



UN SDG Leadership Labs: Answering the Urgent Call for Transformational Change

INTRODUCTION

"The impact is beyond measurable... It potentially could set off a chain reaction."

This was the reflection of one participant in the United Nations SDG Leadership Labs which took place in ten countries from 2022 to 2023. The SDG Leadership Lab program, offered by the Presencing Institute, represents one compelling response to a call for action from António Guterres, UN Secretary General, to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Doing so is critical to the future of humanity and the planet and yet, in the words of Mr. Guterres, "instead of leaving no one behind, we risk leaving the SDGs behind".

The objective of these leadership 'laboratories' was to develop and build the collaboration and innovation capabilities needed by the UN and their partners to improve humanitarian preparedness and response, and to accelerate progress towards the SDGs. The Labs used research and methodologies developed by the Presencing Institute to support systemic leadership practices, and they built on [sixteen previous SDG Leadership Labs](#) which focussed on the UN's international development role.

The approach taken by the Labs was based on an acknowledgment within the UN that more of the same approaches won't deliver the outcomes which the world needs. The Labs brought a highly participative action learning approach, designed to move beyond incremental improvement to realise transformational change. The 2022-23 Labs, commissioned by the UN Development Coordination

Office and funded by USAID, supported senior UN leaders and their partners in Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, and Rwanda. The Labs were conducted in four languages: English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish.



SDG Leadership Labs 2018–2023 at a glance

IMPACT ON THE GROUND: PROTOTYPING NEW APPROACHES

One of the most visible impacts of the Labs were the innovation projects and initiatives which they produced. The Labs generated 46 new initiatives which prototyped new ways of working to capitalise on newly identified leverage points and new insights to fast-track the realisation of the SDGs.

The action prototypes tested new approaches to increase effectiveness in humanitarian-affected countries by working together differently. Of the 46 prototypes:

- 24% had a thematic focus such as supporting youth, integrating gender perspectives, or addressing climate change. For example, one Lab set a strategic goal of integrating half a million refugees within host communities and municipalities rather than housing them in camps;
- 23% promoted working better together to improve humanitarian response, such as integrating different capabilities within humanitarian country teams to improve collective response to natural disasters;
- 21% improved stakeholder and community engagement, including involving the private sector and collaborating more with civil society or government;

- 15% were targeted at more effective planning, implementation and resource mobilisation. One country team used their Lab to develop a more innovative strategic Cooperation Framework agreement. Another agreed to pool resources for better impact, rather than compete for funding;
- 8% focused on localization. One country Lab dedicated 30% of the relevant budget to build the capacity of national NGOs and to delegate decision making to more local levels. Another shifted its plans to align more closely with the priorities of local communities.

A common theme explored in several Labs was how the UN and its partners can intervene 'upstream' of problems in a preventive way. This included leveraging the interaction between the UN's mandates for humanitarian, development, and peacekeeping work.

STRENGTHENING UN LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

The goal of the Labs, however, extended beyond generating specific action prototypes. The Labs sought also to build and embed new systems-leadership capabilities within teams to deploy across all of their work. The prototypes allowed participants to develop and practise these skills in order to mainstream more effective ways of working within the UN and between the UN and its humanitarian response partners. One participant reflected: "It was inspiring. How do I use my job - use this unique position that I have - to influence or actually achieve more and have this multiplier effect? I found it very fulfilling... Making use of this precious time that we have; this opportunity we have with the UN." An [external evaluation of the 2022-23 program](#) explored this wider impact made by the Labs, including feedback from Lab participants, in three key leadership areas: systems thinking, collaborative leadership, and action learning capabilities.

Systems thinking capabilities

These include the ability to shift perspective, operate from multiple sources of intelligence (head, heart, hand), see the hidden dynamics in systems, sense the system's emerging future, and identify potential leverage points for change. In practice, this meant:

- **developing a whole-system view:** deeper awareness and understanding of actors, perspectives, and parts of a system. *"We got a good understanding of what we can do in changing complex systems... and in doing so we discovered ourselves and each other during the process – that you make things happen."*
- **opening up to thinking and working differently,** including developing new perspectives through listening to less prominent voices in systems and surfacing less visible dimensions. Following a visit to communities impacted by humanitarian needs, one participant said: *"Those who were present were able to see, to ask questions, and also make connections with other projects... Not necessarily only in the refugee camp... Because people can explain to you a lot. But until you step out there, until you see either the needs or the challenges that we have... it's difficult."*

- **practising reflection and deep listening** as enablers for the system. *“To do that collective introspection, in which each member could ask themselves what they were feeling in the process, was helpful in the work of drawing up a road map for the future.”*

Collaborative leadership capabilities

These include the ability to engage in deep listening, to build mutual understanding and trust among diverse stakeholders, and to uncover and align teams and stakeholders with common purpose. In practice, this meant:

