

Leading from the middle: rethinking leadership in global networks

Bethlehem Mengistu, July 2026



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Introduction

Networks and coalitions are becoming increasingly important for tackling complex global challenges in the development sector. Collective action is now central to driving systems change in climate action, public health, and water governance.

While partnerships and alliances are frequently discussed, network leadership receives far less attention.

While there is a growing body of work on networks, collective action, and multi-stakeholder collaboration, far less attention has been paid to the practice of leadership within networks. In particular, how leadership operates without hierarchy, and what capabilities are required to sustain alignment across independent actors, remains underexplored in both research and practice. This paper seeks to contribute to that space by drawing on lived experience to articulate what I describe as “leading from the middle.”

Networks differ from traditional organisations because they rarely operate through hierarchy or formal authority. Members remain independent, each with their own unique mandates, priorities, and cultures. Leadership in this context relies not on command or control, but on trust, relationships, and shared ownership.

Through my experience leading Agenda for Change, a global coalition strengthening water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) systems across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, I have come to see this approach as “leading from the middle.”

Leading from the middle is not about controlling decisions. It's about facilitating a space with conditions that allow diverse actors to align around joint goals whilst maintaining independence. In practice, this entails investing in trust, cultivating relationships, and distributing leadership across the network rather than concentrating it within a single institution.

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In contrast to traditional organisations, networks bring together independent actors who have their own mandates, priorities, and responsibility frameworks. Therefore, when trust is not shared amongst these diverse actors, coordination becomes fragile, and joint effort often becomes transactional. Research on collaborative governance shows that sustained collective action across institutions depends on the gradual development of trust between participants (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

For network leaders, trust must be intentionally cultivated. It grows through transparent decision-making, participatory processes, and recognition of the value each actor brings to the joint effort. Practitioner literature on network weaving conceptualises trust as relational infrastructure, rather than as an emergent behaviour of collaboration. In this view, trust is intentionally generated through specific leadership practices such as convening, brokering relationships, and supporting transparency. This approach views network leadership as the cultivation of conditions for collective action, rather than the direct management of such action (Holley, 2012; Network Weaver). One example that confirmed this for me was the development of the current Agenda for Change strategy. As a coalition of independent organisations, the secretariat could have developed a strategy internally and circulated it for endorsement. Instead, we chose a different path, slowing the process to ensure members could actively influence the coalition's direction.

This involved creating space for open discussion about priorities and approaches to systems change. These conversations sometimes revealed genuine differences in perspective, but it was via these exchanges that trust deepened. This process enabled the strategy to be shaped collectively rather than merely gaining endorsement. Members saw their ideas reflected in it, and the process reinforced the coalition's perception of shared ownership. Our community of practice is another effective space for building trust; it's where members regularly share experiences and lessons from their programs of work. They showcase the expertise distributed across the network, share approaches, honestly reflect on challenges, and discuss recommendations for scale/multiplication across contexts.

This serves two purposes: it reinforces that each member contributes unique value to the coalition and elevates the network's joint expertise, strengthening our contribution to sector practice. When members learn from one another's practices, the coalition strengthens trust and elevates its value platform for shared thought leadership in the WASH sector. Trust allows members to share influence, navigate competing priorities, and sustain collaboration across institutional boundaries.

Leadership without hierarchy

Leading a network differs intrinsically from leading a traditional organisation. Authority is not exercised through reporting lines or mandates. This perspective is consistent with practitioners' views on network leadership, which prioritise facilitation, brokerage, and alignment over formal authority (Holley, 2012). Leaders must balance providing direction with maintaining a truly collective network.

At Agenda for Change, this principle guided changes to our governance. As the network evolved, we adapted our structures to give country collaborations a stronger voice in coalition decision-making. Their representatives now participate at multiple governance levels, including the Executive Committee and the General Assembly.

This was more than an administrative change; it reflected the belief that leadership ought not to be centralised. National perspectives must shape important decisions and guide collective priorities.

