make the world a better place. Respondent 3 also explains that he is missing collaboration in the organisation, saying that the organisational structure and its mechanisms is blocking collaboration. It can feel a bit too much like everyone is looking out for themselves, since the organisational structure is one where everyone themselves are responsible for how much money they make. For example, if some consultants on the bench decide to build an offer together, which takes time and energy, but then one of the consultants gets offered a project during that process, respondent 3 explains that many are likely to then accept that offer and leave the collaborative effort.

"There is no common financial budget or possibility to have patience and think "let's do this together"" – Respondent 3

This takes us to the economic model, which is built on the principle of freedom for every consultant to make as much money as they want, while paying a fee covering the costs of runnig Organization X. The fee is partly fixed (around 3500-5000 SEK per year), and partly a percentage of the individual consultants' revenue (usually around 8-12%). The fee is adjusted every quarter depending on how much they have in their coffers, so that it just covers the costs. There is also a ceiling of how much fee you can pay, so that consultants don't leave Organization X because they make too much money, driving up the fee too much. Thus, even though Organization X strives to minimize its financial value, the individual consultants' independent companies obviously do not. The policy of 'naked in naked out', is followed by 'with lots of gold on the journey'. However, all respondents indicate that for them, making money is not the most important. Instead, there is an emphasis on learning, integrity and having fun. For example, respondent 3 explains that he want to work with clients where he feels a sense of meaningfulness and turns down those who don't align with his values. What's more, respondent 2 puts emphasis on learning, rather than maximizing profit:

"I make sure I make enough money. But I feel like it's very important to learn. That's actually my main driver all the time. To become a bit smarter." – Respondent 2

4.1.2 Decision making

How are decisions made when there are no managers? In contrast to traditional organizations, anyone can drive any decision. Different types of decisions need different processes and it is up to the person driving the issue to decide on the decision making process:

> "We have no hierachy. Everyone can be heard." – Respondent 1

There are no well-defined decision making processes, but one important principle is that those affected by the decision should always be involved in the process. Some examples of processes were mentioned, ranging from a 'fast' decision to 'well-anchored'. For more simple and fast decisions, such as buying a new coffee mashine, decisions are made with so-called 'intent', meaning you inform everyone about your intention to buy it, and if no one dissapproves, you can go ahead and make the decision. On the other end, bigger decisions may require consensus among everyone who is affected by the decision, or majority vote if consensus can't be reached. Respondent 2 explains that the way they make decisions has evolved over the years:

> "We used to work a lot with consensus, and then we tried to introduce consent. But now we have intent. And intent is so simple so you just say "this is what I think, and I will do this in a week". If no one says "no that's not good, let's not do that", the decision will be made. And this has speeded up the decision making process enourmously." – Respondent 2.

All respondents express positivity towards the process of intent. This way of making decisions eliminates the time consuming process of searching for everyones' consent, even the ones who don't have an opinion. Not only is this way of making decisions effective, but respondent 2 also emphasises how it still keeps everyone feeling involved:

> "They must have had the opportunity to have a say. The thing about just getting a decision that is already made land on your lap, just to accept it, that can feel very degrading. People don't need to feel like they are part of actually making the decision. But they do have to feel involved." – Respondent 2

Building on the principle of involving everyone affected by a decision, Organization X has found a way to avoid involving those not affected in order to increase effectiveness. They call this making a Mini-Organization X (within the large Organization X). This means anyone can start an initiative in anything and those who are interested can join and form a new group. For example, there is a mini-Organization X (Mini-X) for the ones who use the office. So, when decisions are made regarding the office, only those who are in that Mini-X will be involved in the process. What's more, many Mini-Xs have their own set decision making processes. So, they may for example mainly make decisions with consent, which works well when there are less people involved. All respondents express positivity towards this way of working since it allows for decentralization:

> "An improvement is that we make less decisions on the Organization X-level and more decentralized decisions on the Mini-X-level." – Respondent 1.

Not only does Mini-Xs make decision-making more efficient, but it also allows for freedom and more innovation:

> "Before we had the Mini-Xs, the ones who cared about something were always inhibited by those who didn't care, because they just wanted to keep the costs down. It was very paralyzing." – Respondent 2

Mini-X:s gives the consultants the possibility to initiate anything they want, without having to get the entire company on board. However, sometimes these Mini-Xs are so impactful that they end up affecting the entire company. Respondent 1 provides an example of this, where one consultant had great experience of working with *agile* at a company. He wanted to explore this more and started a Mini-X that turned out drawing so much interest that it is now a part of the brand of Organization X.

> "It turned out so big that being good at agile is now part of our brand. If we would've been a traditional company, maybe someone would've been like "I don't think so, it is not in our plan. Do this instead" – Respondent 1

On the contrary, respondent 2 said that he sometimes has ideas that no one is interested in, and then nothing happens, but he enjoys the possibility to start new initiatives in the organization. Also Respondent 1 express positivity towards Mini-Xs. However, he also mentions that it can be a disadvantage from a customer perspective, since it leads to a lack of cohesiveness in their brand. Also respondent 3 highlights this aspect, explaining that the different interests in the company make it difficult to find a common purpose and vision.

> "We don't have a common purpose, no clear vision." – Respondent 3

Respondent 3 continues to explain that with all the different interests that exists within the company, it sometimes looks more like many 'Me-companies' where people look out for themselves and do what they like, rather than one coherent organization. Although there are principles and guidelines, no one has the role to make sure it is followed.

