

Petra Kuenkel

# Stewarding Sustainability Transformations

An Emerging Theory and Practice of  
SDG Implementation



A Report to the Club of Rome

 Springer

## About the Author

Petra Kuenkel is a full Member of the International Club of Rome and the Executive Director of the Collective Leadership Institute, a Germany and South Africa based social enterprise building collaboration competency for transformative change. As a seasoned systems scientist, visionary author and expert in complex multi-stakeholder settings she promotes systems transformations by scaling-up collective stewardship skills for decision-makers from corporations, public sector and civil society. With her educational background in change management, organizational psychology and political science she has profound international experiences in corporate change, development cooperation and policy implementation. She is a leading strategic advisor to pioneering international initiatives that tackle sustainability challenges. Based on successful transformation processes, she developed the *dialogic change methodology* and the *Collective Leadership Compass*, a guiding tool for navigating change in complex multi-actor settings. Kuenkel's ground-breaking publication *The Art of Leading Collectively* received international attention; her writings have appeared in numerous professional journals as well as the Guardian and Huffington Post. For more information, please visit [www.collectiveleadership.com](http://www.collectiveleadership.com) or [www.clubofrome.org](http://www.clubofrome.org).



## A first glimpse into the 2019 Report to the Club of Rome

Have you ever been in a shockingly destroyed landscape? Have you ever entered a building, a park, or a city and thought this place is deadening? Have you ever worked in an organization or a team that drained the life out of every conversation or activity? Have you ever tried to get something new started only to experience that every initiative seems to reach a dead-end?

In contrast, have you ever experienced the breathtaking beauty of an unspoiled landscape? Have you ever entered a building, a park, or a city and thought: this makes me feel alive? Have you ever worked in an institution that enhances your sense of purpose? Have you ever experienced a feeling of vibrancy, when working on a collaborative team in an initiative that would make a difference for the common good?

If this feels familiar, you may immediately recognize why understanding principles that ‘give life to systems’ might be important to human (and natural) systems as well as the interaction between both. You may even wonder how humankind could learn from what gives life to systems and become a partner of this process. Or you may start thinking how we can consider ‘what gives live to systems’ in global transformative change initiatives.

Anchored in a systems view of life this new Report to the Club of Rome draws upon a wide-ranging set of sources to develop a set of six principles that form the foundation for creating and sustaining systems ‘aliveness.’ It shows how principles can exemplify how natural phenomena create patterns that work for life and how collaborative multi-stakeholder initiatives can become living laboratories if such patterns. These principles can also provide guidance for human agency in large systems change, in policy development, community empowerment and technological

innovation. They can inform change objectives and action plans. Understanding systems aliveness and its patterned composition is central to conceptualizing transformative change in the complex adaptive systems that constitute human socio-economic-ecological developments. It is the basis of the transformation literacy we need in the Era of the Anthropocene. Fostering systems aliveness is a paradigm shift that can underpin the search for a new civilization.

The overarching aim of this book is to translate a systemic – and enlivening – worldview into the practice of stewarding transformative change for sustainability. It connects the emerging practice of multi-stakeholder collaboration with the call for a new way of seeing the world and ourselves as part of nature. It contributes to bridging the gap between the so urgently needed renewed worldview shift and the practice of tangible action in climate change mitigation, integrated water resource management, poverty alleviation, renewable energy development, land restoration, and in changing our economic system towards a regenerative economy.

This requires a shift in thinking towards seeing humankind as an integral part of the Earth System - and a possibly much more responsible actor. It emphasizes the need for humanity’s stewardship role in collectively ensuring a safe pathway for the Earth.

Despite their inconsistencies in implications for climate conditions the UN’s 2015 Sustainable Development Goals provide a global framework for the world’s actors to effect significant large system change. The SDGs are an intention to bring about a more prosperous, equitable, and sustainable world for all; in short, a flourishing world.

The vision seems utopian: it is one of a world that is free from poverty and hunger and a world where life can thrive – life of

all species including the human. It is a world of peace where all people have access to sufficient education as well as to social protection and health care. In this world, wellbeing refers to physical, mental and social qualities, and humankind lives in harmony with nature within the boundaries of the planet Earth. Such a world would require re-defining an economic system that is currently built on depleting the Earth's resources. A new economic system would have to radically change to operate in partnership with nature in a regenerative economy that aims for long-term human and planetary vitality.

