



# Under Pressure and for a Higher Purpose

## How to Foster Transformational Leadership



Governance Nexus Series 02



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## INTRODUCTION

The complex and inter-related crises unfolding in relation to climate change, health, inequality, poverty and conflict are placing **intensifying demands** on governance systems and a **formidable strain on political leadership**. At the same time, there is growing contestation over how governance is delivered and legitimized. Previously settled opinions on the ideal model of governance are being questioned and tested.

Traditionally, it is political leaders and their institutions that are **expected to face up** to such inter-related crises and to drive the transformations that planet and people need for survival. So far, public leaders and institutions have been considered the **legitimizing engine** to our **collective ingenuity**: They are expected to turn around short-term health and long-term inequality emergencies; to find peaceful solutions to conflicts; and to stand in the way of climate change. What we consider and understand less is how, in turn, these increasing pressures **impact on our institutions and leaders**.

As if this were not challenging enough, we know that for real and lasting transformation to happen, public sector leaders and institutions must deliver for a **higher purpose**. In other words, leaders need to think not only about but **beyond their own place and time** and drive actions by their institutions accordingly.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, without recognizing the role and potential of such transformational leadership, the UN(DP) may lose its ability to support societies across the globe to achieve transformational outcomes.<sup>2</sup> To avoid this, it will need to invest in **understanding the dimensions of transformational leadership** and in actively and systematically fostering them (UNDESA CEPA, 2023). This requires UNDP to think about its own role, its entry points and interlocutors and the system it operates in at different levels. For example, for UNDP to help achieve transformative outcomes for a higher purpose, it may not be enough to rely on working with individual transformational leaders in public institutions.

*For real and lasting transformation to happen, leaders need to think not only about but beyond their own place and time.*

UNDP's Global Policy Centre for Governance (Oslo Governance Centre, 'OGC') has started to explore what constitutes transformational leadership and how UNDP could enable it through its work on sustainable development. This has included internal consultations at technical and senior level as well as a roundtable of external thought leaders as part of OGC's Future Governance Workshop, held in Oslo in January 2023. This working paper provides an overview of current thinking on transformational leadership and consolidates key aspects of the discussion that the UNDP OGC has elicited on the topic between June 2022 and January 2023.

<sup>1</sup> UNDP's 2022-2025 Strategic Plan mentions "principled leadership" and notes that it is this kind of leadership that "earned trust" during the COVID-19 pandemic (para 4).

<sup>2</sup> Input from a UNDP global, internal consultation on a draft of this paper in December 2022.



## WHAT IS TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

Transformational leadership is generally defined as the delivery of transformational change through a particular mindset – a mindset that values, continuously seeks to understand, and tries to work with “**deep structures**” to foster significant change. These deep structures are the aspects that relate to our humanity and sense of place in the world, channelled through skills and capabilities such as emotional intelligence, deep listening, cognitive reasoning, resilience, social awareness and conscious communication. The foundation of successful transformative change from this perspective lies in understanding how to draw on and develop these deep structures as inner-to-outer connection points that can help us to effectively respond to complex challenges in the world around us. As it’s generally understood, **transformational leadership is about “going to the roots of the issues, challenging fundamental assumptions, and proposing and embodying alternative futures”** (Montuori and Donnelly, 2017).

*Transformational leadership is a participatory process of creative collaboration and transformation for mutual benefit.*

During an internal workshop, when asked to think of the defining quality of transformational leadership as they have experienced it, UNDP colleagues described transformational leadership especially as involving interactive qualities such as “trust” and “responsiveness” as well as “thinking beyond elections”, “system change”, “future visioning” and also “disruptive”. Similarly, global experts participating in the OGC Future Governance Workshop flagged qualities of “connection” and “courage” in particular, as well as “vision”, “curiosity” and “tenacity”, and also “vulnerability”, “tensions” and “violence”.



Source: UNDP OGC internal consultation in December 2022

By the end of the UNDP OGC’s research and consultation process, a notion emerged of transformational leadership as the **ability of societies, systems and individuals to take decisions that consider the effects beyond their own time and space**. It also became clear that shifts need to take place at three challenge levels, namely the macro – institutional, meso – relational and behavioural, and micro – individual. This is set out in further detail later in this paper.