> "It is not difficult to not have a CEO when there's no common purpose and several "me-companies" that work towards clients." – Respondent 3.

The respondents opinions about not having an assigned leader differs. Respondent 3 would like them to have a an assigned CEO to help create a common direction and purpose of the company. On the contrary, respondent 1 and 2 are positive to the current leaderless situation:

> "I struggle with authorities who tells me what to do." – Respondent 2.

4.1.3 Recruitment

We have now seen how 'day-to-day' decisions are made in Organization X. But how about recruitment? First, Organization X relatively rarely recruits since they don't have an aim to grow. In fact, each new addition makes their organization a bit less personal and a bit more difficult to coordinate, according to respondent 3. So when they do recruit, they do so in the belief that the person will contribute to valuable knowledge-sharing, challenge the status quo of the company and bring new ideas. Their principle for hiring is “hire awesome people, or don’t hire at all”, which is an important component for making their organizational model work:

> “We want to grow with knowledge. There is no tangible advantage of hiring new people, but if we feel like this person has a lot of knowledge that I don’t have, then there’s a great reason to hire.” – Respondent 2

Respondent 2 goes on to explain that besides knowledge, they look for people with similar values. He would like to hire people that are eager to learn and are interested in Organization X because of learning, rather than for pure financial reasons.

> “I don’t want anyone who just wants to join because of our strong brand just to make a lot of money” – Respondent 2

The minimum bar for hiring someone is that there is one consultant at the organization who drives the decision to hire and makes sure the new candidate is well treated. Second, at least one of the consultants must have worked with the candidate before. And lastly, that no one puts their veto against the candidate. Usually, recruitment is done in a group of around three people, where one is the initiator of the decision. This way, not everyone has to get involved unless they want to. Respondent 1 said that they trust each other in making good decisions, so he doesn’t feel the need to get involved in every process. He expressed that:

> “I don’t have to get involved. If they think it’s good, then I think it’s good” – Respondent 1

When recruiting, there are no guidelines regarding diversity, and no one responsible for ensuring this. Respondent 3 explains that because of this, there is a lack of diversity. Almost everyone are men around the same age. Since they highly value their brand, they avoid taking risks with hiring young professionals.

> “We’re almost all men, in the same age. No one is responsible for diversity.”– Respondent 3

4.2 Informal hierarchies and power imbalance

Although the model of Organization X is built on equal power for everyone, Respondent 2 and 3 both indicate that there are power imbalances at the company. Respondent 2 compared it to a school class. Some people have higher status and are ‘cooler’ than others, and their ideas will get more attention and agreement. Also, those with more friends in the organization will have greater chances of getting their decisions through. Respondent 2 express how he doesn’t like this mechanism but sees it as unavoidable.

> Unfortunately it is like that with us humen, that we have some kind of built in hierarchy no matter how you twist it. – Respondent 2

Respondent 2 contiunes to explain that they used to make more centralized consent-based decisions, meaning everyone would give their consent in order for the proposal to happen. When this was the case, people would create alliances with others in order to get their proposals through. However, since they decentralized the decision making by creating the Mini-Xs and simplified centralized decisions by using 'intent', as described above, this mechanisms of strong internal politics has been reduced.

> "Then you really had to find alliances. So there was a risk of this thing of "if I vote yes for you now, you do the same for me in this matter."" – Respondent 2

Besides the social hierarchies, another thing that detirmines the how much power someone at Organization X has is their level of knowledge. Respondent 1 explains that if you are knowledgeble in an area, then you can take initiatives and lead in your area of expertise.

> "If you are competent in one area, then people will listen to you. So you get power in that way, in your competence." – Respondent 1.

Lastly, respondent 2 describes how although everyone has access to power, you also need to take it. You have to take up space and help yourself. Variations in personlity means not all people are equal in this sense. Thus, the level of power you have also depends on your ability to help yourself and take up space. On the other hand, respondent 2 also points out that, in a traditional hierarchical company, you often don't even have the chance to take up space and help yourself anyway.

> "I feel bad for those who don't know how to take up space and help themselves" – Respondent 2

4.2 Wellbeing

Organization X puts a lot of emphasis on the wellbeing of their employees. So much that it is the only thing they actually systematically measure and follow up in their so-called 'Happiness Index'. The Happiness Index is measured in a shared document where you rate a few different questions on a scale 1-5. Examples of the questions include how happy you are being at Organization X, and how happy you are with your current client, or bench situation. This is measured continously, some update every month, others less frequently. There is no need to update it (based on the core principle of freedom in Organization X), but there is quite a strong peer pressure to keep it updated. The happiness data is used to generate insights or trigger actions.

> "The only thing we measure is the happiness of the consultants" – Respondent 1

Since Organization X is a limited company (a Swedish 'aktiebolag'), they need to have a board of directors according to law. The board is selected during their annual conference, where people can volunteer and then vote. The main task for the board is to make sure the financial aspects are okay and to make sure people are happy by looking at the Happiness Index in their monthly meetings (which anyone in the organization is free to join). The numbers of the Happiness Index is also printed and brought to the annual conference.

Sometimes, they can see cascading effects. For example, if someone is annoyed with something, all numbers go down because it effects the happiness of people around that person. Since it is of the interest of everyone to be happy, the issue will be dealt with to create a generally happy workplace. Respondent 2 express how this self-organization of creating wellbeing works:

> "No one is responsible for my wellbeing. But a prerequisite for me to feel good is for everyone at the company to feel good" – Respondent 2.

