Systems Leadership in the Humanitarian Sector: Findings from Field Leadership Labs

Foreword

This paper has been produced as part of a series on humanitarian and development leadership, and for presentation and discussion at an Event in Berlin, 10th November 2022, co-hosted by the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI) and the Centre for Humanitarian Action (CHA) in Berlin. The Berlin event is supported by and made possible with the generous support of the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO).

The report is the result of field work that has been commissioned by GELI and supported by the UN Development Coordination Office. It is hoped that the Berlin Event will help global policy makers, humanitarian practitioners and donors take the discussions forward in a proactive manner to ensure policy is influenced by evidence-based research and the leaders in humanitarian operations are sufficiently supported to deliver assistance effectively to people living in critical conditions as a result of conflict, natural hazards, climate induced crises and other underlying causes of humanitarian suffering.

Dalberg and KONU would like to thank GELI for establishing this agenda and making the space for these discussions.

Abstract

Mobilizing progress towards major development and humanitarian challenges requires an understanding of complexity, of coalition building and advocacy, and a collaborative approach to leadership. Recognizing this, GELI contracted an international development consultancy, Dalberg, and their leadership partners, KONU, to design and implement **Field Leadership Labs** over the next few years across several countries to support humanitarian leadership teams to work more effectively together. This report details the program's purpose, methodology and approach, the impact to date[1] from the pilot Labs in Pakistan and the Philippines, and findings around common leadership challenges faced by humanitarian leaders in the field as well as ways to address them.

To date, the pilot Labs in Pakistan and the Philippines have surfaced that UNCTs/HCTs face significant challenges to true collaboration. These include, but are not limited to, mandate-driven responses at the expense of people- and problem-centered responses; tension and distrust within teams and across levels of the system; and structural disincentives to collaborate across agencies and organizations.

So far, the Labs have supported RCs/HCs and their teams to lead more effectively within this system both by building their long-term capacity to diagnose and collaborate on a complex challenge using a systems leadership framework, as well as achieve meaningful progress on their goals through leadership interventions with critical stakeholders within and beyond the UN. 96% of Philippines workshop participants agreed or strongly agreed that the Lab achieved its primary learning objectives, and 95% reported greater individual agency to exercise leadership in their work and roles. Overall, participants across both two pilot Labs appreciated the space to reflect and hold honest conversations about their

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[1] Following an initial in-person workshop in May 2022, the Pakistan Lab concluded early due to competing and unpredictable priorities related to the core team's humanitarian work, The Philippines Lab is expected to conclude in mid-November following a second in-person workshop with national and local government, NGOs, CSOs, and UN stakeholders.

work, as well as the support in designing and testing different leadership interventions to mobilize cross-sectoral change on major humanitarian challenges.

Introduction

Launched in 2021, the Field Leadership Labs is a program jointly offered by the Global Executive Leadership Initiative (GELI) and the UN Development Coordination Office (DCO) to support leadership teams to work more effectively together. The Labs are intended for Resident Coordinators / Humanitarian Coordinators (RCs/HCs) and members of their United Nations Country Teams and Humanitarian Country Teams (UNCTs/HCTs) to practice systems leadership by directly working on challenges that they encounter in their work, particularly in the face of complexity and uncertainty. This program builds from a successful pilot that was delivered in Uganda and Cambodia in 2019 and received positive feedback from the RCs in each of these countries. The program began in 2021 in Pakistan and the Philippines, and will expand to include additional country partners in 2023.

Purpose and Approach

Navigating complexity requires a systems approach to leadership. In other words, it requires the ability to make sense of the interconnected factors that make positive change hard to achieve and the ability to strategically engage a diverse array of stakeholders to advance a common goal. With the support of systems leadership specialists from Dalberg and KONU, the Lab partners directly with RCs/HCs and their teams to help them advance progress on a complex, cross-boundary challenge of their choosing.

The purpose of the program is to achieve real progress at multiple layers of in-country operations by:

- Building a group's long-term capacity to diagnose, collaborate on, and mobilize change using a systems leadership framework
- Achieving meaningful progress on an existing in-country challenge with a group of humanitarian and development stakeholders within and beyond the UN, using a systems leadership approach

The program differs from more traditional problem-solving approaches in a few ways.