Source: UNDP OGC Future Governance Workshop, January 2023

This perspective correlates with much of the academic literature that views transformational leadership as a constant interaction that runs from inner to outer to create step changes of mutual impact. Academics from various fields view transformational leadership as being **context relational**. Accordingly, it is seen as something that is cultivated from within and caught from others, as a **“participatory process of creative collaboration and transformation for mutual benefit”** (Montuori and Donnelly, 2017, p. 1). As such, “a transformative leader is a node in a network of interactions in a larger context of relationships” (Ibid. p. 19). Transformational leaders are a nexus, a catalyst, a facilitator, who push and pull in the context of a network of relations. Transformational leaders step back and reflect on the **human agency behind all processes**, acknowledging that nothing just happens and that everything is the result of human choices. “Transformational leadership emerges through a process of interaction with unpredictable, holistic, systemic properties and qualities (Ibid.).”

## WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

As former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair recently observed with regard to political leadership, “the problem at the moment is that **we are living through this enormous period of change and we are not in good shape**, and we need to get in good shape (Blair, 2022).”

Extending beyond this assessment, one may argue that we are facing a “Catch-22” situation: On the one hand, we urgently **need transformational leadership** by individuals, systems and societies **to address complex, inter-related challenges**, such as climate change, inequality and poverty, health and conflict. More specifically, we need to address these challenges within as well as beyond election cycles in order to meet current and future generations’ needs. Arguably, many aspects of the challenges we face have their origins in the failure to focus and invest in transformational outcomes and can only be reversed by turning the spotlight on the leadership drivers blocking needed action. In short, we need leadership that looks at but also beyond our own time and place to tackle these challenges in a sustainable manner - effectively, accountably and inclusively.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, these **very challenges** have the potential to **affect and undermine transformational leadership**. They drive more and more pressure onto public sector leaders and those working in public institutions.<sup>4</sup> For example, crises at the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic or the current cost-of-living crisis can stretch the capacity of leadership to its absolute limits. This is especially true if the crises are compounding and incessant, and institutions and individuals not only restrict themselves to addressing merely the immediate, but give in altogether. Collapsed health systems and world leaders stepping down out of pure exhaustion are just some illustrative recent examples.

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3 These three characteristics relate to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)-endorsed [Principles of Effective Governance for Sustainable Development](#) (2018).

4 See para 7, p.4 of the [UNDP 2022-2025 Strategic Plan](#) (UNDP, 2021a).

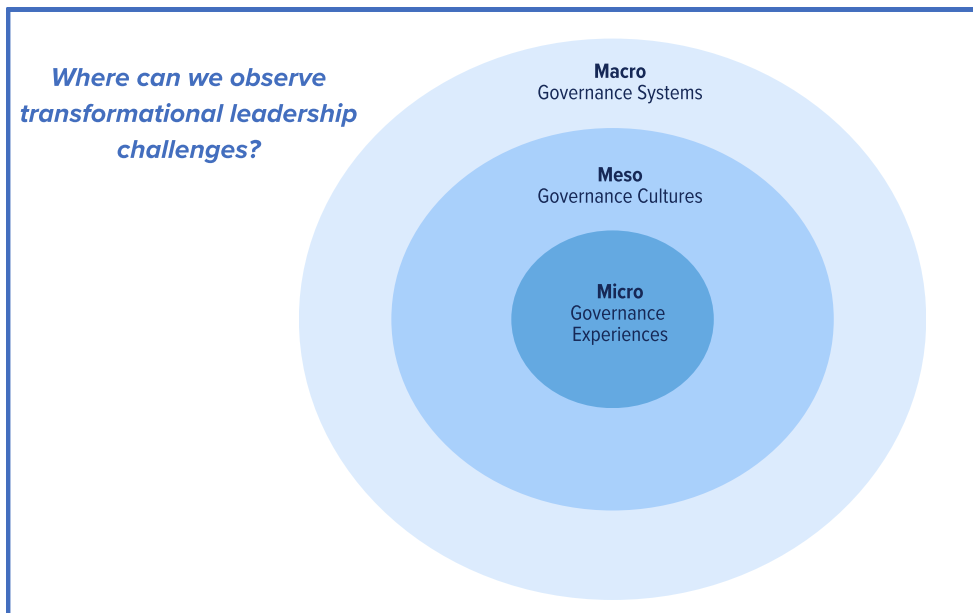
As a result, **the delta between where governments are and where societies need them to be is getting bigger and bigger.**

So, where to start? Research and consultations underpinning this paper indicate that part of the answer lies in understanding the different dimensions of transformational leadership.<sup>5</sup>

## HOW TO LOOK AT TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP?

One way to review the dynamics of transformational leadership is to observe and unpack it at the macro, meso and micro level of governance systems, governance cultures and governance experiences.

