

Leading into the Future: The role of Co-Creation and Collaboration in a Fractured World

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Keynote address by the GELI Executive Director, Panos Moumtzis, at the 2022 DIHAD conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

I focus on the importance of the role of leaders in advancing collaboration, co-creation and innovation in an ever-changing world. When I joined the United Nations over 30 years ago, hope was in the air. As humanitarian practitioners, we are all driven by the values and principles that are core to our work with the aim to save lives and provide assistance and protection. Humanitarian organisations give a light of hope to the people we serve, so they can build a better future. Principles of impartiality, neutrality, independence, and humanity guide our work. Over the past 30 years, much has changed and yet not enough change has taken place.

My own journey took me from Gaza to Iraq, from Somalia to Rwanda to Bosnia, and more recently to Syria. In each assignment what drove my energy and focus was the people we were there to serve. Their wisdom and resilience, their hope and light, always left me feeling humbled. For a while, we believed that we had overcome violent struggles and deadly conflict between great powers. We believed that a new era of global collaboration had begun. These past weeks have dashed our hopes. After all these years, we have not come as far as we had believed we had.

The world's focus is rightly on Ukraine today. As the United Nations Secretary-General said: "*The use of force by one country against another is a repudiation of the principles that every country is committed to uphold and it underlines the relevance and need of the UN Charter*".

The level of destruction and violence that took place in Ukraine has brought back for me flashback memories from Rwanda, Bosnia, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria. Attacks on civilian residential areas, health facilities, and basic infrastructure have shattered the lives of millions in Ukraine. The toll on civilians is horrifying and tragic. The stories we hear are heartbreaking. It is the civilians – one more time - who are paying the price. We all feel outraged by what is happening. The protection of civilians in the conduct of hostilities in Ukraine is not respected. All parties must respect International Humanitarian Law.

But there is hope. In response to the crisis, the international community has been united in protecting the values it stands on. Neighbouring countries have opened their borders to refugees fleeing from the conflict. Citizens opened their homes. The world is responding generously by providing humanitarian assistance to Ukrainians in need. This is a moment of global solidarity. We have proven, once again, that coming together, working towards a common goal, is our strongest leverage in an ever more uncertain world. Hope has to be kept alive. Light has to replace darkness.

Collaboration

At the same time, change is irreversible. Our world is not the same and it never will be again. How do we respond to this new world?

Albert Einstein said, "*The problems that exist in the world today, cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them*". The question that comes to mind is, why are we still trying to fix today's problems with yesterday's tools and approaches? In today's world, emergencies turn into disasters in a matter of days. New humanitarian crises demand a response before we are even able to adequately address the needs stemming from the previous crisis. While we provide emergency assistance to Ukraine, we must not forget about the multiple other crises in the world today, that also deserve our support. Our system is complex and fragmented. Divided. Our systems are also heavy in terms of processes and can be bureaucratic. To handle all these situations, stronger partnerships are needed. Partnerships and effective collaboration are at the heart of what we do. Collaboration and partnerships must be about putting the people we serve at the center, ensuring a relationship of dignity and respect with clear procedures for accountability. Effective leadership plays a key role in all these situations.

This is why at the Global Executive Leadership Initiative – GELI, we have decided to focus on investing in leadership development, looking at both individuals and teams, helping them reach their full potential. Having been in these leadership positions, I can say we do not invest enough in leadership development in our sector.

Leaders in the humanitarian and development sector, working with the United Nations, NGOs, and the Red Cross Movement, today face a level of complexity never seen before. At the same time, leaders need to be courageous, visionary, ethical, agile, and able to work with teams and complex systems. We have moved in our sector from the heroic one-person leadership style to collaborative leadership in teams, which is vital to help us achieve a deeper level of collaboration. Effective collaboration is successful if the results achieved for a programme are greater than the sum of its parts.

We need to be able to work better together to openly discuss issues that are systemic and to find ways to move forward in a complex world. We need to be agile. We need to be innovative. At the same time, leadership can be a lonely place, where leaders are expected to know it all. We need to come together around shared challenges to co-create innovative solutions across our system. Collaboration and co-creation to adjust to our changing world have the power to change behaviours, transform realities, and inspire change. In fact, I am convinced collaboration and co-creation is the only way forward. Only together can we find solutions for the problems of today and tomorrow. I also find that when we talk about collaboration, we often operate within the same circles.

To better achieve the SDGs we need to broaden our circles of collaboration and influence.

Co-creation

We need to see more active engagement from the private sector and work closely with civil societies and local actors to help achieve the goals. Sadly, today we are further away from

achieving the SDGs than we were two years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has not ended yet, followed by the Ukraine crisis is already slowing down the world economy with negative impacts on the energy and food security sectors and will have a direct impact on the 2030 Agenda.

Instead of making progress, we are falling behind. We need to refocus and redouble our efforts for change. Our world needs more unity, more creativity, more courage. Our world's prosperity depends on peace and stability. To launch the transformation our system needs, we need to co-create new solutions.

Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT and Co-Founder of the Presencing Institute says that "*the key to transformative change is making the system see itself.*"

Our entire system, humanitarians, development practitioners, peacekeepers, local, national, and international actors must see ourselves and each other. I do not think we do this enough! The world is changing faster than our ability to adapt and adjust. Systems leadership and co-creation are the approaches to successfully navigate our fractured world. They are our best tools for dealing with the unexpected. Equipped with these frameworks we can build coalitions, collaboration, and alignment based on trust and shared goals. Understanding and developing strategies to influence mindsets and pursue common goals is key for driving tangible outcomes for the communities we serve.

Leading into the future

Collaboration and co-creation are our most powerful tools for progress, peace, and security. For transformation. For achieving the 2030 Agenda. Let's use them. Together. We still have time till 2030, not much, but let's use it. To be more innovative. More courageous. More ambitious. As individuals and as a system. The time to act is now. There is no alternative and no time to waste.