



Transformative Sustainability Leadership

A framework for Citizen-Led
transformation towards
a sustainable future



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Index

Executive summary	5
About the Framework	
Creating A Future We Can Live With	6
What Is Transformative Sustainability Leadership?	7
Core Principles	8
Impact3 - The Foundations of Transformation	
Breadth and Depth: A Dual Approach for Systemic Transformation	9
Transformative Pedagogies: Beyond Traditional Education	10
The framework	11
Strategy 1: Develop Key Competencies	11
How To Build Key Competencies Amongst Learners	13
Strategy 2: Participating and contributing, democratic citizenship	14
Strategy 3: Cultivate Networks	16
Building and Maintaining Starfish Networks	16
Conclusion	18
Pathways Forward	19
Bibliography	20



Executive summary

About the framework

Since 2009 SERES has been working with emerging young leaders from economically marginalized and vulnerable communities in Central America, helping them to develop the skills needed to confront mounting injustices and growing uncertainty as a result of rising inequality and climate change. Using education and leadership as the main tools, SERES started a process to engage and mobilize young people to take action. Since then SERES has been working side-by-side with young leaders from all walks of life to develop, implement and improve on the strategies that are described in the TSL Framework outlined in this document.

In 2016 we published the first version of this Framework (then called our Theory of Change). The thinking was then as it is now: to present an approach that weaves together our own experiences from over a decade working on the frontlines with the technical and academic frameworks that have emerged in the fields of social innovation, sustainable development and leadership. The first version of this document was freely given and widely shared, and used in different contexts to support many different programs around the world including UNESCO's Flagship Youth Program for Education for Sustainable Development in 2017.

The following document outlines the core principles and key strategies that make up SERES' Transformative Sustainability Leadership Framework. This document is not an academic investigation nor does it represent an exhaustive review of the literature and research that exists. It is, more than anything, a synthesis of practical experience, shared learning and current thought leadership.

The objective of sharing the Framework is to help to build a better understanding of how sustainability learning and leadership can drive social transformation, as well as providing a basis from which we can continue to design and innovate in a more systematic and strategic manner. We present this work in the spirit of making a contribution to this emerging field with the hope that this may help to further accelerate actions and drive the transformation towards a more peaceful, just and regenerative society.



“The rates of social change, the movements of the world’s people, industrialization, globalization, and militarization continue to escalate at an ever-accelerating pace. Educators face an unprecedented task. They must support people to become highly creative, collaborative, problem solvers, and critical thinkers. They must cultivate people’s capacities to see the world from profoundly different perspectives. They must nourish people’s capacities for connection and caring in a fragmented and divisive world. Nothing is more important.”

Mary Field Belenky, co-author of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* and *A Tradition That Has No Name*

Creating a future we can live with

Meeting the goals and targets of the ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for unprecedented transformations. Transformations at a scale and pace beyond anything we have previously imagined. As such, **every moment of business as usual is a lost opportunity for making change.**

We are at a kairos moment in human history and the decisions and actions we make now will be instrumental in shaping the future. All people everywhere must realize their leadership potential, working to shape systems and move beyond business as usual approaches. We need strong partnerships and collective actions that bridge across traditional boundaries and transcend polarizing discussions, collaborations that leverage our inner capacities and leadership skills to strategically align projects and initiatives.

As the voices of the People's Climate Movement have been crying out for years: "To change everything, it takes everyone." This work of transformation is more than the work of a handful of leaders and conscientious citizens, it requires a movement of leaders...a leaderful generation.

This leadership is distinct from that which has brought us here and shaped the predominant worldview. It is a leadership that takes into account our impact on the earth, society, and the health of local and global economies. And it is based on an understanding of the world that is deeply rooted in our common humanity, our connection to each other, and our connection to this Earth.

This is Transformative Sustainability Leadership.

what is transformative sustainability leadership?

Transformative Sustainability Leadership (TSL) is an approach that works at the intersection of sustainability education and leadership development. The approach has been designed to support everyday citizens - in particular young people - to lead where others have not.

TSL teaches these emerging leaders to work authentically, inclusively and transformatively, taking responsibility for fellow human beings and translating it into actions to create a future that we can all live with.