- First, the Lab brings explicit focus to diagnosing the leadership challenges standing in the way of progress—issues such as competing priorities, misaligned incentives, or differing perspectives on what success really looks like on the issue—alongside discussion of the technical solutions needed to meet certain milestones.
- Second, this Lab focuses on live experimentation. As opposed to just a focus on planning and discussing, there is a strong bias towards trialing new approaches and building new relationships through the Lab to see what works and what doesn't.
- Third, the Lab is focused intentionally on building relationships across boundaries at a personal and professional level – the discussions are not just about understanding how we make progress on the issue, but how we as individuals and leaders drive change in collaboration with others on thorny, multifaceted issues.

Program Components and Duration

The Labs provide multi-layered support to RCs/HCs and their teams over the course of approximately six months. This includes on-going remote support as well as 2 in-country engagements with the team.

The exact schedule of activities is co-created by Dalberg/KONU, the RC/HC, and a core team of collaborators selected by the RC/HC.

The Lab structure is depicted in the figure below.

Field Leadership Lab roadmap
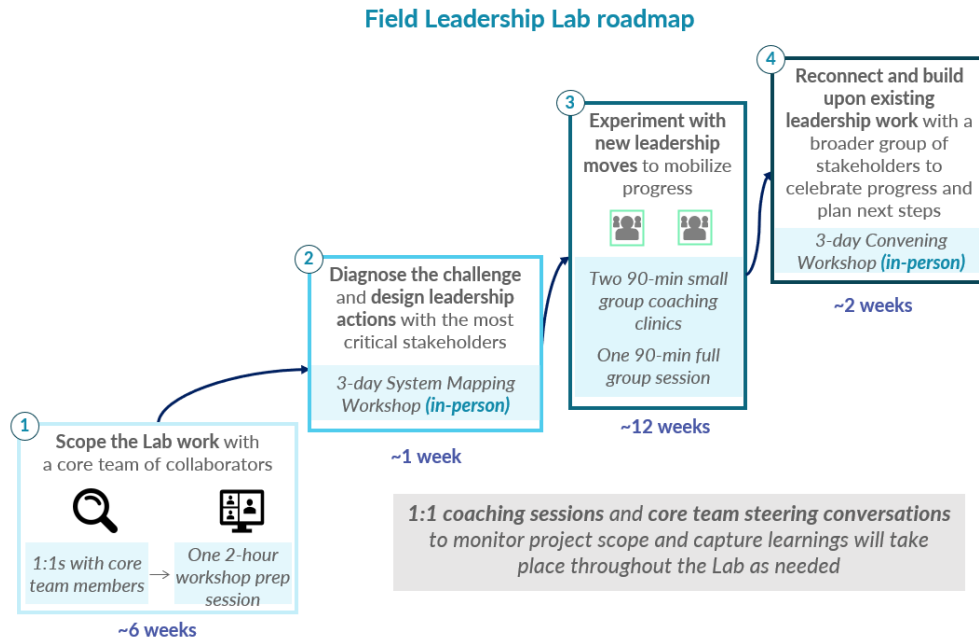
At the beginning of the program, the RC/HC and the core team selects a goal or persistent pain point they are encountering in development or humanitarian operations. Then, across four phases of work, the faculty team assists the group in making progress on that issue through a mixture of personalized and team coaching, creative working groups sessions with the team, experiential in-person leadership workshops, and moments to reflect and co-create in the team environment.

Throughout the course of the Lab, RCs/HCs hone, practice, and apply strategies that can lead teams through disagreement and difficulty and toward collective problem-solving. At the same time, their HCTs and broader in-country humanitarian and development stakeholders iteratively design and test creative ways of working as a team to address systemic challenges more effectively. In doing so, they develop an increased sense of shared purpose and trust across their agencies, organizations, roles, and/or identities.

Given the collaborative and co-owned nature of this work, the program can be intensified in a period shorter than six months or lengthened if a longer timeframe is judged necessary by the team. For instance, the Pakistan country team opted for a shortened version of the Lab to address more immediate climate and gender needs in their cooperation framework, while the Philippines country team has opted for the full program with two in-country workshops to engage in deeper coalition building work around the issue of internal displacement.