In contrast, respondent 3 express how the self-organization of creating wellbeing is not really working. He witness about quite an unpleasant environment at times. No one has the responsibility to create psychological safety, and people tend to care for themselves and be quite straight forward and not really be considerate about how it lands with the other person. Respondent 3 also describes how he was quite shocked in the beginning about how people spoke to eachother:

> "People yell at each other sometimes. You know, we don't have a manager. We don't have anyone who can say "this behaviour is not okay""
> – Respondent 3

Since there is no manager who can put an end to a bad behaviour, it is up to the individual do so. If there is not hard work put into creating a good culture and mechanisms, there is a risk for school yard behaviour. Respondent 3 goes on to describe it as the principal not being there, which can result in bullying. There is no one to turn to with conflicts or if you witness bad behaviour. If you don't have the courage or ability for handling conflict, there is a risk it leads to worse wellbeing:

> "You hope that it will be self-oganized and figured out, but it is not really. There is a long history of personal conflicts." – Respondent 3

There is a set process for handling conflict. If agitation is building up, the first step is to address it straight away with the involved person(s). If that doesn't resolve the conflict, next step is to invite other people in to help solve the conflict. However, as seen, respondent 3 indicate that this process is not really adopted properly. Also Respondent 1 explains that most people are quite bad at step one (addressing the conflict straight away).

Althugh respondent 3 experiences issues with wellbeing at Organization X due to the self-organizing principles, it is also highlighted how the organizational structure contributes to increased wellbeing. For example, Respondent 2 express how the fact that there are no managers contributes to his personal wellbeing since he has a hard time with authorities who tells him what to do. What's more, all respondents emphasize how they enjoy the freedom, and how the freedom and autonomy contributes to continous learning.

Besides the main point to ensure the consultants' wellbeing, the Happiness Index has other beneficial effects. First, respondent 1 emphasise how wellbeing makes them do a better job with their clients. Second, it is a way to be more agile. When there is a drop in the index, people at Organization X come together and make a necessary change. For example, at one point somebody's number dropped to a 1 due to confusion and frustration with the internal process of invoicing. Within a week there was a workshop to improve this issue. The organization improved and the Happiness Index went up. Thus, the Happiness Index helps them be more agile compared to most financial metrics that are trailing indicators, making it hard to react to change in time.

Besides the Happiness Index, Organization X also fosters wellbeing by prioritising learning and freedom. All respondents puts emphasis on the importance of these two aspects. Respondent 2 points out that in a traditional consultancy company, emphasis on learning or work that feels meaningful is often not possible, since the there is pressure from the top management to have the consultants working at a client as much as possible to generate as much profit as possible. What's more, Respondent 1 expresses that he believes the freedom that permeates Organization X plays a crucial role in driving sustainability. He points out that in traditional companies, sustainability most often has to be prioritised by the assigned leaders (and the shareholders) in order for the company to focus on sustainability.

Respondent 3 explained that many of the consultants find it important to do good for the environment. This is reflected in several ways in Organization X. Respondent 2 explained that a train-travel policy was established as some of the consultants raised critique towards their way of travelling by plane. What's more, there is a company blacklist where everyone in the organization can put their veto against working with a company that they consider unethical. This means no one in the organization can work with that company under the brand of Organization X. However, since freedom is an important value, they could still work with a company from the blacklist as independent consultants, under their own names. On the topic of client selection, respondent 1 explained that it differs quite a lot between the individuals regarding how important it is for them to work with purpose-driven companies.

"I would really like to leave the world in a better place than when I entered it." – Respondent 3

The engagement in sustainability can also be seen in the Mini-Xs that are formed. For example, there was a Min-X focused on climate that became so successful it ended up becoming its own independent company, and is now one of the most well-known organizations in its industry. On the other hand, Respondent 2 highlights an example of a person many years ago who was very interested in environmental sustainability, and tried to start an initiative in that. But as there was not really an interest among others, he eventually quit the efforts. However, respondent 2 highlights how he found this person highly inspiring, although he was a bit "before his time". Now a days there is a bigger interest in the environment.

"There are quite a lot of us who have an interest for the climate." – Respondent 1

5. Discussion

In this chapter, I will answer the two research questions: (1) *What does collective leadership look like in practice*? and (2) *What is the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth business characteristics?* As seen in the empirics, it is inevitable to discuss the leadership of Organization X in isolation from the organizational structure (including the ownership model). They shape and enable each other. For example, without the ownership model of equal non-profit shares for everyone, an environment where all voices have the same significance would be difficult to create. The same goes for the flat structure (where no one has a title or authority), which most certainly has an influence on the collective nature of the leadership in Organization X. Taking this interconnectedness into consideration, I will include the role of the organizational structure when discussing the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth businesses.