The TSL Framework is designed to establish a learning ecosystem that supports leaders to navigate through emerging contexts, lead from a living processes paradigm¹, and commit to taking action. This learning ecosystem:

- Builds critical core competencies for effective sustainability leadership;
- Provides tools for both personal and societal transformation;
- Cultivates the skills and processes to experience a higher level of self-identity beyond the ordinary, reactive ego level;
- Creates a common connection and identity beyond traditional boundaries of race, religion, class, culture, politics, wealth, and education; and
- Connects people into a trusted, diverse and dynamic network of other leaders also working to create change.

¹ A *living processes paradigm* is based on an understanding that the world is an interconnected web of constantly changing, dissolving and emerging relationships [1,2]



Working on the frontlines with some of society's most vulnerable and marginalized has shown time and again that given encouragement and the right kind of learning, anyone can become an influential and impactful leader, deeply committed to addressing the root causes of injustice and inequality in their community.

Core Principles

There are three core principles that underpin the TSL Framework. These principles hold that effective leadership for co-creating approaches that contribute towards an inclusive and sustainable future require three elements: a holistic grounding, a systemic lens, and a transformative pedagogy. These principles are described in the following.

Impact3 - The Foundations of Transformation

The most fundamental and lasting social transformation occurs at the intersection of people, process and place. This is a model that the TSL Framework refers to as Impact3 (see Figure 1).

Evidence from the field has shown time and again that programs and projects that are not grounded in this holistic approach do not have the social infrastructure to sustain change over time, much less transform systems and cultures. The holistic aspects of people, process and place from the Impact3 model are embedded into the TSL framework as follows:

- By fostering the leadership and growth of whole people, activating their power and potential to develop transformative solutions and empowering and engaging with them as the principal agents of change;
- By teaching the tools for transformation through experiential and interactive processes that engage participants at the level of hearts and minds;
- By supporting people to work for place-based change, strengthening their connection to community while building resilience and sustainability from the individual to the societal level.



Impact³ Model for Transformative Change

breadth & depth a dual approach for systemic transformation

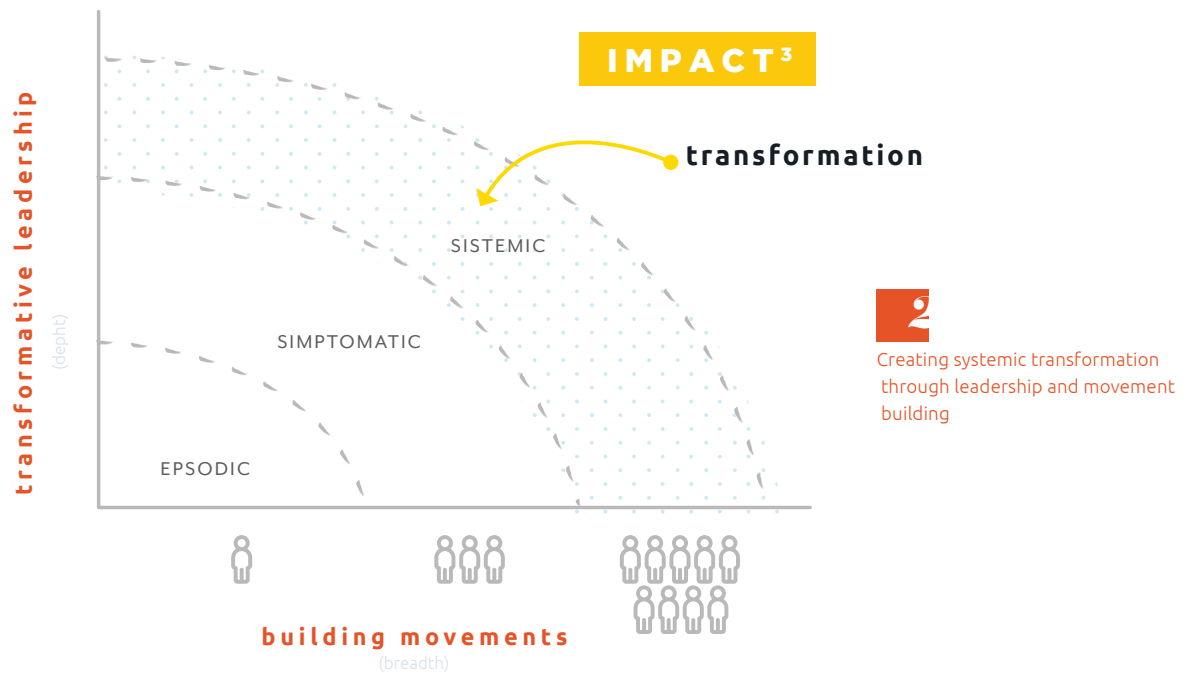
The TSL Framework incorporates systems thinking both as a valuable tool and an end unto itself. A systems thinking lens enables leaders to recognize complex, systemic issues - those that are dynamic and bound up with many other factors. It develops an appreciation that no single program or intervention can address all the interconnected and interwoven underlying challenges behind a complex problem. And it helps to find solutions to tackle the complex, interrelated nature of the systems they are working on and within.