Findings and Impact to Date

The work in the Labs thus far have made clear that UNCTs/HCTs face significant challenges to true collaboration. This is driven by factors including, but not limited to, the structure of the humanitarian coordination system, leaving RCs/HCs with significant responsibilities and expectations but limited

resources; mandate-driven response at the expense of a people-centered response; tension and distrust within teams; and structural disincentives to collaborate across agencies and organizations. While this program will not address these underlying structural challenges, it is intended to support RCs/HCs and their teams in leading effectively within this system.

Common leadership challenges surfaced in both the Pakistan and Philippines Labs include:[2]

1) **Leading effectively given competing priorities and lack of formal authority** – Participants shared that the process of enrolling UN and non-UN organizations with "competing priorities" was "difficult without the formal authority to do so." Unless they could "tell" someone to do something, they found it difficult to generate buy-in and build a strong coalition for success.

2) **Leading beyond a mandate and the challenge of crossing boundaries** – Many participants noted discomfort with operating outside of their formal mandates, and that even when they did have differing opinions or innovative ideas, "navigating the political realities was not easy", especially within the UN context. There was a strong sense noted that unless the solution was within their "mandate," they could not champion it for fear of moving too much into someone else's space.

3) **Lack of clarity on how to build cross-sectoral coalitions for change** – Participants questioned whether leadership actions should be targeting the UN system stakeholders ("peers"), or also the wider community (government, non-profits, activists, etc.), and when they should choose one or the other – and how to continue engaging them with the limited set of tools at their disposal.

4) **Creating a space to share honest feedback and hold productive conflict** – A key skill that many senior leaders struggled with is how to have honest and difficult conversations, particularly when it involves interpersonal dynamics within the UN system. False harmony is often seen as a better outcome than productive conflict, so the latter is consistently avoided.

Over the course of the Lab, participants were able to engage with their selected in-country challenges[3] in the following ways:

- **Diagnose and frame a complex, systemic challenge** in a way that articulates the root issues standing in the way of progress across layers of the system, as well as identifies *who* needs to learn *what* in order to engage hearts and minds for a cross-boundary issue
  - *"The Lab helped us move away from labels and technical mandates. 'Business as usual' failed us for years because we didn't have a common sense of purpose."*
- **Gain awareness of the various perspectives, values, and losses** across systemic layers that make progress hard
  - *"In the Lab, I heard new perspectives from others that I had never really considered before in my role, but it made me think about new ways of working towards a common goal."*
- **Engage in productive conflict with colleagues** to diagnose and address the underlying issues of a challenge that cannot be addressed only with technical 'fixes'
  - *"It's rare for us to have such deep, frank conversations that cut across government, UN, private sector, and civil society, and this Lab let us do just that."*

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[2] Quotes from past Lab participants.
[3] In Pakistan, the Lab team opted to address gender and climate change challenges through the program, and in the Philippines, the Lab team chose to make progress on the issue of durable solutions for Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs).

- **Design and try out leadership interventions needed to receive genuine buy-in** to make progress on a collective systemic challenge
    - *"It is amazing - the fact that we're creating a coalition with all these senior leaders in government and local communities - this is a new way of working for the UN and for the Philippines."*

A sample of leadership interventions during Phase 3 of the Philippines Lab can be found in the figure below.[4]

Group	Sample of leadership interventions made to date:
Group 1: Youth engagement	• **Held consultations with youth and gathered existing research** – to collect stories that can influence policymaking at the national and local level • **Made advocacy moves** in 1:1s and at World Humanitarian Day in Maguindanao
Group 2: LGU engagement and broad coalition building	• **Conducted focus group discussions with IDPs and LGUs** – to understand IDPs' needs and facilitate conversations between IDPs and the local communities they are currently living in • **Shifted to a new mindset at IFRC to advocate for long-term, local durable solutions** in the new migration pillar
Group 3: Building an IDPs narrative	• **Made advocacy progress with DSWD, CHR, and others on the IDP bills** at the national and BARMM level • **Completed an initial draft write-up of a national IDPs narrative** – which can be shared with coalition partners

So far, progress has emerged in the form of:

- **Greater appreciation for internal systems and dynamics**, in addition to external systems
    - *"I see that we cannot wait for an outside authority to fix our problems – we in the development and humanitarian space must collaborate on these issues ourselves. The Lab is here to help us do that – collaborate better in a complex system where there are no clear social hierarchies."*
    - *"We cannot continue to blame system constraints – sometimes we fail because we think only about mandates and who has the formal authority to do what. But this workshop helped us break free of labels and think as – if not technical experts – coalition-building experts."*
- **Increased awareness of differing perspectives**, allowing for candid discussions around why there has been a historic lack of genuine buy-in
    - *"The reason we haven't made progress yet is that we always choose false harmony over productive conflict. But we need to hear the real priorities of other agency representatives."*