5.1 Collective leadership in practice

One of the strongest views about leadership is that groups benefit from having a (one) leader (Haslam et al., 2024; Bregman, 2020). Therefore, Haslam et al. (2024) would probably not be surprised by the attention Organization X has gained for their collective leadership model, as it deviates from what they call zombie leadership. To re-cap, zombie leadership refers to the dominant view and practice of leadership as being limited to a few who tend to be put on a pedestal. This leads to elitism, inequality and is not even very effective (Haslam et al., 2024). Instead, leadership should be viewed as a process which anyone can, and needs to contribute to (Haslam et al., 2024). Similarly, Bendell et al. (2017) argue that, to foster sustainability, a 'leader' should be seen as a label or behaviour that anyone can tap into at any time. This goes in line with how leadership is executed in Organization X. With no formal leaders, anyone can drive any decision whenever, and everyone who are affected by the decision has a say in it. This fluent view of leadership can be spotted in various examples provided by the respondents. For example, one of the consultants in Organization X wanted to work more with agile, and started a so-called 'Mini-X' focused on just that. Thus, the driver of this Mini-X successfully took on the behaviour, or label, of a leader, as Bendell et al (2017) would probably put it.

When decisions are made, it is central that everyone who is affected by the decision has a say in it, whether it be actively giving consensus, or just not saying no. Respondent 2 stress the importance of this, saying that having a decision that is already made just land on your lap can feel very degrading. This can be connected to the research by Peters et al. (2019), that the idea of 'you need a leader' is a subtle insult to the rest of the group. What's more, just having decisions land on your lap may contribute to the point that Einola & Alvesson (2021) made, that leadership by the few leads followers to rely less on their own ability and too much on the leader. In Organization X, this is mitigated by letting everyone be involved in the decisions that affect them, fuelling individual empowerment. This principle also means leaving out those who are not affected, which makes decision making more effective and de-centralized. This can be seen in the formation of Mini-Xs.

The example of the agile Mini-X mentioned above turned out to draw a lot of interest. However, there are also examples where similar initiatives don't take off. For example, Respondent 2 explained that sometimes, he has ideas that no one is really interested in. There was also an example of a person many years ago who tried to start sustainability initiatives, but gave up eventually as not enough interest was sparked. This clearly showcases the centrality of followers in leadership. As Bennis (1999) and Hollander (1992) argue, the ultimate proof of leadership is what the followers do, and not what the leader is like. Smith and Smith (1994) also puts emphasis on the followers when talking about leadership, arguing that leadership is not about *making* people do things, but rather making people *want* to do things. In Organization X, this is truly how it is. There is no possibility to gain followers by formal authority, i.e *making* people do things. Instead, you have to make people *want* to do things in order to gain followers. The mechanism of leadership by 'wantness' may tell on the effectiveness of collective leadership. In the case of the agile 'Mini-X', the movement was so big that it turned out to shape the entire brand of the company.

Besides the natural mechanism of leadership by 'wantness' that is facilitated in Organization X, another reason why new initiatives successfully develop may be the mechanism of trust and influence that is facilitated by the reduced space of 'otherness' between the initiator and the followers. In traditional authoritative leadership, a space of 'otherness' is created between the leader and the followers due to the pedestal on which the leader is put on. Peters et al. (2019) argue that another reason for this psychological divide is the subtle insult of 'you need a leader'. The mechanism of 'otherness' undermines trust and influence, which is what effective leadership is all about (Haslam et al., 2024). This dooms the leadership to fail as it makes the followers less susceptible to work towards the leaders' goals (Aaroma et al., 2019). In Organization X, the issue of 'otherness' is mitigated by not having chosen authoritative leaders. And if someone initiates others to follow along on their goal, it is optional to join as a follower, naturally making the initial leaders' goal also the followers' goal, which circles back to leading by 'wantness'. Respondent 2 summarizes the two perceived benefits of absence of authorities and leadership by 'wantness' by stating that he is "*struggling with authorities who tells him what to do*". To conclude, two factors that seem to affect the success of collective leadership in Organization X is the naturally occurring mechanism of leading by 'wantness', and the reduction of 'otherness' between the temporary leader and the followers.

Reduction of 'otherness' leads to more trust (Haslam et al., 2024), and trust seems to be an important component in making collective leadership work in Organization X. Without it, it would be too ineffective. For example, respondent 1 gave an example of a decision of recruitment that was being made by his colleagues where he didn't feel the need to get involved in the process. He expressed that, "*if they think it's good then I think it's good*". This indicates a lot of trust, which is an important component of effective leadership according to Haslam et al. (2024). What's more, when recruiting, Organization X sees it as very important that they recruit very competent people, so that the brand remains valuable. By only recruiting people that at least someone has worked with before, trust to new colleagues is already established to a degree, contributing to the continuous effectiveness of collective leadership.

As we have seen, Organization X is formally a flat organization with no hierarchies. In theory, everyone has equal power. However, in practice, this is not fully the case. The empirics show that informal power imbalances and hierarchies exists. First, there is a degree of meritocracy, as those with more knowledge are trusted to lead in their area of expertise. Second, the level of power you have also depends on your ability to help yourself and take up space. Variations in personlity means not all people are equal in this sense. This indicate that with collective leadership, personality does play a role, like Rubenzer et al. (2000) claims. Looking at leadership research, there is no clear consensus on what personality traits make up a good leader (Plato, 1993; Jia et al., 2018; Mast et al., 2012; Schein & Schein, 2018). However, in the case of collective leadership, the ability to take up space, or extroversion, seems to be an important trait in order to influence the group in a common direction, and thereby succeed as a temporary leader. Lastly, there are power imbalances in the form of socially constructed internal hierarchies. As respondent 2 said, some people have higher status and are "cooler" than others, meaning their ideas will get more attention and agreement. And those with more friends will have an easier time to get people to join their initatives. Thus, status and popularity plays a role on how succesful a temporary leader will be in collective leadership. In turn, status and popularity can also be assumed to be connected to personality traits, such as for example extroversion, openness and/or kindness. However, Organization X has reduced the power imbalance of status by de-centralizing decisions and simplified decisions so there is less need to seek consensus by as many people as possible.

