

# Introduction



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Throughout the history of the United Nations (UN), there have continuously been calls for stronger, more efficient, and more principled multilateral leadership partly based on the belief and feeling that each specific moment in time has been marked by challenges more demanding than those of yesterday. Although these sentiments have been valid at each specific point, the global context against which UN leadership is explored in this third edition of the 'Art of UN Leadership' report series is in many ways demanding on a scale and scope rarely seen before – even in comparison to the 2020 and 2022 leadership reports.

The multitude of challenges, both internal and external to the UN, are of such a calibre that the vocabulary increasingly used to describe them include terms like polycrisis, permacrisis, cascading, and, even, existential. Without prescribing a clear definition of this terminology, the descriptions capture a situation where several crises are happening in parallel, sometimes permanent in nature, often interconnected, with compounding effects, and having an overall impact that exceeds the sum of each part.

The UN, and its leaders, have an awesome role to play navigating a reality that demands not only multilateral action but unprecedented levels of multilateral leadership along a variety of new axes and interconnected contexts. In reality, however, the space and appetite for multilateral action is shrinking in many quarters, the disconnect between actors growing and trust in the UN waning while it struggles to remain the preferred choice for solutions in the face of alternative platforms for action and collaboration. The UN's credibility is being questioned on issues like inclusivity, efficacy and relevance reinforcing the notion of international institution elitism and paralysis at a time when respect for its standing is acutely needed.

### **Flipping the orthodoxy**

What does this mean for UN leadership? Few would dispute that the leadership that worked yesterday will not

suffice today. It is probably a false notion of security to believe that merely tweaking or adapting current practices and behaviours when responding to the challenges of today and tomorrow will be enough. Or that forecasting future leadership requirements can be done by looking at trends and successes from the past, or even by relying on instinct developed from years of practice. There is a growing awareness, also within the organisation, of the need for fundamental shifts in the leadership mindset, to 'flip the orthodoxy' and 'do business as unusual.'

With an increasing diversity of actors being part of both the causes and solutions of today's challenges, responses demand the capacity to include a wide range of old and new stakeholders, beyond governments and across pillars. Pre-conceived notions of outcomes are risky in a time where decisions also need to follow the direction pointed out by science and facts – not merely by ideology and geopolitics.

New narratives on norms are being established, sometimes challenging previously agreed understandings and frameworks, including basic principles of the UN Charter. Novel types of crises and challenges, not known to the world of 1945 – or even to the world of just a few years ago – demand from leaders new mindsets, methods and tools.

### **Paradoxes of UN Leadership in the era of polycrisis**

So, on the one hand, for the UN to remain relevant in this reality, its leadership must exhibit adaptivity, agility and the ability to evolve as a reflection of the world and constituency it serves.

Paradoxically, on the other hand, its credibility at the same time rests on the integrity to stay true to its founding principles. To exercise a duty-bound norm-based leadership firmly rooted in the values of the UN Charter as they were set out almost 80 years ago. As pointed out in the first edition of the Art of UN Leadership, 'the UN Charter is both the source and purpose of UN leadership.'

Considerations of leadership have been included as a fundamental part of the current UN Secretary-General's reform process and the instrumentality of a value-based leadership approach was manifested by the adoption of the UN System Leadership Framework in 2017. Among other things, the Framework seeks to promote a culture of leadership that is geared towards prevention rather than reaction. But how does this play out in an era of polycrisis – where the inherent characteristics of disruptions are that they often are unpredictable? How can leadership in an organisation that is constantly over-burdened, underfunded and undermined show agility and adaptivity in these highly volatile times? And how can the UN effectively respond to the epistemological challenges to the conceptual and practical toolbox of UN leadership posed by today's crises?

#### **A reader's guide**

This report makes an enquiry into leadership across three dimensions of acute relevance to UN leaders today – leadership against a backdrop of normative erosion, leadership in fragile settings, and leadership marked by urgency and polycrisis.

The first section addresses how UN leadership deals with new narratives around global norms, stemming partly from a more multi-polar world with new power configurations. It reflects on the institutional, contextual and individual factors affecting the ability to safeguard core norms and values, also in the face of opposition and pressure. Authors share experiences of the contextual realities facing UN leaders when translating normative policies and agendas into action in the field, sometimes in contexts where the moral grounds and intent of the UN playing the traditional role as the guardian of norms are questioned. The continued relevance, merits and challenges in a new era of the International Civil Service (ICS) and the Oath of Office are also addressed.

The following section deals with the specific and complex challenges of leading in highly fragile, uncertain and

rapidly changing contexts, whether they are in humanitarian, conflict-affected or politically challenging settings. Does the nature of present-day challenges – including high security risks, balancing risk mitigation with urgency of needs, resource constraints, multiple stakeholders, ethical dilemmas and trade-offs, local dynamics, stress and fatigue and the inherent dilemma between short-term interventions and long-term sustainability – require new types of responses, skills and traits by UN leaders? Authors also share perspectives on the support and preparation offered to individuals leading in these situations, enquiring whether the toolbox supplied, and support systems offered, are enough.

The contributors to the last section reflect on the specificities of leadership marked by urgency and/or polycrisis. The UN today is confronted with challenges that are often simultaneously existential in scale and urgency – pandemics, the climate crisis, armed conflicts, the uncertain impact of new technologies, (etc). The authors address the realities of leading in an organisation with the mandate to respond to potentially existential threats to humanity, sharing experiences of leading work on crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergency of forced displacement, the lack of progress on the Sustainable Development goals, (etc). This section also explores the role that UN leadership plays, or should play, within the larger multilateral ecosystem in dealing with urgency and the need for collective leadership in a polycentric world.

#### **Points of departure for the report**

In the making of this report, there has been a very deliberate effort to offer a platform of expression to a diversity of voices with different affiliations, experiences and entry points to the topic. UN contributors include both current and former employees, with different exposures to the organisation in terms of function, context and geographical setting. In addition, based on the conviction that the UN's relevance is dependent on meaningful partnerships with, and responsiveness to

input from, external actors the conversation is enriched by views on UN leadership from various civil society organisations.

As in previous reports, the mandate given to contributors has been very open. Within a broad thematic frame, authors have had the freedom to decide the direction and content of their reflections. Likewise, the report does not prescribe a uniform definition of leadership nor share any specific academic notions or leadership theories.

### **The Art of UN Leadership**

Alluding to leadership as an art, the title of the report series has become a trademark for this publication with each edition focusing on different artistic expressions. Dag Hammarskjöld himself often pointed to the parallels between leadership and art, where the task is to create meaning within a certain framework through skill and knowledge, but also creativity, courage and perseverance.

This report presents objects and sculptures that belonged to Dag Hammarskjöld, each one dear to him for different reasons. Dag Hammarskjöld carefully chose the objects he surrounded himself with – objects that, through the symbolism they embodied or the stories they communicated, guided and strengthened him in shaping his own decisions and leadership choices. Not only is this a way of connecting the content of the report with his spirit, but the notion of ‘form’ and what goes into shaping and moulding also speaks to the notion of ‘finding new forms’ and ‘crafting innovative ways’ of leading in a new, challenging reality. It is our hope that the contributions in this report will help shape new mindsets and ideas for supporting UN leadership today and tomorrow. ■

### **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, ‘The Art of Leadership in the United Nations: Framing What’s Blue’, (Uppsala, Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2020), p 114.
- <sup>2</sup> UN Systems Chief Executives Board for Coordination, ‘United Nations System Leadership Framework’, (Geneva, United Nations, 2017), <https://unsceb.org/united-nations-system-leadership-framework>.