

# SDG Leadership Labs: Supporting UN Country Teams to Achieve Agenda 2030

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## Transformative Leadership in the UN: Towards Achieving the SDGs

Building on the success of two [pilot SDG Leadership Labs](#) in Uganda and Cambodia in 2018–2019, in 2021 the Presencing Institute (PI) has been working with UN senior leadership teams in fourteen countries around the world in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Leadership Labs. These Labs support the UN to build capacity in systems leadership, collaboration and innovation in order to advance the UN's [Decade of Action](#) agenda.

The SDG Leadership Labs are structured around the methods of [Theory U](#) and have been contextualised to address the specific priorities of each Country Team. The UN Country Teams that took part in the 2021 Labs were: Bolivia, Cabo Verde, El Salvador, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Jamaica, Mauritius-Seychelles, Moldova, Mongolia, Serbia, Syria, Tanzania, Uzbekistan. Each Country Lab was facilitated by a PI Faculty team, working closely with a core team from the UN in each case, over a period of four to six months.

As well as building capabilities in systems leadership and cross-agency collaborative working, the Labs promote action learning and have resulted in a range of new initiatives and prototypes that advance the 2030 agenda. At the time of writing, 42 prototypes have been generated from the 2021 Labs.

## Lessons Learned



UN SDG Leadership Lab: Co-initiation & Co-creating – Visual by [Kelvy Bird](#)

An interim review conducted by the Presencing Institute in September 2021 identified results from the “Phase 1” Labs that took place between February and July. Surveys carried out at the end of those Labs indicated that 93% of respondents considered the programme to have *strengthened systems thinking, collaboration and action learning*. 80% said the programme enabled the *development of prototypes which reflect collaborative leadership*, and that they were likely to *apply the Lab tools and concepts in their own team or organisation*. Most participants reported that the experience offered important challenges and a fresh perspective on leadership culture and approach.

Five major learnings were surfaced:

1. **Ecosystem Leadership is essential, but difficult to achieve.** Like many organisations the UN system sometimes makes contradictory demands of leaders, who are caught between top-down accountability-driven requirements, and expectations for collaborative ‘horizontal’ and innovative ways of working. As one participant reflected: *“If we stop focussing on processes and bureaucracies and mandates and silos, what we can do to reach a solution together is huge.”*
2. **Relational skills are critical to effectiveness.** In the words of one participant: *“It 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, including providing feedback, leading team members, and respecting human dignity.”*
3. UN Country Teams feel an **urgency to increase the UN’s positive impact** in a rapidly changing world: *“People are expecting us to step up, not continue business as usual.”*

4. The Labs activated a latent **culture of taking bold collective and individual action**: *“We were able to get things done together without too much planning and analysis.”*
  
5. **Open mind, open heart, open will**. Lab participants responded powerfully to the importance of applying a range of intelligences to understanding complex systems.

*“I believe that the Lab as a whole allowed us to become more self-aware, community-aware and share joyfully, with less judgement.”*

*“I learned things about members of my own team that I would have never learned from just working with them in an office. They were quite extraordinary things.”*

*“It allowed us to genuinely share ideas and prototypes; to move forward without prejudging colleagues.”*

## **Experience Captures: some Participants’ Voices from the Labs**

The following five short video clips give a flavour of what happened in the Labs.

## Overall Experience Capture Video

[UN SDG Leadership Lab 2021: Overall Experience Capture on Vimeo](#)

This is an overall 5-minute video that captures a range of participant voices from across the Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Ghana and Jamaica country teams.



## Ghana

[UN SDG Leadership Lab 2021: Ghana Country Team on Vimeo](#)



“This was an exciting opportunity to align leadership around a different way of thinking and working together, and to step away briefly from the what we do, to the how we do.”

— Charles Abani, UN Resident Coordinator, Ghana

## Jamaica

[Prototypes Born through the Jamaica SDG Leadership Lab 2021 on Vimeo](#)

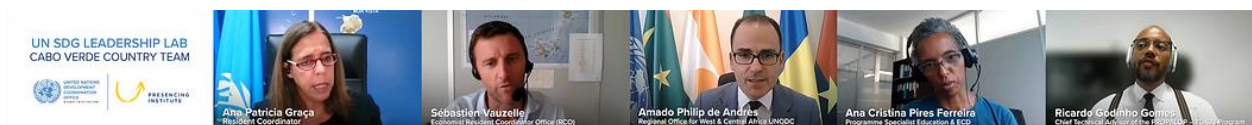


“We’re at a critical time when there is so much going on, we thought it would be an excellent idea to find new ways to approach old problems.”

– Garry Conille, UN Resident Coordinator, Jamaica

## Cabo Verde

[UN SDG Leadership Lab 2021: Cabo Verde Country Team on Vimeo](#)



“Most people are afraid of change, because they think that they will lose something, but if they realise that it can be a win-win for all, then you’re not alone in action.”

– Ana Patricia Graça, UN Resident Coordinator, Cabo Verde

## Bolivia

### [UN SDG Leadership Lab 2021: Bolivia Country Team on Vimeo](#)



“When we have such an ambitious agenda like the Agenda 2030 in front of us, it precisely requires the collective action of not only all the agencies or parts of the UN system, but of the countries, the regions, the international community ”

– *Susana Sottoli, UN Resident Coordinator, Bolivia*

## Next Steps: Looking Ahead

The Presencing Institute’s work with the UN continues: November 24th 2021 marked the launch of the [Cambodia Futures Lab](#). This initiative grew out of the initial pilot in 2019 and those early seeds of innovation have grown into an exciting new engagement with innovators across government, private sector and civil society, in partnership with the UN, in Cambodia.

The SDG Leadership Labs will also continue in 2022 with a new cohort of countries. The Presencing Institute is looking forward to working with 10 other UN country teams and their stakeholders to respond to humanitarian needs.

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