As such, collective leadership as in Organization X (i.e. in practice) goes in line with the definition of leadership formed by Haslam et al (2024), "*The process whereby one or more people motivate one or more people to contribute to the achievements of collective goals (of any form), by shaping beliefs, values and understandings in context*" (p.3). Not only does collective leadership at Organization X reflect this definition, but it also facilitates the execution of such leadership. Empirical insights and previous research shows that the effectiveness of the leadership in Organization X can be explained by the naturally occurring leadership by 'wantness', reduction of 'otherness' and a component of trust both because of reduced 'otherness', but also facilitated through careful recruitment.

These findings can be applied to understand the self-organizing mechanisms in Organization X. First, a *shared sense of identity* was found, which is deemed by Reicher (2001) to be an important part of self-organization. The shared sense of identity was highlighted as the respondents talked about each other as "us" and "colleagues", and about their shared values. What's more, all consultants operate under the same brand. They also largely share the same values, since the values were established as a product of interviews and consensus among all individuals. What's more, the empirics revealed a lack of diversity in the organization. Most of the individuals are men in the same age range, and when recruiting, they approve only people who at least someone has worked with before. This homogeneity of the group is also assumed to contribute to a shared sense of identity. Thus, factors such as operating under the same brand, sharing values, and the homogeneity of the group in terms of gender and age most likely contributes to a shared sense of identity and purpose, which drives the mechanism of self-organization and makes it possible to operate without formal leaders (Reicher, 2001; Kerr and Jermier, 1978).

On the other hand, the contrary can also be found in Organization X, meaning a lack of the factors that previous research by Reicher (2001) and Kerr and Jermier (1978) argue to be drivers for self-organization. Respondent 3 express a divide between two groups of consultants, indicating a 'we and them'-mindset. What formally tell these groups apart is their area of consulting, but he also express how they have slightly different values and prefer different ways of working. One group leans more towards simply working at the same client and making financial profit, whereas the other leans more towards being driven by learning and making the world a better place. This divide indicates a lack of the facilitating self-organizing factors of both *professional orientation*, as well as *shared sense of identity and purpose* (Reicher, 2001; Kerr and Jermier, 1978). Respondent 3 express an issue of lack of purpose, saying there is no common direction and vision of the company, since there are several different values and interests in the organization. What's more, the fact that they are all individual consultants who first and foremost look after themselves leads to a lack of collaboration. He refers to this as a problem of being less of an organization and more of several 'Me-companies'. This indicates a lack of *group cohesiveness*, one of the facilitating factors of self-organization (Kerr and Jermier, 1978).

These insights on self-organization in Organization X, showcases the importance of the 'soft' (intangible) factors of *shared sense of identity and purpose*, and *group cohesiveness* to effectively practice collective leadership. This implies that organizations should look beyond 'hard' (tangible) factors such as decision-making processes when aiming to make collective leadership work effectively. With strong self-organizing factors present, a strong foundation is built on which tangible tools, like frameworks for decisions, can be added.

In conclusion, leadership in Organization X is proposed to be effective due to the factors of leading from 'wantness', together with a reduced 'otherness'. However, internal hierarchies do exist and disrupts the pure 'collectiveness' and democracy of the leadership. What's more, self-organizing factors such as a shared sense of identity and purpose play an important role in laying the foundation which makes it possible to practice collective leadership. Organization X have enough self-organizing factors to function, but a lack of cohesiveness and purpose hinder the organization from functioning optimally. Drawing on these insights, I recommend organizations to look at self-organizing factors to determine if collective leadership may be a good fit and how/if it is possible to foster such factors to facilitate an environment where collective leadership can work well. When having established such an environment as foundation, I recommend learning from the tangible frameworks such as the decision-making process of Organization X, as they have been developed over several years of trial and error and is perceived by the respondents to be efficient. What's more, the decentralization of the decision-making process minimizes the issues of internal hierarchies and power imbalances, although they inevitably still exist.

5.2 Collective leadership and degrowth characteristics in businesses

As we have now seen *how* Organization X practices collective leadership, I will dive into the role collective leadership has had in shaping degrowth characteristics in Organization X. The degrowth business characteristics presented by Nesterova (2020) that are relevant for

Organization X is (1) *Democratization of decision making*, (2) *deviation from profit maximization imperative*, (3) *workers' wellbeing* (4) *environment*, and (5) *diversity*.

The link between collective leadership and *Democratisation of decision making* is clear. Nesterova (2020) suggests deviation from hierarchical structures as a facilitating factor to achieve democracy. Also degrowth researchers Hankammer et al. (2021) and Froese et al. (2023) stress the importance of democracy in both ownership structure and decision making. As the empirics show, Organization X most certainly has adopted a democratic approach both to ownership structure and decision making. It is important to point out that these two go hand in hand. The ownership structure in Organization X facilitates democratic decision making. If some members of the organization would be financially affected by the direction of the company, democratic decision making would be difficult to lean into. When everyone is a shareholder and there is no economic growth, no one's word will weigh heavier because of financial investment. Thus, Organization X adhere to the degrowth principle of democracy, both through organizational structure and leadership. However, as seen above, there are power imbalances and informal hierachies influenced by status, meritochracy and personality. Thus, although collective leadership encourages democracy, human nature doesn't allow us to completely get rid of un-democratic power imbalances. However, it is safe to say that Organization X is far more democratically governed compared to traditional hierarchical companies.