*Figure 1: Observing transformational leadership challenges at macro, meso and micro level.  
Source: Author's own elaboration*



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5 While the research and consultation described in this paper focused on the external context that UNDP staff is confronted with, colleagues also reflected on the transformational leadership needed within the organization to support transformational leadership externally. This could be further examined in the future, e.g. through internal action research.



At the macro level, public institutions and decision-makers are expected to provide the **legitimizing framework** for governance responses to rapidly evolving economic, political, environmental and societal trends.

What are some of the leadership challenges we can observe at this level?

- If public leadership **fails to anticipate or respond quickly enough** to the impact of economic shifts or relies on regressive policies, an increasing number of **people can be left behind**, with negative effects for inclusion, equity and poverty reduction.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, such failure has resulted in communities that are left behind becoming less committed to open, accountable and democratic governance systems (see point 30 of UNDP, 2021). In other instances, extreme policy positions have activated the fight for democratic values.
- **Polarized political leadership** at the macro level often fosters increasing gaps between people, which can be **exacerbated by digital manipulation and disinformation**. It has also created a gap in the centre ground by drawing on divisions and ideology where post-ideological and transformational ideas should be.
- Handling the pressure of polycrisis (see, e.g. Harvey, 2022, or Oxfam, 2022) through **restrictive, exclusionary or ideologically-based leadership** paradigms can contribute to the dramatic **decline in trust in public institutions** and can place a significant strain on social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> When combined, **low levels of vertical trust** in democratic institutions and **low levels of horizontal trust** between people create a hostile systemic context for the transformational changes we need our leaders and institutions to support. The use of #NotInMyName across social media and on placards is symptomatic of a breakdown of trust and legitimacy, when people and governments disconnect on the values and the policies adopted to resolve an issue or advance society. This is compounded for young people in particular, who feel ill-served by systems that once offered prosperity and security to their grandparents.

*There is a gap in the centre ground where post-ideological and transformational ideas should be.*

6 For example, contemporary wealth inequalities are very large. The share of the bottom 50% of the world's population in total global wealth is 2% while the share of the top 10% is 76%. Since wealth is a major source of future economic gains, and increasingly, of power and influence, this presages further increases in inequality. See: Chancel et al. (2022).

7 The importance of creating developmental policy responses to the cost of living crisis is outlined in: UNDP (2022a), [Addressing the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Developing Countries](#). For an overview of the issues around trust in public institutions, see, for example: UNDP (2021b), or Brezzi et al. (2021).

At the meso level, the culture of a governance system can foster or undermine a society's **diversity, aspirations and ingenuity** and will be reflected in the policies that are developed and in the way they are implemented.

What are some of the leadership challenges we can observe at this level?

- **Gendered “strong man” performances** still dominate conceptions of what effective governance looks like across many political cultures. Marginalized forms of expression and perspectives, for example by population groups across age, gender, physical ability, ethnicity or income levels, **struggle in finding legitimacy** within institutional and leadership norms, leading to **marginalization, unequal access, and various forms of discrimination** within and by public institutions. Exclusionary **leadership cultures can feed their own continuation** by deterring a diverse range of individuals from entering public service. Insights can be drawn from research looking at inclusive transformational leadership cultures from across sectors and cultures (see, e.g. Simmons and Yawson, 2022, or Pless and Maak, 2004).
- The **rigidity and complexity of public institutional processes** also often make it difficult for people who are purpose-led and bring passion and drive to decision-making positions to think outside the box and to create new boxes.