- **strengthening relationships and fostering trust.** *“The Lab really helped us connect as individuals, get to know each other, and find new ways to interact.”*
- **nurturing common visions and initiatives** to foster a collaborative culture. *“There are [now] many more participatory sessions for the elaboration of new proposals.”*
- **cultivating deep listening and empathy** as enablers of collaborative leadership. *“Being able to pause and to say ‘from here on I’m going to fully listen to what they are saying, and I’m not going to be thinking about how I’m going to respond... I’m going to listen, I’m going to observe and I’m going to feel.’ ”*

Action learning capabilities

These include the ability to learn by doing, to possess the confidence to move quickly from ideas to action, and to activate new possibilities to achieve results. In practice, this meant:

- **engaging in renewed possibilities and confidence for joint action.** *“My immediate work team came out very motivated. My commitment is that the prototypes are going to come out and will be carried forward.”*
- **embracing change, failure and discomfort.** *“You must start building the new system whilst the old one is still there.”*
- **prototyping as an enabler** to develop concrete ways forward. *“The prototypes were powerful - they are our own. We got in and brought ourselves in. It’s not... [just] theory.”*

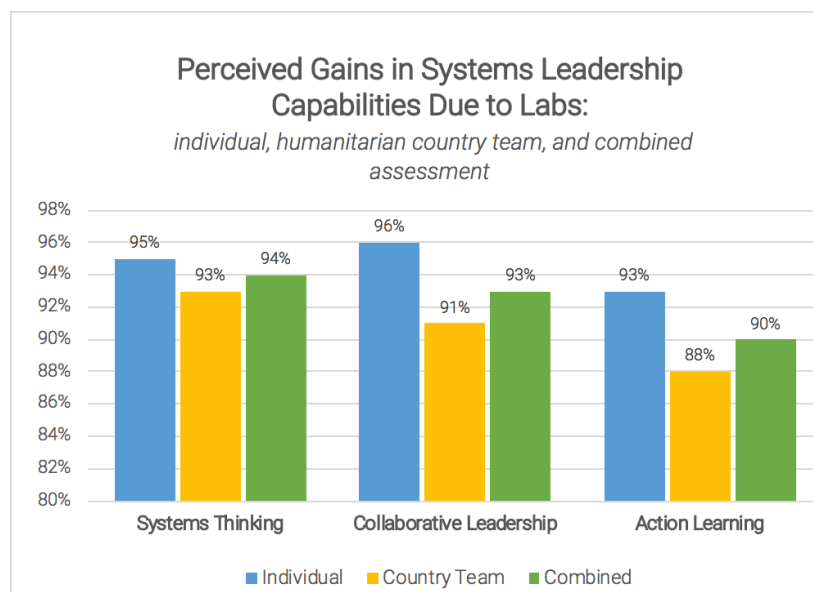
The Labs used the methodology of Theory U which addresses the inner capabilities required of leaders to help realise change in the world. In addition to building technical capabilities such as prototyping change quickly and scaling up what works in practice, Theory U also connects individuals and teams to what really matters to them - their core motivation and purpose - and supports leaders in listening to voices and perspectives across the affected populations and communities. It introduces eco-systemic leadership (contrasting with ‘ego-system’ leadership) as an effective approach in realising complex goals like the SDGs.

CONCLUSION

Having been run in 26 countries, which represents 20% of the UN Resident Coordinator (RC) system countries, the Presencing Institute's SDG Leadership Labs are now beginning to achieve critical mass in impacting the wider UN system. The system leadership impact is amplified further as over time UN senior leaders move between agencies and country teams taking learning from their Labs with them.

In the exit surveys of Lab participants, 93-96% of respondents concluded that their Lab had enabled individual gains in systems leadership, and 88-93% said their Lab had realised gains within their senior UN teams. These gains:

- built and strengthened their leadership capabilities (in systems thinking, collaboration, and action learning);
- helped them develop prototypes reflecting collaborative leadership with their colleagues; and
- provided tools and concepts which they then applied , or were planning to apply, to their work.



António Guterres has said “It is imperative to keep the foot on the pedal to achieve the cultural change we need for greater collaboration across pillars and tangible results for people on the ground.” Much has been achieved so far through the SDG Leadership Labs, and there is a clear appetite for more. In addition to more UN country teams wanting to participate, several which have previously participated have expressed a desire for a ‘2.0 version’ of the Labs to deepen and expand the learning. A 2023-24 program is already under way, with four more Labs taking place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Colombia, Nepal, and Bhutan.

One Lab participant concluded that leaders have experienced changes within themselves and their colleagues that “could now only be built on, not reversed.”

FURTHER INFORMATION: VIDEOS

In the six short videos below senior leaders from the UN country teams of Liberia, Honduras, Madagascar, Cameroon, Ecuador and Kenya share their Leadership Lab experiences.



Left to right: [Honduras](#), [Madagascar](#), [Cameroon](#)



Left to right: [Ecuador](#), [Kenya](#), [Liberia](#)

The following video tells the complete [history](#) of the Presencing Institute’s UN SDG Leadership Labs, from 2018 until 2023.



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