This chapter aims to explore the role this democratic nature of collective leadership has had in shaping the remaining four degrowth business characteristics. The role which collective leadership plays in shaping these characteristics can be divided into three different categories: (1) *Prioritising workers' interests*, (2) *Perspective sharing and critical thinking*, and (3) *Individual empowerment and freedom.* I will now present these three categories in detail while simultanously diving deeper into the remaining degrowth business characteristics and argue for their relevance.

5.2.1 Prioritising workers' interests

With collective leadership as in Organization X, the direction of the company is shaped by the interests and values of the consultants, rather than a seperate group of profit-oriented shareholders. This has had a great impact on the priorities and direction of the company. Froese et al. (2023) advocate for democratic and purpose-driven governance in organizations in order to facilitate degrowth oriented value creation. The authors argue *"…that in many organizations, profit-oriented equity owners have a strong influence on an organization's direction and decision-making*" (Froese et al., 2023, p. 18). This can undermine sustainability goals as they conflict the so often overemphasis on short-term financial goals that are prioritized when equity owners' interests permeate the direction of the organization (ibid.) In Organization X, this is mitigated by the fact that the equity owners are also the ones working in the company and collectively leading the company. All consultants who have been at the company for more than two years can become an owner, and they have all chosen to do so (even though the shares are financially worthless). This means that Organization X will be shaped by the values and interest of the consultants, and not a seperate stakeholder group of equity owners who prioritize profit-oriented goals on the expense of other stakeholder groups, such as the employees. This allows for more balanced decisions as the decision-makers belong to the stakeholder group of both shareholders and employees. As Fang et al. (2022) pointed out, stakeholder participation is key for balanced decisions that can serve the wider society and result in sustainable development. The fact that the consultants of Organization X belong to several stakeholder groups is a form of automatic stakeholder participation. The fact that leadership is executed from the interests and values of the consultants leads to more balances decision making and has played an important role in forming degrowth business characteristics.

First, Organization X strives to minimize financial value in the company. This goes in line with the degrowth business characteristic of *Deviation from profit maximization* (Nesterova, 2023). The purpose of Organization X has always been generating happiness for the consultants, rather than financially growing. However, at one point they did start to grow and one of the founders wanted to sell their share and make a profit. This sparked a conflict since the majority agreed that this was not the purpose of the company. Thanks to the collective leadership approach, the majority voted against him, which not only kept the company in line with the inital purpose, but also made it even clearer what they stand for. Thus, the collective leadership approach and democratic decision making process kept Organization X in line with the interests and values of the majority, rather than allowoing for an un-balanced decision where the interests of a few with financial interest was prioritised.

Although Organization X minimizes the financial value of their stock, the individual consultants make their own money and they natrualy do not strive to minimize financial value. But since they have other interests than pure financial, they do not maximize profit on the expense on their own wellbeing, interests and personal values. Thus, they deviate from the profit maximization imperative, which is in line with Nesterova's (2024) view of a degrowth business. There are several examples of this that mirrors the saying of 'Heart over wallet'. For example, respondent 3 said that if he cannot work with a client in a way that resonates with him, mening to make a meaningful and lasting impact, he rather declines. Respondent 2 expressed that he makes sure to make enough money, but his main driver is to keep learning. He pointed out that if he would like to widen his competence, he takes a few weeks without income so that he can educate himself. Respondent 2 also points out that in a traditional consultancy company, emphasis on learning or work that feels meaningful is often not possible, since the there is pressure from the top management to have the consultants working at a client as much as possible to generate as much profit as possible. The interests of the top management is prioritised, which undermines the interests of employees, which is a mechanism of clashing interests Haslam et al. (2024) points out as an issue with traditional zombie leadership.

Although the respondents do not view profit maximization as the most important aspect of their work, not all consultants share the same values and interests. Respondent 3 mentioned that there is a group of consultants who deviates from some of the company values and solely want to continously sit at a client and focus mainly on profit. However, in this case, profit maximization is a personal choice and not driven by the top management, meaning it is assumed to be within the frames of their own wellbeing, which takes us to the next degrowth business characteristic by Nesterova (2024).

Organization Xs main purpose is to generate happiness for the consultants. This highly resonates with the characteristic of *Workers' wellbeing* that Nesterova (2023) argue to be a characteristic for degrowth businesses to adopt. In a degrowth economy, the process of production should be oriented towards workers' wellbeing and happiness (Jackson, 2017). As seen in the empirics, happiness is Organization Xs main goal and the only thing they measure through their Happiness Index. Happiness is cultivated through focusing on what is most important for the consultants, which are the same as the company's values. For example, the respondents find it important to continuously learn, have freedom and to act according to 'Heart over wallet'. Kallis (2017) suggests de-specialisation to foster wellbeing, which is made possible for the consultants as they focus on learning and have the freedom to go in a new direction whenever they like, see for example the consultant who came across agile and decided to start a Mini-X to learn more about that. Gorz (2012) highlights development of human potential, as well as pursuit of fulfilment, which is also in line with the possibilities to keep learning according to the individuals' interest in Organization X. The company value of 'Heart over wallet', goes in line with what Fournier (2008) point out as key for wellbeing, namely having a meaningful job. Thus, the degrowth characteristic of workers' wellbeing is not only found, but prioritised in Organization X. One main reason for this is the fact that it is the interests and values of the consultants that shape the company.