*Failing to attract a diversity of talents into public authority hampers the abilities of democratic countries to design radical and practical solutions to secure the rights and living standards of future generations.*
- These and other challenging aspects of governance cultures disincentivize and prevent some of the best talents from entering public service, **limiting diversity and representation** in the determination of what future society looks like. This stunts the abilities of countries to design radical and practical solutions to secure the rights and living standards of future generations. It can also contribute to political tensions and social unrest.
- Feminist leadership literature reminds us of the **continued biases that can still inform even recent understandings of effective leadership**.<sup>8</sup> Even transformational leadership approaches are not inherently gender, power or sex neutral. Without careful attention, they can reinforce the unequal advancement of male leaders who are often rewarded more than female leaders for invoking the feminine leadership traits associated with a transformational leadership style (Fletcher, 2004).

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8 For a broad overview from a transformational feminist leadership perspective, see: Battiwala (2010).

At the micro level, people and communities, but also those holding public office themselves, experience the effects of governance systems directly.<sup>9</sup> The characteristics of the system at the macro level and of the culture at the meso level directly affect people's personal lives, well-being and mental health at the micro level. Where a low-trust system and a divisive culture of political debate and policy-making prevails, this **undermines the leadership qualities and experiences needed for transformational shifts to occur**. In turn, experiences at the micro level can also affect the meso and macro level (negative feedback loop).

*At the micro level, low-trust systems and divisive cultures of political debate and policy-making impact on people and communities but also on those holding public office themselves.*

What are some of the leadership challenges we can observe at this level?

- Many decision-makers are pulled physically, mentally and emotionally between different geographic and institutional spaces; between different political challenges; and between different institutional requirements. For those in public office, this is in part because representation, oversight and law-making **require a wide range of cognitive and behavioural skills**. The skills required to succeed in one function must often be traded in relation to the skills demanded to succeed in another, leaving individuals feeling **cognitively overwhelmed** as well as **emotionally stretched**.<sup>10</sup> There are also lines of inquiry, including neurological research, into the mere ability of the human brain to process and address highly complex issues such as climate change (see, e.g. Wamsler and Bristow, 2022, or Walsh, 2019).
- Public decision-makers face high **expectations** and the **responsibility** for appropriately handling crises and daily demands, **but limited resources** and capacity to deliver (Flinders et al., 2020).<sup>11</sup> Public representatives often have minimal resources to support them in their various tasks and in processing the vast quantities of information requiring their attention, resulting in considerable amounts of **cognitive loading**.
- Divisive cultures impact those holding public office, undermining their mental health and well-being. **Abuse and harassment** of public decision-makers both online and

9 For a useful exploration of the characteristics and motivations of public sector leaders, see: Corbett (2019).

10 Former UK Foreign Minister Rory Stewart observed in an interview for Men's Health magazine that "very few of my colleagues who had been there for 10 years were fully human beings anymore", adding that politics drives out humanity. Campbell (2022).

11 For a recent toolkit to begin tackling the problem, see: The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (2020).

offline is escalating.<sup>12</sup> Even without large-scale data sets, political psychologists have drawn attention to the unavoidable likelihood that at least one in five democratic leaders will be suffering from a mental health condition, such as depression, anxiety or burnout (cf. Weinberg, 2012). As disclosure becomes less stigmatizing, we are seeing increasing numbers of politicians share their mental health challenges in relation to the role and the pressures they are under (cf. CBC News, 2022).

- The well-being and mental health of those holding office **impacts their ability to foster transformation**. Evidently, we are not going to get the transformational leadership we need if those taking the decisions affecting our future do not feel physically or psychologically safe. The effects also go the other way: **Psychological transference** is a recognized consequence of highly stressful working conditions, with those experiencing high pressure directly or indirectly shaping the experiences of those working with them and around them. We also know that “followers need to feel **psychologically empowered** to believe they have the ability to act on the inspiration of transformational leaders” (Pieterse et al., 2010, p. 613). In the case of state institutions, this includes state ministers as well as the broader political culture filtering down to impact the transformative capacities of civil servants and officials.