The TSL Framework approaches systemic change broadly and deeply, as shown in Figure 2 below.

Breadth is achieved by building movements and coalitions of people working towards change. Learners think through questions such as: how do we empower others to lead the change they wish

to see? How do we hold multiple perspectives and transcend divisiveness while adhering to universal values? How do we align multiple projects and initiatives toward a unified goal? How do we talk about the change we want to create and enroll others in creating this change?

Depth is achieved by developing highly skilled, transformative leaders that are able to identify and work on strategic leverage points in the system. Learners at this level are asking questions such as: how do we identify and use leverage points to create scalable systemic change? How do we effectively track and measure the change we are creating through our projects over time? How do we activate our own and our community's potential for change?



Box1

Understanding Breadth and Depth in Action

The #FridaysforFuture movement led by Greta Thunberg is an example of breadth: a wide-scale symptomatic action that led to significant systemic change.

Incubators where social entrepreneurs receive long term support, development of skills, mentoring and are able to adapt, ideate, or change ideas to create impact, are examples of depth.

The framework

The TSL Framework uses three key strategies to create impact.

They are:

1. Developing key competencies;
2. Nurturing participation and contribution, and;
3. Fostering distributed networks.

These strategies have a high level of interdependence: they work in parallel and complementary processes that create impact at the personal, interpersonal and organizational/ community levels. They are explained in further detail below.

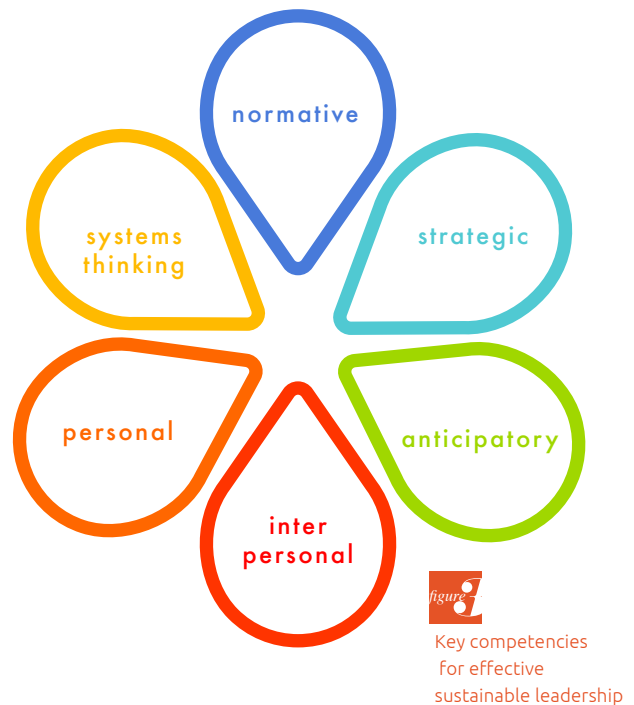
STRATEGY 1

Develop key competencies

The TSL Framework identifies six key competencies required for effective sustainability leadership, which can be defined as enabling leaders to analyze and solve sustainability problems, anticipate and prepare for future sustainability challenges, and create and seize opportunities for innovation in sustainability[5]. The six key competencies are shown in Figure 3.

These key competencies have been adapted from a framework developed by Wiek et al. entitled Key Competencies in Sustainability: A Reference Framework for Academic Program Development[5], with one notable difference: the addition of personal competence. This is what connects the transformative aspect of the TSL Framework with other sustainability-focused leadership frameworks.