Leading from the middle means creating structures that allow leadership to circulate throughout the network rather than remain concentrated at the centre.

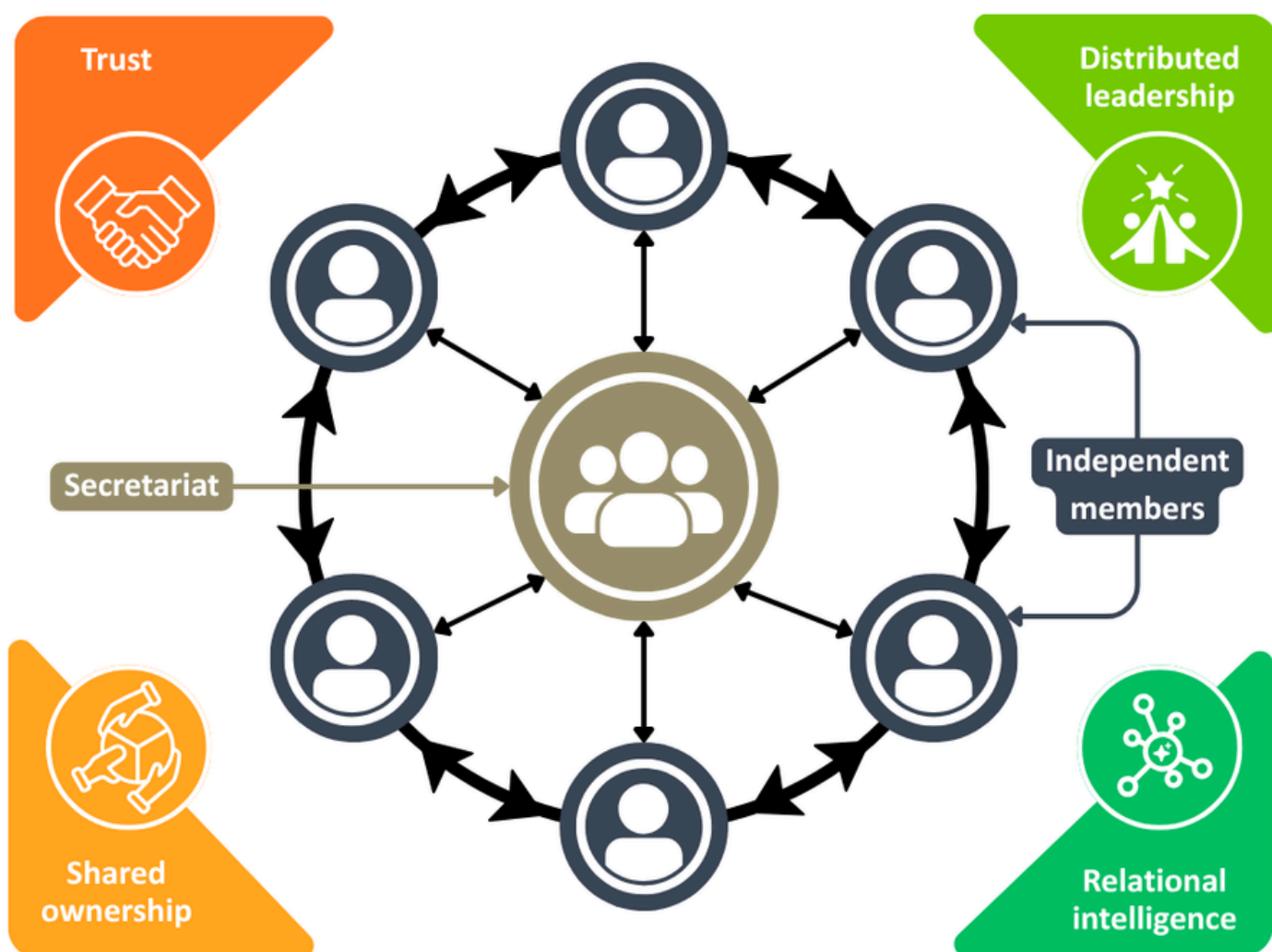


Fig 1: the structure and key attributes of a successful network.