*Followers need to feel psychologically empowered to believe they have the ability to act on the inspiration of transformational leaders.*

- Many existing leadership approaches borrow from corporate models that were developed in the private sector and tend to focus heavily on the micro level, e.g. with regard to skills development. Adjusted to the context, this focus can be valuable for public sector leadership, too.<sup>13</sup> However, public sector leadership will often require a deeper exploration of the **inner to outer connections**, i.e. the links between the micro (individual, experience) level and the meso (cultural) and macro (institutional, systems) levels.<sup>14</sup> Organizations such as the Ekskåret Foundation, which created the Inner Development Goals, the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute, which supported the transformation of Google, and the recently launched Inner Foundation, offer useful examples of exploring the connection between inner development and societal outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

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12 Research into the harassment of politicians and other public officials in North America and Western Europe demonstrates that 30–93% of politicians report having experienced harassing or stalking behaviour. See Adams et al. (2009); Every-Palmer et al. (2015); James et al. (2016); Pathé et al. (2013). In more than half of the cases, the behaviour takes place in the victim's private environment, and it consists of physical violence, death threats, libel, slander and vandalism of private property. For a general overview, see: Marijnissen et al. (2020). See also, for example: Lynch (2022) or Krook and Sanin (2020).

13 For example, a University of Oxford Study found that successful transformational programmes require leaders to be constantly working on themselves in a deep and reflective way, to become leaders who “lean in” rather than leave when times get difficult. University of Oxford and Ernst & Young (2022). See also: Gordon and Hasson (2021).

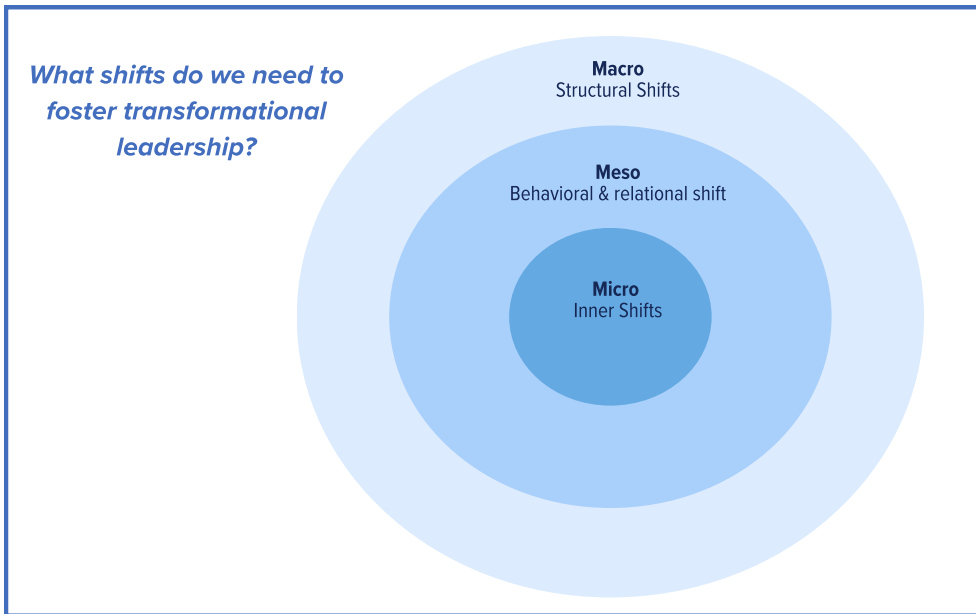
14 See, for illustrative purposes, this study looking into the transformational leadership of three school leaders in a large urban school district in the Rocky Mountain West, US: Shields et al. (2020). See also: Perera et al. (2018); Denney and Roche (2019).

15 Read more about the Inner Development Goals here: <https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org/>; Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute here: <https://siyli.org>; and the Inner Foundation here: <https://www.theinnerfoundation.org>.

## WHAT SHIFTS ARE NEEDED?

The research and consultation process underpinning this paper showed that transformational leadership frameworks for sustainable development are emerging, including within UNDP. Of particular interest is an effort by UNDP's SDG Integration team to identify the types of shifts needed to enable systems leadership, namely: structural shifts, relational shifts, behavioural shifts and innershifts. These map well onto the dimensions discussed above that show how these shifts might enable us to address the macro- to micro-level challenges associated with governance structures, cultures and experiences.

*Figure 2: Identifying the shifts needed to foster transformational leadership.  
Source: Author's own elaboration*



**Structural shifts** refer to shifts in prevailing norms and perspectives determining **resource allocation** and **organizational structures**. This offers an entry point to address transformational leadership challenges at the macro level of governance systems.