In traditional companies, as Froese et al. (2023) pointed out, the direction of the company is strongly influenced by profit-oriented shareholders. In those cases, workers' wellbeing will most likely not be the priority, but rather exist to a degree where it serves the financial goals. As Haslam et al. (2024) pointed out, we live in a world where interests often clash. An organization and a leader might benefit from increased profitability, but this may mean worsening working conditions for employees (Haslam et al., 2024). But since the workers are also the leaders and the shareholders in Organization X, the issue of one stakeholder group's interest (shareholders) being prioritized on the expense of another (employees) is mitigated. This makes it possible to prioritize workers wellbeing.

Concern for *environmental sustainability* can certainly be found in Organization X. In the literature of degrowth, environmental sustainability is central (Nesterova, 2020; Froese et al., 2023; Hankammer et al., 2021). Therefore, it is no suprise that one of the degrowth business characteristics is contributing to a society where firms are operating within the earth's limits (Klitgaard, 2013; Nesterova, 2020). Heavy emphasis is put on circular principles (O'Neill et al., 2018), as well as as well as encouraging pro-environmental behaviour among employees (Moriarty and Honnery, 2013). In Organization X, Environmentally sustainable practices that were revealed from the empirics include travelling by train, 'Good Citizenship', company blacklist, and Mini-Xs focused on sustainability. These environmentally sustainable practices were all brought into Organization X since they mirror the values and interests of the consultants. As respondent 2 said, many people in the organization has an interest for, and values, environmental sustainability. For example, 'Good citizenship' with the saying of 'Heart over wallet', was established as a product of all the consultants individual values. What's more, the company blacklist represent the companies that at least someone has put their veto against working with for ethical reasons. And one of the the Mini-Xs that was started in favor of the environment became so successful it became an independent start-up which is now one of the most well-known climate action companies in Sweden.

These environmentally considerate initiatives all reflect the values and interests of the consultants. In these cases, the consultants led the company in the direction of sustainability. On the other hand, if no one has the interest or value sustainability, the organization might as well go in the opposite direction. Respondent 3 gave an example of a collegue many years ago who tried to get people along on a climate focused initiatives, but no one else joined, so he eventually gave up. Thus, whether or not an organization with collective leadership as in Organization X will be driven towards sustainability is completely dependent on the individual values and interests of the organization's members. However, respondent 2 pointed out that in traditional companies, sustainability most often has to be prioritised by the assigned leaders (and the shareholders) in order for the company to focus on sustainability. As Froese et al. (2023) points out, the interests of shareholders to increase short-term profit oftentimes undermines environmental consideration. Thus, just like with workers' wellbeing, environmentally sustainable initiatives are most often happening only within the frames of reaching financial goals. In Organization X on the other hand, if at least someone care about sustainability, this person has the freedom to go in that direction and possibly bring other people along. No one can tell that person "*no, this is not in the company strategy",* as respondent 2 put it. This takes us back to the argument by Haslam et al. (2024), that interests so often clash, and what the leader and organization benefit from may go against the interests of other stakeholder groups and lead to environmental destruction.

To sum it up, the organizational structure and collective leadership approach of Organization X facilitates balanced decisions where not only the interests of the stakeholder group of shareholders are prioritised. Instead, the organization is driven in a direction based on the consultants, who belong to the stakeholder group of both employees and shareholders. This allows for more balanced decisions. In Organization X, this can be seen in their priority of consultants' happiness and *wellbeing*, which has led to *shifting focus away from proft maximization*, as well as several initiatives in *environmental sustainability*. All three of these are characteristics of degrowth businesses (Nesterova, 2024). We cannot say for sure that collective leadership in general leads to these degrowth business characteristics, since it is completely dependent on the values of the group leading the company. However, I find it *more likely* than compared to 'traditional' hierarchies, as the collective leadership logic creates synergies for following a degrowth trajectory.

Based on this discussion, I recomend companies who aim to fit into a degrowth society to move away from the organizational structure where the company is run from a priority of financial profit. This can be done as in Organization X, where all workers are also shareholders and the stocks do not grow. This allows for more balanced decisions which increses the likelihood of degrowth characteristics to develop in businesses.

5.2.2 Perspective sharing and critical thinking

Collective leadership has a role in shaping degrowth business characteristics as it enables perspective sharing and critical thinking. Bendell et al. (2017) argue that the fact that collective leadership allows for more perspectives to foster critical thinking. Building on this, Evans (2011) explains that critical thinking is key for creating spaces for discussion where sustainable solutions can arise. Looking at the sustainable practices in Organization X, we can see that the opportunity for everyones' perspective to arise has played a role. For example, the pro-environmental behaviour of 'train travel only' that belong to the degrowth characteristic of *environment* (Moriarty and Honnery, 2013) arose because some people in the company had strong opinions about sustainability (as respondent 2 put it). In Organization X, these strong opinions about sustainablity was natrually heard, as everyone can equally share their perspective. In turn, this allowed for critical discussions and reflections as they were questioning the 'normal' of the company travel practices. Another example where open discussions played an important role for degrowth characteristics to form was during the conflict that arose when one founder wanted to sell their share and make profit. The fact that everyone had opportunity to voice their perspective on this matter sparked discussions where the outcome was to make the stock financially worthless moving forward. Thus, the fact that several different perspectives can arise and foster critical thinking is pointed out as a driver for shaping degrowth business characteristics.