Shifting power in networks

There is an increasing focus on shifting power in development, particularly around localisation and just partnerships. While deliberations often address structural changes, including funding or representation, power also operates through relationships. It is conveyed through the following:

- Who sets the agenda?
- Whose knowledge is considered legitimate?
- Who is trusted to convene conversations?

These relational dynamics affect networks as much as formal structures.

At Agenda for Change, dealing with these dynamics has meant expanding participation. In many countries, our collaborations now include national organisations and government actors, indicating the belief that sustainable WASH systems change must be driven and owned by the custodians of the systems, the national actors.

Making membership inclusive in this way has shifted the coalition's centre of gravity. It has ensured that processes are shaped by both international organisations and national actors. This is where relational leadership becomes key. By investing time in building trust, fostering transparency, and facilitating integrative processes, network leaders can create spaces where influence is shared rather than concentrated.

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Measuring success differently

Power in networks is also reflected in how success is defined and measured. Traditional development metrics focus on outputs and short-term results, but systems change requires valuing locally driven processes, collective ownership, and institutional strengthening. For this reason, Agenda for Change has increasingly aligned its success measures with nationally-led processes. Progress is recognised through strengthened national systems, partnerships, and robust capabilities, rather than solely programmatic outputs. These shifts underscore the importance of relational leadership, which prioritises long-term trust and common purpose over short-term visibility.



Fig 2: The locally led system strengthening continuum of WASH Agenda for Change. Developed by country collaborators and member at the Strategy Lab Convening on May 2025 in Lilongwe, Malawi

Relational intelligence as a leadership competency

Leading a diverse network requires a capability often underestimated in development leadership: relational intelligence. While technical expertise and management are often prioritised, understanding relationships, navigating competing interests, and building alignment across institutions are equally critical in networked environments[BM6.1]. This capability closely corresponds to what network practitioners refer to as “network weaving,” which is the intentional process of building and strengthening relationships to facilitate collective action (Holley, 2012).

Coalitions bring together actors with different mandates, incentives, and institutional cultures. Sustaining collaboration requires political insight: understanding where interests converge, where tensions exist, and how to articulate shared benefits to keep actors invested in the joint effort.

In practice, relational intelligence involves listening carefully, recognising the motivations of different actors, and identifying common ground for collaboration. It also calls for acknowledging that influence in networks is dynamic and evolves as relationships and trust deepen.

In leading Agenda for Change, I have seen relational leadership help diverse organisations stay in alignment even when priorities differ. Investing in relationships, transparency, and common purpose enables networks to maintain diversity without fragmentation and sustain long-term collaboration.

This is especially clear at the country level, where Agenda for Change collaborators increasingly act as intermediaries between sector ambition and implementation. In many cases, governments face multiple, often competing crises that limit their ability to coordinate consistently within the WASH sector. A platform focused on WASH systems strengthening has added value by connecting stakeholders, aligning efforts, and sustaining momentum around long-term sector priorities. In this capacity, country collaborations serve as facilitators by bridging institutions, supporting government leadership, and helping translate collective ambition into coordinated action.

As development challenges become more interconnected, networks will play a key role in mobilising collective action. Their success depends not only on structures and strategies, but also on the quality of leadership within them. Leading from the middle demonstrates the importance of relationships, trust, and stewardship in empowering diverse actors to join forces effectively.

Ultimately, networks succeed when leadership focuses less on directing action and more on creating conditions for collaboration to thrive. For networks to fulfil their potential as vehicles for systems change, relational intelligence must be recognised as a strategic capability for leading complex coalitions and sustaining collaborative development.

References

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