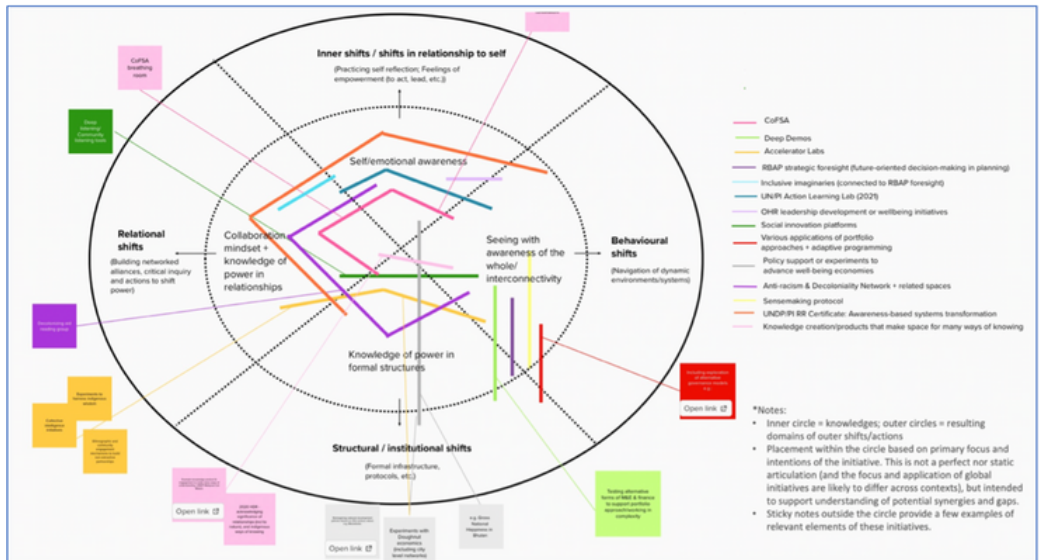
*We can view transformational leadership as relating to four different types of “shifts” taking place to deliver a transformational outcome.*

**Relational shifts** relate to changes in **interactions** and **connections** points between individuals that have an impact on the content and the pace of change. **Behavioural shifts** relate to changes in **the way people behave** in response to norms and interactions. Both relational and behavioural shifts speak to the meso level of governance culture.

**Inner shifts** relate to changes in **how people experience** the world around them and what they bring to creative, future-thinking processes, relating directly to the micro level of governance experiences.

UNDP’s SDG Integration team has started mapping existing initiatives of awareness-based systems transformation using the shifts identified above as a framework. The coloured lines in the diagram show that most initiatives seek to address more than one of the four identified shifts.

Figure 3: Awareness-based systems transformation: Mapping initiatives.  
Source: UNDP SDG Integration team



This mapping as well as the research and consultation process underpinning this paper surface **illustrative examples** of UNDP’s potential to support transformational leadership.

At the **country level**, this includes the “Leading Like Mandela Leadership Programme” by UNDP and the Thembekile Mandela Foundation, which aimed to foster transformation in South Africa (UNDP, 2018). Insights can also be obtained from the work of UNDP’s Strategic Foresight Network in North Macedonia, which tries to institutionalize foresight and futures thinking into national planning processes (cf. UNDP, 2022b). Moreover, there



are several UNDP projects on foresight training, e.g. within the civil service academy in Bhutan, and work with the Doughnut Economics Actions Lab (DEAL) in Armenia.

At global level, a recent **UNDP policy brief on women's leadership** within environmental ministries by UNDP's Gender team flagged the need to recognize the importance of leadership qualities in supporting future thinking and leadership. The report affirmed in particular that "women's stewardship and leadership are the foundation of many effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable climate and environmental solutions (UNDP, 2022c)." (For related insights, see also UNDP, 2021c.)

There are also efforts to explore what supporting transformational leadership may require from UNDP itself. The **Sustainable Development Goals Leadership Labs**, led by the SDG Integration team, has now engaged UN Country teams in 15+ countries and demonstrates, for instance, how shifts at the behavioural and relational level can improve the support UNDP can provide. In the words of one participant, "[the lab] helps uncover and unveil the soft part of leadership that helps relate better with team members and connect better in a positive and progressive manner to achieve results." Another participant recognised that "if we stop focusing on processes and bureaucracies and mandates and siloes, what we can do to reach a solution together is huge (Hentsch, 2021)".