The addition of this competence recognizes that the dynamic interrelationship between inner life and the outer world is a fundamental aspect in transformational leadership. It also shifts the



overall focus of the framework from academic to transformative by embedding the person into the change process. As emerging transformational leaders journey out into the world there is a parallel, internal journey that takes place, moving from reactive ego constraints to proactive courage and creative consciousness.

The journey to develop this consciousness requires cultivating practices of thinking, being and relating that create authenticity, strengthen awareness of self and deepen our understanding of the interdependence of all life - all important characteristics of a transformational leader[6].

The important aspects of each of the key competencies is described briefly below:

Systems Thinking: the ability to analyze complex systems across different domains (society, environment, economy, etc.) and different scales (local to global), thereby considering cascading effects, inertia, feedback loops and other systemic features related to sustainability issues and sustainability problem-solving frameworks.

Normative: the ability to evaluate the (un)sustainability of current and/or future states of social-ecological systems and then to co-create new or alternative sustainability visions for these systems. This capacity is based on acquired normative knowledge including concepts of justice, equity, social-ecological integrity, and ethics.

Strategic: the ability to “get things done”, and transition from the current state to the desired (sustainable) state’. This involves familiarity with real-world situations and relationships, political understanding, challenging positions at the right time, being able to solve logistical problems, using language that non-academics are comfortable with, working with deadlines that governments insist on, and so forth.

Anticipatory: the ability to collectively analyze, evaluate, and craft rich “pictures” of the future related to sustainability issues and sustainability problem-solving frameworks, thereby being able to analyze situations such as unintended harmful consequences and/or intergenerational equity.

Interpersonal: the ability to motivate, enable, and facilitate collaborative and participatory research and problem solving, and the capacity to understand, embrace, and facilitate diversity across cultures, social groups, communities, and individuals is recognized as a key component of this competence.

Personal: going beyond competence and skills, being able to live life from a creative rather than reactive viewpoint, aligning action with values, being driven by personal vision and purpose, understanding the creative tension between vision and reality, self-efficacy, personal mastery.



how to build key competencies amongst learners

Transformational learning is most impactful when the learner is able to move through a constant ebb and flow of experiencing and reflecting, moving out into the world, and coming back to self. A transformative learning ecosystem should provide space for this process, which more often than not is a non-linear process in regards to time.

The TSL Framework does this by developing programs and training modules that are anchored around 9 Learning Spheres as shown in Figure 4. Each of the Learning Spheres contributes to the development of multiple

sustainability competencies, providing a cross-cutting approach. Any program, activity or event developed within the TSL Framework should be designed to draw on each of the nine spheres. This not only creates a rich and transformative learning experience, but also ensures that all participants, regardless of roles (e.g. trainees, mentors, facilitators), have the opportunity to incrementally strengthen core competencies and continually work to broaden and deepen their understanding of TSL.



Learning spheres for developing key competencies



STRATEGY 2

Participating and contributing, democratic citizenship

The objective of the second strategy in the TSL Framework is to foster active, democratic citizenship. It is focused on the action component of TSL, giving learners the opportunity for experiences outside of the classroom environment that help to develop the kinds of skills, attitudes and values that only come from real-world experience.

“The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.” Herbert Spencer

The TSL framework does this through the Community Action Plan (CAP). The CAP is a change idea or initiative designed, developed and implemented by the participant to address the most pressing concerns that they identify in their community.

As a core strategy within the TSL framework, the CAP has four main objectives:

1. Helping learners to develop an identity as a leader (with self and others) by discovering their capacity to enact change and positively influence the world and others;
2. Creating opportunities for emerging leaders to practice their skills, build their toolkit and

develop experience leading a community project while strengthening the critical lens on systems transformation;

3. Rooting people to “place” by restoring and strengthening their own economic, ecological, cultural and political connections to community; and
4. Building actions and strategies for sustainable development and community climate resilience.

The dimensions and direction of the CAP are as limitless as the imagination, drive, creativity and resources of those implementing them.

“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.” Margaret Wheatley

We have seen projects related to human and environmental health, education, conservation, climate change adaptation, social justice, and many others. As an element within a dynamic learning ecosystem, the CAPs themselves also change and morph over time often moving from episodic to systematic (Figure 2) as participants themselves deepen and strengthen their own leadership.