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[4] For the mid-November convening workshop, the 20 returning participants have invited 35+ senior government officials, NGOs, CSOs, and other UN agency representatives to discuss the progress made thus far on the internal displacement agenda via the Lab and develop 1) an action roadmap forward and 2) a group charter to continue their cross-sectoral collaboration post-Lab.

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- o *"We were lacking some glue – some co-creative energy – to come up with a shared agenda together. This workshop is a starting point because it's the first time we have had such a diverse group of participants in a room to debate and discuss what we can do together."*
- o *"In today's workshop, I heard perspectives from others that I had not considered, and it makes me think about new ways of working to work towards a common goal."*
- o *"It was difficult to have healthy, productive debate in my group, but it was also incredibly important to have government, UN, and civil society voices all present in our discussion. We also realized that some of our issues were very similar, and we connected over the open and free-flowing conversation that followed."*
- **Deeper trust and candor among peers**
  - o *"I crave for this space we have with each other, where we can be very open and candid about the real issues. This is very rare in the UN."*
  - o *"I love that I can be frank here. It's rare we get this opportunity to have such deep conversations with an intimate and diverse group."*
  - o *"Some people may be skeptical of these [in-person workshops] at first, but slow thinking and reflection for even 2 days is a really good thing for the UN."*
  - o *"This Lab helps our team focus on an important challenge we've been putting off for a while. We want to get underneath the iceberg – not only stay on top – and the open conversations we're having can help us build a genuine coalition."*
  - o *"I'm here because I failed you all before as a leader of this work. But by being transparent and vulnerable with you all, I hope we can work across boundaries to get the real work done. I'm ready to jump in and take on my little piece, but we all need to do this together and share our leadership."*
  - o *"We're so used to looking at other people's gaps, but not at our own. We're afraid of saying things that make us look unpolished or unprofessional. But we need to have these conversations here and not just behind the curtains – because we are a family."*
- **New relationships** formed across the traditional technical working groups within and beyond the UN
  - o *"I was so impressed by how intimate and friendly and open this space felt - I was able to make connections with colleagues I never work with normally in my role."*
  - o *"The Lab was a great forum for building connections and networking. It was also a great opportunity for knowledge sharing that we normally don't do."*
  - o *"Ever since the workshop, my small group has been meeting every two weeks to talk about what we've been doing in our roles to advance progress on our challenge."*
  - o *"I'm walking away today with 20 new friends."*
- **Deeper shared understanding around the "root cause" of systemic challenges** that include the analyses from the "heart and minds" of critical UN and non-UN collaborators
  - o *"The Lab reminded me not to make best the enemy of good. We don't only need to get bills passed - we also need to build out a community of willing champions and maintain the momentum we've generated here."*
  - o *"Yes, we need more funding and more bills, but to get there, we need to start conversations with the local communities, youth, and government to understand their needs before we can work alongside them."*

- o *"There is a lack of 'adaptive leadership' in the UN to engage [the humanitarian-development-peace Nexus], but this Lab is an opportunity to rally all people – and not just humanitarians – to address not just short-term relief but long-term support."*
  - o *"[The Lab] has helped us make sense of our current transitional state – in the UN and government – and see where strategic alignment is possible in the future. We are really riding the momentum of this new political movement and moment to make change."*
- **Greater awareness for the kinds of leadership actions individuals and teams can take** to build genuine buy-in to make progress on a collective challenge
  - o *"This Lab helped me see the relationship between the formal and informal roles we all play. The [authority exercise] helped me visualize where I want to go and who I need to speak with to make progress, even though I'm not the most senior person in the room."*
  - o *"We are, by mandate, supposed to be working with each other, but we don't always do that. This program is an opportunity to set the agenda right and give it a go, using these leadership ideas like 'orchestrating productive conflict' and 'acknowledging resistance and loss' in the broader system."*
  - o *"We are here to learn technical knowledge, yes, but more importantly, we like that you are sharing with us actual ways to foster buy-in for our goals, navigate conflicts and losses, and help our team build stronger collaborative muscles for not just gender rights or social policy, but all larger systems issues."*

Conclusion

The pilot Field Leadership Labs have offered an opportunity for RC/HCs and their UNCTs/HCTs to experiment with new ways of working together, to deepen their connection to each other, their own roles, and a sense of shared purpose in bringing about change, and to design and test out new leadership approaches to collective action.