Another example of UNDP's potential to support transformational leadership is a preliminary assessment of UNDP's current orientation to **"thinking and working politically"** by the Crisis Bureau's Conflict Prevention, Peacebuilding and Responsive Institutions (CPPRI) team. Taken as the ability of UNDP to understand political dynamics, be responsive to changes in local context, and to be flexible and adaptive in project design and implementation, this assessment includes a mapping of existing initiatives and capacities related to politically-astute programming. It identifies entry points to deepen UNDP's ability to think and work politically, moving forward. A key component of UNDP's ability to work politically (and to be adaptive in project implementation) relates to "adaptive leadership". This leadership capacity includes promotion of: (i) risk assessment techniques and the cultivation of an appropriate appetite for risk; (ii) an understanding of the value and methods of political economy analysis; and (iii) a command of adaptive management practices, amongst other issues. Next steps in the CPPRI's work on this topic, in 2023, include the delivery of a series of regional Resident Representative Learning Labs focused on navigating the political dimensions of development and the cultivation of adaptive leadership skills.

## WHAT INSIGHTS HAVE WE GAINED SO FAR?

An exploration of transformational leadership in the abstract runs the risk of becoming unmanageably broad and vague. The research and consultations underpinning this paper therefore used the frameworks outlined earlier in this paper as well as established foresighting tools (such as the three horizons model) to think big while also probing into practical implications. This has made it possible to distil some first overall insights.

### **Transformation = power struggles**

We have entered an era of massive transformation. Whoever tries to trigger transformation will face counter-forces and resistance, potentially even violence. We need to understand better how to deal with those that block change (“lock-ins”) and dissect the blockages in order to create strategies to work around them, so that transformation can take place. We must also anticipate that powerful interests often reinvent themselves to appear new, when in fact they are upholding their old positions of power. This compels us to face the realities of deeply ingrained corruption in political systems and their systemic, transnational effects.

Internationally, many countries are caught between the Great Powers and may experience pressure to align with one or the other, which can affect their policy space and increase global polarization. There is a need to support elected leaders and civil society actors in impacted countries to help navigate this polarized power space.

Against this background, transformational leadership could be the ability of societies, systems and individuals to take decisions that consider effects beyond our own time and space. To foster it, shifts may be needed at macro (institutional), meso (relational and behavioural) and micro (inner) level. Seeds of transformation that are already present include emerging efforts on international tax solidarity and tax evasion, and countries forming new alliances to demand a fairer deal for their natural resources (e.g. ‘OPEC for minerals’).

### **Do we need heroes – is it all about an individual’s vision, skills and resilience?**

Whether we like it or not, individuals are needed to kick off transformation at any level. For decision-makers at the top of governance and politics, this requires incredible courage and tenacity. We are quick to criticize politicians but rarely acknowledge the challenges they face. If they are not supported, there is an uncalculated impact on the quality of the decisions they take for (future) society and an evident personal impact on each of them. At best, they can burn out. At worst, the politicians we most admire leave office. As a result, we only get people as decision-makers who can handle this pressure. But handling this pressure requires emotional and psychological detachment (numbing). There is a fine line between being tough and being disconnected. The same place you feel hurt is the same place from which you care. And we need leaders who care to transform our societies inclusively and effectively.

What belies this dynamic is the reality that we know very little about the experience of political leadership. We also know little about what it takes to make transformative decisions. For example, are some people more likely to think long-term, e.g. young people or women? How do we make sure that political drivers and will of both younger and older generations complement each other? Does the human brain have neurological barriers that make it hard to think about complex futures? How can we champion forerunners to show what is possible and to motivate others?

Fortunately, there are seeds of the future in the present showing us what is possible. We have examples of leaders unafraid to display vulnerability and compassion for others as well as for themselves; parliaments changing rules so parliamentarians can manage job and family; decision-makers starting to use foresighting; initiatives to prepare young people for ethical and innovative leadership (e.g. Futurelect in Africa); and initiatives to connect traditional and young leaders (often referred to as 'reverse mentoring').

However, if we focus only on individual transformative capacities, do we risk condoning individualistic, potentially autocratic, leadership?