Box2

An example of a CAP moving from episodic to systemic

I learned about SERES because of Edwin Panjoj, a SERES ambassador in my community, who told us that we would have the opportunity to run a Community Congress in the community. I was happy and got involved to bring 20 young people and seek support from the community to carry out the program. I was surprised by all the information received and the conversations we had around the sustainability challenges in the community and globally. It also left me with a lot of questions and pushed me to learn more and change habits, mainly with my relationship with the environment.

After the congress, we kept leading actions to raise awareness about waste management. We carry out cleaning days and d with the local bus driver association to provide new protocols regarding solid waste management, so we could reduce the number of people throwing garbage out of the bus window during their trips. People asked us, why do you do it? What do you get in return? We smiled and our response was always

with the satisfaction of taking action to contribute to the change of the community. **Change does not start with others but with myself. As I was taking these actions, it made me feel part of the community. Before I didn't think about that, I was isolated.**

I remember that we had a visit from Juan Pablo, a SERES facilitator, and he presented us with more programs, this motivated me to commit more and to be part of SERES. Because at this point it was only the beginning of something bigger: I wanted to be an ambassador too.

When I received a call for the Catalyzers program - focused on becoming facilitators - I was very happy. To my surprise, it was a space that I would share with Salvadorans and young people from other communities in Guatemala. What I value the most about this program is that **I met other women who had dreams and who were taking action and also creating movements in their communities.** I learned the ability to lose the fear of performing on stage, group management, and voice modulation, and pronunciation. Once we received the theory it was time to put it into practice by working and presenting an action plan. My biggest fear was saying

the wrong thing, but at the end of the speech, I received appreciation accompanied by applause, due to lack of habit, I felt like I was in another world. I can't explain, but I had tears in my eyes, I was used to being told about all the things we don't do correctly, negative reviews, and comments. In SERES I found a space where I could be me, it makes me feel like family and that my ideas are valued. With other girls, we talk about women's development in our communities and how SERES opens up a learning space for us. I also participated in a permaculture program. I didn't imagine that these skills would be useful one year later during the pandemic.

In 2020 we led the project Bio-plant with the network of midwives. Each family of the youth network planted and harvested herbs and vegetables during the pandemic. The midwives learned to cultivate their medicinal gardens, and everyone received online permacultural technical advice, seeds, and pylons for cultivation. We learned to diversify fruit crops as well.

Being part of the SERES network has been an incredible and exciting journey to connect, create and change. By being an ambassador, I am connected with many young people, with whom we share hopes and dreams. I now know powerful women and we keep developing new skills. I didn't expect SERES to open the door for me to connect and be part of something bigger and get out of that isolation that I felt in the community.

Every time I am part of meetings, there is always someone new to meet. In SERES I feel appreciated, loved, and valued as an indigenous woman, they have given me security and confidence in myself. The skills that SERES helped me develop are for my benefit, my family, and the community.

We have also gained space in decision-making processes in the community: local leaders who are members of the Community Council look for us to get our opinion on specific issues, and we offer them ideas. We also have

Since all participants are encouraged to develop their own CAP, it also creates a common thread for sharing stories and experiences through the network.

For example, two groups addressing water contamination issues in their local community may approach the solution very differently, one through an education lens and the other through a direct-action lens. The opportunity to share and discuss these approaches creates a rich co-learning environment and contributes towards building stronger movements over time.

the recognition of the community, they identify us as an active group, and because we don't have drinking problems, because this is a problem with the youth in the community. Gaining this trust has been a challenge because we've had cases where young people do not respect the community system.

As a woman, I believed that I didn't have the right to speak and to express my opinion, I only had the role of listening and that men are the ones who are always right. Now I have a saying, I have a life purpose, I lead, I have the potential to carry the "vara" (the vara or stick is a symbol of leadership in the communities, given to those who become mayors). This is not a competition against men, we can also contribute a lot, mainly because of our leadership style which is "with the people and for the people, and thus the changes are faster."

By the time I'm 40 I see a transformation in the next generation: I see organized women's groups, with proposals. I see more spaces and opportunities for youth, very productive, and children following their footsteps. With a wide network where they meet other people and expand their circle of friends with a vision of common transformation. Beyond that, I also see my children taking action to continue with the change.