Overall, participants reported that the Labs offered an important, reflective space for experimentation as well as a diverse perspective on their own and others' understanding of a collective systemic challenge. Being able to practice and apply adaptive leadership skills – e.g., diagnosing and acknowledging diverse perspectives, values, and losses; starting challenging conversations; and creating the structures and roles for coalition building – was critical to breaking through some of the barriers that were holding back collective progress on a pressing in-country humanitarian challenge. Some participants felt that the approach of the Lab was focused too much on leadership theory, and that more time should have been spent on practical actions to deliver short-term, tangible outcomes. However, our findings indicate that applied leadership programs like the Field Leadership Labs can help leadership teams break away from technical, mandate-driven responses and instead collaborate across silos to achieve meaningful, sustainable progress on their work.

The Labs provide several insights on leadership development in the humanitarian space. First, while relational and collaborative leadership is essential for driving collective impact, it is difficult to achieve under the current status quo of inter-agency competition and focus on technical solutions. Second, it is important to continually create spaces for leaders to share honest feedback and hold productive, difficult conversations with one another – particularly given that a key skill many senior leaders often struggle with is navigating interpersonal dynamics within and across the UN system. Third, helping leaders identify ways of working outside of their formal mandates and develop their informal authority

is critical for cutting through agency and organizational siloes. Fourth, new approaches to problem-solving are needed to address and transform competition into a genuine commitment to co-creation – including the ability to go beyond technical solutions and access hearts and minds to build a sense of common purpose. Finally, action learning is fundamental to any systems leadership exercise. The ability to learn by doing, experiment with new ways of working, and collaborate with a diverse and "untraditional" group of stakeholders is key for transforming humanitarian leadership within and beyond UNCTs/HCTs.

The next set of Labs will start in late 2022 and continue into 2023. These Labs will build on the lessons learned from the pilot programs in Pakistan and Philippines and offer new insights on leadership in the humanitarian space, as well as what it takes for collective progress to be achieved at the systems level. In particular, these Labs will continue to explore the question of how leaders can most effectively drive change outside of their formal mandate, what role the RC/HC and others play in leading and catalyzing change, and how to build positive systemic change at the national stage when structures, resources, and policies are not at the same level for headquarters and individual organizations.

ANNEX: Program Methodology

Dalberg/KONU utilize a methodology based on the Adaptive Leadership Framework, which is the product of 40 years of research and teaching at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. The framework leverages ideas and practices from organizational change, political science, sociology, psychology, and systems theory.

Adaptive Leadership focuses on 5 essential shifts in perspective that are needed to achieve change in complex systems:

- **From Authority to Leadership** – a shift *from* the belief that the person in charge is the leader *to* an understanding that leadership is an activity one can take from any role
- **From Power to Progress** – a shift *from* the perception that success involves control over a group's work *to* an understanding that success requires group collaboration and trust in achieving a shared purpose
- **From Technical to Adaptive** – a shift *from* thinking that leadership entails delivering the "right" answer *to* understanding that addressing complex challenges involves empowering others to learn about the challenge at hand and explore what changes in culture, mindset or action may be needed to address it
- **From Personality to Presence** – a shift *from* focusing on individual charisma *to* an understanding that good leadership requires a genuine understanding of the underlying issues at hand, as well as any conscious / unconscious biases at hand
- **From Individual to System** – a shift *from* believing that complex challenges arise because people are "good or bad" or "right or wrong" *to* an appreciation that individuals are representing values or perspectives that are important for the broader group, even (especially) when they conflict

The Adaptive Leadership framework has been used to build team capacity and accelerate governance initiatives in post-conflict, developing, and fragile contexts including Timor-Leste, Madagascar, Burundi, Tajikistan, and Papua New Guinea. Former Colombian President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Juan Manuel Santos credited the adaptive leadership model as a major influence and resource in his work to end Colombia's 50-year Civil War.