Based on these insights, I recommend organizations to foster an environment where everyone feels safe to raise their perspectives. A collective leadership approach can enable such an environment, as the norm is for anyone to raise their perspectives and no one's voice is valued higher than another (in theory). However, although collective leadership may provide the basis for such an open environment, I do believe fostering psychological safety in the group is still a necessary effort to increase perspective sharing.

5.2.3 Individual empowerment and freedom

The fact that collective leadership opens up for individual empowerment and freedom has a role in shaping degrowth businesses. By viewing leadership as a label anyone can adopt, overall leadership capacity is fostered in the organization (Bendell et al., 2017). This can be connected to workers wellbeing, and in turn environmental sustainability. As mentioned, Gorz (2012) point out development of human potential and pursuit of fulfilment to be important for workers' wellbeing. Enabling everyone in the organization to develop their leadership abilities, not only directly fosters personal development, but it also allows the consultants to successfully lead their collegaues in directions that align with their interest and values. This can foster fulfilment. Take for example the consultant who started the climate-focused Mini-X, which ended up so successful it is now its independent company, and one of the most well-known of its kind nationwide. This person's leadership abilities made it possible for him/her to pursue what was in their interest and according to their values, which leads to fulfilment. The same goes for the person who started the Mini-X in agile. Besides individual empowerment, I also see the *freedom* to start such initiatives to be an important driver for wellbeing and the development of environmentally sustainable initiatives. All respondents mentioned freedom to be one of the best things about working at Organization X. What's more, The concept of Mini-Xs gives everyone opportunity to develop and use their leadership abilities to pursue what is meaningful to them. The fact that not everyone in the organization has to join the initiative makes it easier compared to if you had to get the entire organization on board to, for example, focus more on environmental sustainability. As such, individual empowerment and freedom may lead to increased wellbeing and even environmental sustainability if that aligns with the interests and values of the individual. However, individual empowerment may also be used to drive the organization in a direction that goes against degrowth principles such as environmental consideration, and freedom is not something that leads to wellbeing for eveyone. This takes us to the next point of discussion, namely how the lack of direction and responsibility may affect degrowth business characteristics.

With collective leadership as in Organization X, there is no one who is formally responsible for anything. Although the respondents expressed that it works well to get things done, and that people really do step up an take responsibility for things such as organizing a conference, hiring someone new, or buying a new coffee machine, there are also some areas where the lack of formal responsibility leads to dissatisfaction. Respondent 3 expressed that he would wish to see more of a clear vision and purpose of the company. What's more, he highlights how the lack of formal responsibility leads to poor behaviour. There is no manager there to resolve conflicts and point out bad behaviour, which affects workers' wellbeing negatively. Therefore, collective leadership is not only enabling wellbeing, but also inhibiting it at times. Furthermore, the empirics show that collective leadership in Organization X leads to a lack of diversity. Since no one is responsible for diversity in reqruitment, they have ended up with a very homogenous group.

Based on these insights, I recommend companies to consider collective leadership as it drives overall leadership capacity in the organization, which can foster both innovation and wellbeing. However, I find it crucial to understand that freedom may be a double-edged sword: not everyone thrives without guidlines, and the lack of assigned responsibility may lead to decreased wellbeing. Therefore, I recommend organizations to find a balance between freedom and guidlines, as well as assigned responsibility that fits the group and its individuals.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to increase the understanding of leadership for sustainable development in businesses by exploring the role of collective leadership in shaping degrowth-oriented business practices. This aim contributes to the scientific debate of what type of leadership is relevant for driving sustainable development, and to the empirical knowledge gap on how collective leadership is carried out in practice and may contribute to shaping degrowth characteristics.

Through an in-depth qualitative case study of an organization that has adopted collective leadership, the thesis addressed two research questions: how collective leadership works in practice, and what role it plays in shaping degrowth business characteristics.

The findings show that collective leadership in practice is dependent on sufficient self-organization, where a common sense of identity and purpose are important factors. What's more, leadership carried out collectively is found to be effective due to two main mechanisms: leadership by 'wantness', and reducing 'otherness'. However, although collective and democratic in theory, the studied organization revealed internal hierarchies and power imbalances.

In relation to degrowth business characteristics, the study suggests that collective leadership can create synergies that support a degrowth trajectory. This may occur through three key mechanisms enabled by collective leadership: (1) *Prioritizing workers' interests*, (2) *Perspective sharing and critical thinking*, and (3) *Individual empowerment and freedom*. Among these, *prioritizing workers' interests* emerged as the most central mechanism. By having organizational members shape the direction of the company, profit-oriented shareholder dominance is mitigated. These findings support degrowth literature that emphasizes democratic governance and multi-stakeholder orientation as crucial for business practices aligned with a degrowth trajectory. Rather than being an add-on to sustainability strategies, leadership arrangements themselves appear to be a lever for organizational transformation. As such, it looks like leaderless may be the new green in the right context, or at least lay a necessary foundation for developing degrowth businesses.

The findings of this thesis are limited to the specific case and its context. Further research may focus on the contextual aspect of collective leadership, by for example further exploring what contextual factors play a role in successful application.

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