The changes in front of humankind are fundamental. No single actor has all the solutions, but each actor may essentially contribute a parcel of knowledge, a puzzle piece that counts. Partnering and multi-stakeholder collaboration between business, NGOs, government, the UN and communities are expected to be essential to achieve sustainability and development goals, but they will be needed at a scale and quality that goes far beyond the current capacity for collaboration. A systems view of life incorporates shifts in perspective from the parts to the whole, from silo thinking to networked collective action, from fixation on economic growth rates to revisiting the purpose of the economy as one in support of overall systems aliveness.

The dilemma is obvious: on the one hand sustainability – *defined here as the ability of humankind to live well within the planetary boundaries and their systemic logic* - is on the agenda of every nation, every organization, and many citizens today. It is in many ways a global movement that cannot be ignored. On the other hand, it is not clear if this movement can accelerate the transformations quickly enough. The Paris goal of keeping warming well below 2 degrees will remain an enormous challenge and the new IPCC report even suggests that 1,5 degrees are what we should aim for. The hope that arose from the Paris agreement is that

collective action by different actors, including governments, engaged citizens, cities, companies, financial markets and civil society organizations, is possible.

The transformations towards a more sustainable world require more than a declaration of global commitment to global goals. Instead, transformations call for collective action by myriad actors at scales from local to global. This new report to the Club of Rome suggests that ***stewarding sustainability transformations*** at scale can be supported by a new conception of ***collective leadership***, understood as the capacity of different actors who jointly develop strategies and actions that are grounded in a ***systems view of life***.

***Chapter 1*** introduces a practice model for navigating complex change in multi-stakeholder settings, and its empirical and conceptual origins. It summarizes research results from 30 interviews with global actors, who have been involved as coordinators, facilitators, or organizers in complex collaborative change processes for sustainability. The ***Collective Leadership Compass*** is a meta-level framework that guides attention to mutually supportive factors for effectiveness in complex multi-stakeholder collaboration. The compass helps leaders, and groups of leaders, ascertain how a collaboration pattern can successfully emerge and subsequently derive process intervention strategies. The practice model is the starting point for the explorations into new approaches to stewarding sustainability transformations.

***Chapter 2*** sets the scene for understanding transformative change in the context of sustainability as a stewarding task and a collective leadership challenge. It explores the current leadership discourse with a focus on collectives and reviews the discourse on global transformation. The chapter identifies where these discourses point to leadership as the transformative capacity of a collective of distributed actors across institutions. It argues that a paradigm shift towards a radically new

way of seeing reality based on a systems view of life is needed in order to conceptualize stewarding transformative change for sustainability.