For current and future women generations, I wish that you become the protagonists of your own life, in your family and society. I call on you to live that experience, to take advantage of every space. Be part of the transformation.

Manuela Morales - Youth leader





STRATEGY 3

Cultivate networks

The model of leadership upheld in TSL assumes that everyone has the capacity for leadership, and that **the role of that leadership is not to lead over, but to lead with.** With this perspective, leadership becomes rooted in relationships, and the importance of connection and interdependence is paramount. It is this understanding that makes the third strategy of TSL - building a dynamic, highly connected and diverse network of transformative leaders - so vital.

The characteristics of this network are also highly important. In the book *Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*[7], authors Brafman and Beckstrom explore the characteristics and potential of two different types of organizations and networks: the traditional, centralized network (the spider) and the decentralized starfish network. Starfish-type networks are characterized by decentralised, distributed leadership and horizontal learning. These kinds of networks are known for their resilience and mutability, and the way in which they foster participation and creativity. The TSL Framework models its third strategy on the creation of this latter type of network: leaderless yet leaderful, distributed, highly connected and unstoppable.

Building and Maintaining Starfish Networks

The most powerful driving force behind creating a strong, self-sustaining network comes through providing transformative experiences. These kinds of experiences allow participants to develop authentic relationships and forge life-long connections. This is why the integration of the three distinct strategies given under the TSL Framework is so important.

Another important element of building self-sustaining, starfish type networks is the cultivation of “super-organizers”, sometimes referred to as nodes in network theory. These super-organizers are active network members that are able to embody the values of the network and the qualities and characteristics of the TSL Framework. There are normally different types of super-organizers, with specific roles that vary depending on the needs and requirements of the network itself. These roles are not mutually exclusive and it is possible that one person may have multiple roles.



Box3

EXAMPLES OF SUPER-ORGANIZERS

ambassadors

trained and certified facilitators of programs that work within the TSL Framework, ambassadors organize and facilitate events, provide peer-to-peer learning, and support the emergence of new communities of practise within their communities;

catalyzers

provide horizontal and vertical support (e.g. mentoring, peer-to-peer feedback) to their peers and other young people in their community. They inspire and connect individuals and groups and, through their movements and connections, provide the support and infrastructure for growth and expansion of the network. Together with Ambassadors, Catalyzers also drive the demand for more education and programs, encouraging and inspiring other young people to get involved.

champions

passionate advocates for unleashing youth leadership to build a better future. Champions are not exclusively youth, but encompass a broader community of supporters that are dedicated and committed to creating space for and lifting up the voices of these unlikely, transformative young leaders.

entrepreneurs

hands-on project people that are designing and implementing practical solutions to address economic and social transformation of their communities. These may range from localized initiatives (e.g. implementation of sustainable farming practices) to much larger projects.



Super-organizers also become important role models for demonstrating the power and potential of TSL. This has certainly been the case for the example given in Box 1. When super-organizers themselves come from marginalized and frontline communities, **their success and impact can have a catalyzing effect on other young people from similar backgrounds, for whom role models are few and far between.**



CONCLUSION

The TSL Framework offers a solution to the increasing demand for sustainability education and the urgent need for new leadership that challenges existing paradigms. It also provides the opportunity for those who stand to lose the most to play a defining role, empowering young people to step into committed and responsible leadership, shaping the future they want, aligned with society's broader needs.

In places where the TSL Framework has been implemented for a number of years and there are multiple generations of participants, it is possible to see how the three strategies work to create impact, influence and leverage towards driving a more sustainable development agenda. SERES has many case studies from over a decade of developing, implementing and iterating on the Framework.

For example, in many indigenous communities young women have found the courage and inspiration to step into spaces of leadership and influence that have been traditionally male-dominated, becoming role models for other young women and building the power to advocate for increased gender equality in community decision-making. Other young graduates have found themselves stepping into positions in local government, from where they are able to propose alternative policies and economic solutions that promote sustainable development and protect their community's resources. And still other young leaders are beginning to attract the attention and support of both local and international donors who are interested in investing in them and their projects.

More information about the long-term impact of the TSL Framework in communities where SERES has worked in Central America can be found in the research paper: Analysis of Youth Leadership and Empowerment towards Sustainable Community Livelihoods: A case study in Guatemala and El Salvador[8].

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