### **What about the system – does democracy still work?**

Institutions are critical. But we also know that our political systems incentivise short-term decision-making for narrow constituencies. So we need to build accountability structures for decision-makers that foster long-term policy perspectives, support change, allow for uncertainty, and reward authenticity and sincerity.

To support this, we need a focused field of academia to feed the redesign of our political systems. We need to understand how to create stronger feedback mechanisms for top leaders; alternative ways for societies to take decisions; and how to enable greater democratic agency amongst citizens. To make sure politicians represent the public interest, not constituencies, we may need to look into the merits of competency-based voting and sortation instead of elections, as some cities already do, as well as into options to establish individual liability for those making public decisions. We may also wonder whether investing in the nation state really is the solution or whether we need to begin exploring a new global governance model – one that includes non-state actors and new forms of diplomacy, e.g. beyond negotiated treaties.

Seeds of this future in the present include research on lowering minimum and maximum voting ages as well as term limits and countries establishing entities and adopting laws that force decision-makers to demonstrate how their policies meet the needs and rights of future generations (e.g. in Wales).

### **What about all of society – how do we get out of paralysis?**

While individual leaders and institutions are essential, it is clear that societies as a whole need to embrace transformation. However, many people are not ready to accept short-term trade-offs for long-term benefits. A key lever for societal transformation is a media

system which, combined with technology, has an extraordinary influence on people and political leaders alike. This means shifting from a reactive media model, with a negative bias that drives despair, to one that helps spur action.

Critically, this model also needs to support civil and political society to develop a capacity to hold uncertainty, allowing politicians to admit that there are things they “do not know” when it comes to complex challenges. Other levers include education and culture, which are critical to creating global citizens (vs. global consumers), to shape people’s notion of progress and to foster future thinking.

Moreover, the future needs to build on the past, and societies across the globe are realizing that facing up to our uncomfortable truths (e.g. racism, colonialism, ecological hypocrisy) and learning from the past may be the necessary first step to unlock a better future.

We can see positive seeds of such a future in efforts to acknowledge and redress historic injustices, in the use of social and traditional media to shape positive narratives and movements, and in the increasing awareness of the value of information integrity (UNDP, 2022d).

### **What is progress – or how to measure what we treasure (vs. treasure what we measure)?**

The reality is that transformation is not optional. We are already facing the finiteness of resources, whether we fully grasp this or not. This challenge requires us to accept the need to move away from extractive material wealth and to begin creating a wealth we can afford. It requires us to develop new measures of growth, success and progress beyond economics and land ownership, to indicators of non-material, infinite growth potential, such as well-being. This includes moving beyond a traditional anthropocentric view of progress to include indigenous views and the rights of nature. It also includes creating a metrics of progress that gives leaders no option but to pursue transformation.

To achieve this, we must focus on answering questions such as whether and how international financial institutions could consider societal decision-making a strategic asset, giving it a balance-sheet value that can be funded. It requires us to think about how we create global economic rules that serve the interests of people in the future, rather than economics controlling decisions about society. Seeds of this can already be found in cities pioneering carbon budgets (e.g. Oslo), pension funds divesting from fossil fuels, and countries developing measures of progress beyond economics (e.g. Bhutan).

## THE FUTURE

This paper seeks to draw attention to the transformational **role** required of public leaders, institutions and societies, and the global **need** for us to invest in ensuring that public institutions around the world are able to cope with and respond effectively to the transformational demands required of them.

The paper discussed the **notion** of transformational leadership and **why** it is critical. It outlined the **challenges** for transformational leadership arising at the macro, meso and micro levels of governance systems, cultures and individual experiences. It then explored **shifts** that may be needed at these levels, flagged some illustrative **examples** of relevant work by UNDP and, finally, summarized initial **insights** arising from the reflection process that this paper is part of.

Spotlighting transformational leadership challenges in the context of sustainable development paves the way for dedicated future investment on the part of global actors, such as UNDP and its Global Policy Centre for Governance (OGC). Global actors with a convening and integrator role have the ability to map existing work on transformational leadership in the public sector, generate impactful insights from specific sectors or policy areas, forge collaborations, or convene conversations with and among key stakeholders, amongst other actions. Thus, they are well placed to take a leading role in piloting ways for working with the **deeper structures that drive transformational responses**.

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