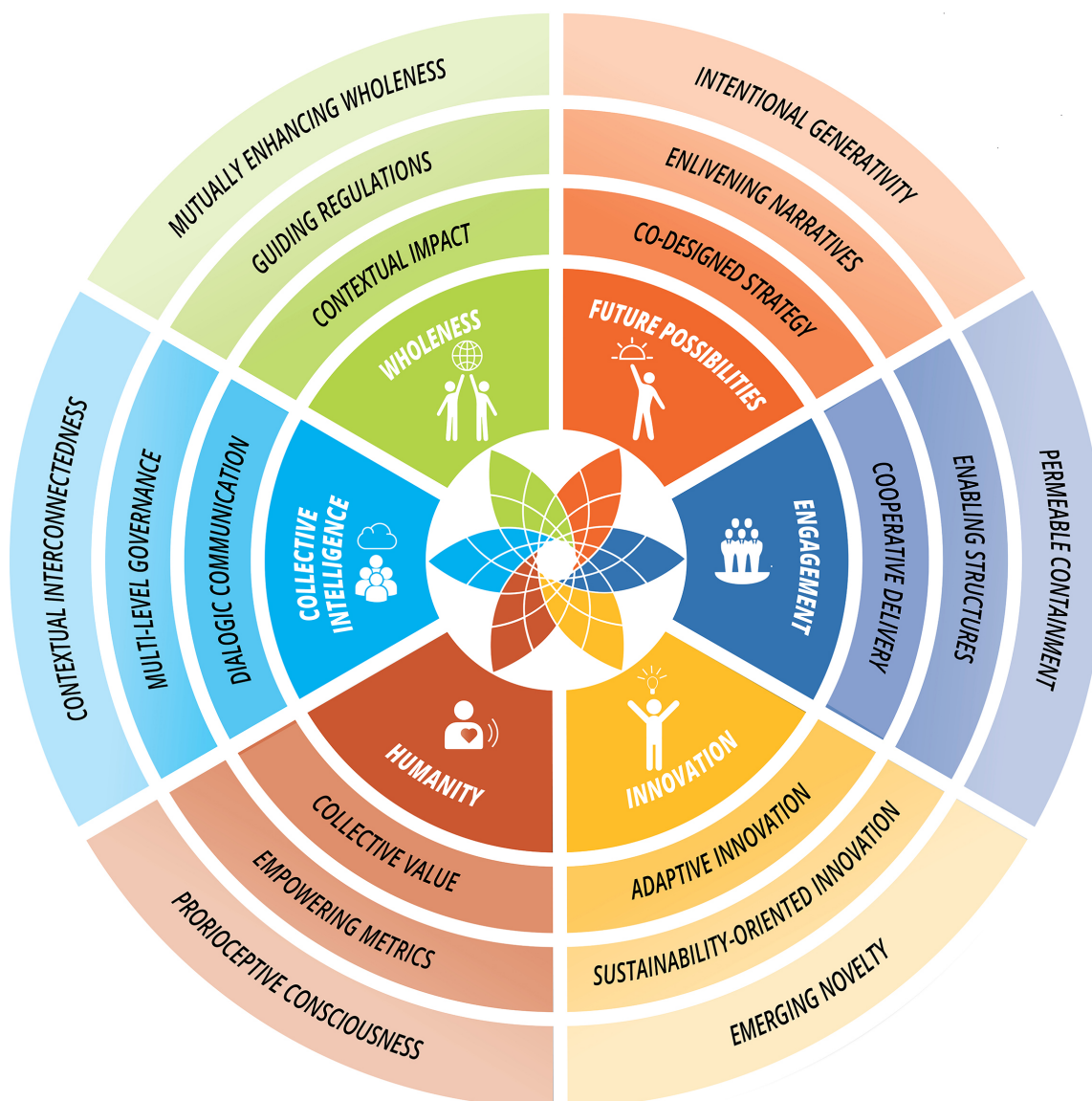
**Chapter 3** introduces systems thinking with a focus on life-enhancing processes. It does so in a trans- and multidisciplinary way and shows the role of patterns as a relational and constituting element in the co-creative process of life. Drawing on socio-ecological research, it relates such constituting elements to vitality and resilience, as a form of aliveness, in living systems. It argues that transferring and translating the insights of this approach to understanding how socio-ecological systems function (or fail to function) is key to stewarding transformative change in a new way.

**Chapter 4** argues that approaches to navigating complex world making and transformative change for sustainability are more effective when they are anchored in a profound understanding of life processes. The chapter takes the concept of *systems aliveness* as a quality element of a pattern approach one step further. It advances propositions regarding essential features of life-enhancement in systems that can also inform a better understanding of enlivening human co-creation. The propositions lay the basis for the *Patterns of Aliveness Theory*, which shows how six essential organizing principles allow life to emerge, thrive, and re-create itself in natural as well as social systems. The chapter suggests that these principles must be taken into account in the practice of leading collectively and shows how they become the foundation of a *conceptual architecture* for stewarding sustainability transformations.

**Chapter 5** takes the *Patterns of Aliveness Theory* into the day-to-day management practice of leading transformative change in multi-actor settings. A short deep dive into the current discourse on multi-stakeholder partnerships emphasizes the importance of collaborative practice for SDG implementation. Arguing that this practice is a pathway to sustainability transformations, the chapter highlights *collaboration catalysts* in complex multi-stakeholder change initiatives and relates them to the six dimensions of the *Collective Leadership Compass*. It shows how these match with the six aliveness-enhancing principles elaborated before and how this forms the next level of an emerging *conceptual architecture* for stewarding sustainability transformations. Two successful examples of collaborative multi-stakeholder change processes illustrate how the strategic design of collaboration leads to tangible results and enhances actors' *collaboration literacy* in navigating complex change.

**Chapter 6** suggests that *collaboration literacy* enhances *transformation literacy*, which is defined as the capability to *steward sustainability transformations collectively*, across the boundaries of institutions, nations, sectors and cultures. Based on the insights from 50 semi-structured research interviews with scholars and practitioners in the global sustainability arena it shows how six *transformation enablers* that are anchored in life-enhancing principles can form the basis of collective action and intervention strategies for sustainability transformations. This leads to a practice-oriented meta-framework – the *conceptual architecture for stewarding sustainability transformations*. How this can be applied to enhance *systems aliveness* is illustrated by an example from the Circular Economy approach.

**Fig. 1: The *Transformation architecture* as a meta-level guidance for the design of large systems change**

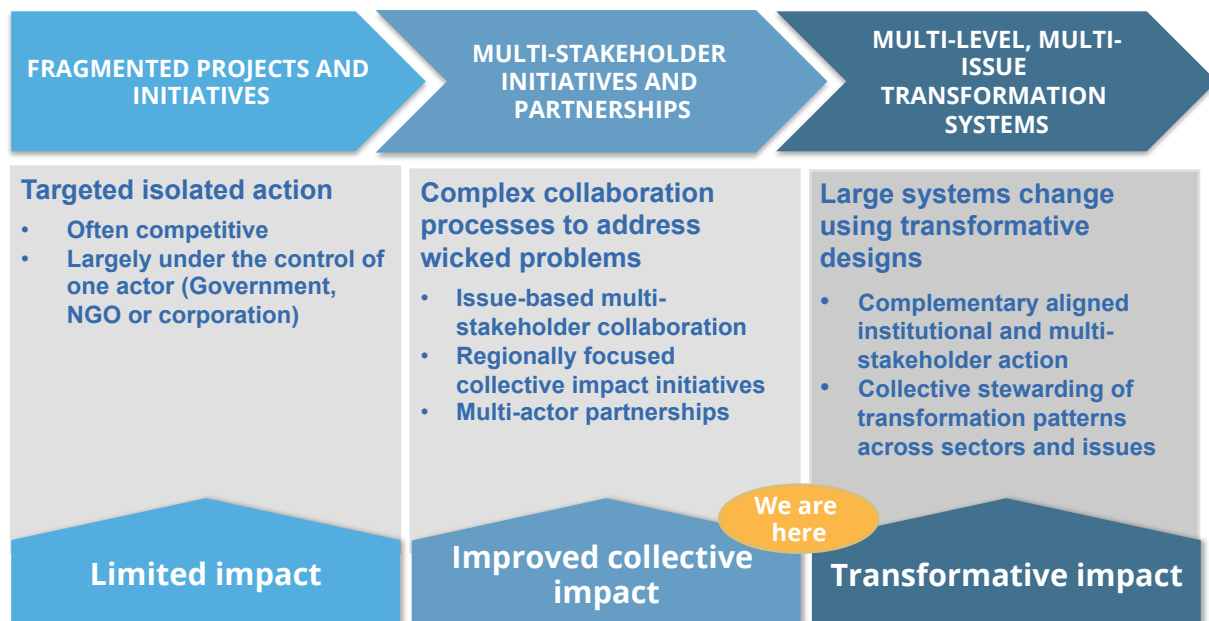


**Chapter 7** suggests that *stewarding sustainability transformations* across and beyond institutional boundaries requires the design of transformative processes and systems. It explains that the choreography of complementary interventions in sustainability transformation systems is crucial for achieving *systems aliveness* at scale. The chapter suggests practical implications for shifting the current dysfunctional patterns of socio-ecological interaction towards more constructive and future-oriented socio-ecological systemic patterns and shows how a **transformation**

**architecture** built on life-enhancing principles can inform the practice of stewarding change.

**Chapter 8** concludes that *stewarding sustainability transformations* is a collective task. It needs to build the capacity of many actors to lead transformative change collectively. This will help decision-makers and implementers to become transformation literate and jointly discover sustainable pathways for a responsible Anthropocene.

**Fig 2: Stewarding change in transformation systems**



Given the complexity of the socio-ecological interaction systems, multiple efforts, from multiple sources, at multiple levels, with multiple different approaches are needed. If life-enhancing principles become the foundation for a new way of looking at systems dynamics in complex change, actors in sustainability transformations can inevitably ask new questions. They can plan and evaluate strategies, e.g. for SDG implementation or climate change mitigation, regarding their

contribution to dynamic *systems aliveness*.

Planned interventions towards sustainability need to move from fragmented institutional actions to multi-stakeholder initiatives and meta-collaboration between initiatives that become part of co-designed transformation systems. Stewarding sustainability transformations is an empowering approach encouraging many actors to contribute to a thriving planet, which is a metaphor for overall systems aliveness.