



# Conclusion

## *Leadership in challenging times*

In this volume, I have tried to argue that we have reached both a figurative and a literal boiling point. When large parts of any community, country, region or continent reach such high levels of exclusion, especially in a context of excessive wealth, wastage and inequality, leaders in all sectors of society, not just politicians, must take serious note. Leadership is probably one of the most important and critical missing ingredients to ensure that we do not sleepwalk into a global crisis that will make earlier crises look like a Sunday morning picnic.

I have sought to examine in this volume the achievements, current possibilities and future potential of progressive citizen action, as well as exploring the obstacles that civil society faces as it seeks to continue to make a positive impact on global society. I would be negligent if I overlooked the fact that as the world struggles to find a way out of the perfect storm we have created; the key issue is leadership or lack thereof. Without appropriate leadership, we are a ship adrift in that storm. So, before I bring this volume to a close, I'd like to offer a few reflections on the nature and importance of leadership as I perceive it.

In lieu of a formal working definition of leadership, let me share three basic elements of leadership that make sense to me:

- » Leadership involves uniting people around a set of shared beliefs or values.
- » The purpose of leadership is to act in accordance with these stated values in the service of society.
- » Leadership is not a one-way street, but a dynamic, reciprocal, interactive process between those termed 'leaders' and those termed 'followers'.

It is often said that the rise of globalisation over the past several decades has ushered in a new era of interdependence. And in many respects this is true. From the foods we eat to the economic and political systems we are part of, our societies, lives and livelihoods have become intertwined to a much greater degree than was previously the case. An economic collapse in one part of the world sets off a chain reaction on the other side of the globe. The outbreak of a mysterious new virus prompts countries worldwide to introduce stringent health precautions. A computer virus spread by email can literally overtake

the world's computer systems in a matter of hours. The release of a much awaited book or film is met by a simultaneous frenzy of anticipation in dozens of cities worldwide.

Once again, we need to remember the truth of the proverb about *ubuntu* – or community – which says, 'I am because you are'. The proverb dates back to an era when interactions between people almost always occurred face to face. It remains valid in our globalised world, but it now takes on a very different form. Our identities are still shaped through interactions with others, but these interactions can now take place across long distances, via e-mail and the Internet, with people from backgrounds very different from our own. Our identities are shaped by more and more diverse influences; and for the growing number of people who cross physical borders and live outside their countries of origin – by plan or because of need – the multiplicity of identities can become truly enormous. This rapidly changing world creates significant challenges for those who, at a community and a political level, place themselves or find themselves placed in positions of responsibility, taking on the mantle of leadership within their communities.



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What are the implications of these changes for notions of leadership? To put it simply, leadership now is much more complicated than it used to be. During the industrial age, things operated in a much more traditional, hierarchical way than they do now. Organisations and societies were structured more 'vertically.' The leader 'at the top' – whether elected, appointed, or there by birth (as in monarchies) – charted the course for the 'followers' at the bottom and was respected because of his (or sometimes, but not usually, her) 'positional authority'. There was a sense that leaders were somehow 'special people' with special abilities. The distance between leaders and followers was often significant and the relationship generally flowed one way: from the top down. In many cases, leaders and their followers derived from quite similar cultural backgrounds.

This kind of arrangement is increasingly untenable, however, against the backdrop of the global society I have described. There are a number of reasons why. First, leaders no longer operate in isolation – it is virtually impossible to separate global problems from local or regional ones. A mayor of a small town is forced to confront the consequences of problems whose roots lie in the international economic system, for example. The head of a small business no longer operates in a regionally defined market – he or she must take into account global trends. An environmental activist works to address issues that are linked to decisions made in cities and countries thousands of miles away. The

old slogan ‘Think globally, act locally’ suggested that in attempting to address local issues one needed to understand how global processes, institutions and decisions impact on local choices. However, one of the ironies about the moment of world history we find ourselves in, is that, as countries like South Africa, and those in central and eastern Europe and elsewhere, were gaining electoral democracy at the national level for the first time, or after a long hiatus, real power was increasingly shifting to the supra-national level. Responding to this shift now challenges us also to ‘think locally and act globally’, something we must learn to do if we want to make an impact within the forums where real power over significant aspects of our lives resides.

Second, the challenges facing today’s leaders have become so complex and multifaceted that it is unlikely that they can be successfully handled by the more traditional ‘top down’ model. Collaborative leadership, teamwork and participatory decision-making are increasingly common – at all levels of society, in single organisations and in complex institutions – as leaders come to recognise the benefits of drawing upon diverse expertise and perspectives. This is linked to the fact that people in societies around the world want to play a more active role in shaping the communities in which they live and are increasingly hesitant to accept ‘leadership from above’ that does not involve a role for ordinary citizen voices. Popular expectations of improvements in quality of life are on the rise, but the ability of traditional institutions such as national governments to deliver seems to be waning. This ‘mismatch’ between present-day challenges and the ability of existing institutions to address them is prompting calls for new and innovative forms of governance and leadership that are more appropriate to current needs.

Third, because of the fragmenting of identities I have talked about above and the increasingly diverse character of many societies, leaders are now in a position where they cannot assume that their ‘followers’ will share the same values, belief systems, language, culture, expectations and outlooks on the world that they do. This greatly complicates the leadership project and demands a deep and ongoing commitment to leadership styles that emphasise dialogue, reaching consensus, building bridges, and valuing difference. Leaders increasingly have to interact with people unlike themselves and to learn to value and use meaningfully the talents and perspectives of people who hail from dissimilar backgrounds.

Let me try to sum up some of the key ‘leadership lessons’ that I think emerge from this discussion of the challenges of a global society:

- » Effective leadership in our global society means bridging boundaries. The boundaries are many and varied. They include not only those differences which are commonly referenced – race, ethnicity, socio-economic standing, gender, sexual orientation and religion – but also things such as age, experience, national origin, language, temperament and world view.
- » Today's problems are exceedingly complex. They demand the efforts of a lot of people from varied backgrounds, who are willing to work together in a deliberate and collaborative way to find innovative solutions.
- » Democratic and participatory forms of leadership need to be embraced. Authoritarian and hierarchical approaches are unsuited to today's challenges and are unlikely to succeed. Leadership can emerge from many places within an organisation or a society, and those forms of leadership that see leaders and followers as dynamically linked in a joint endeavour hold particular promise.



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Leadership is also called into question depending on whether the focus is on changing delivery and implementation, policy or governance.

The first type of change can be said to take place at a micro level, where actions are undertaken with an eye to improving day-to-day realities on the ground. I consider this as change at the level of operations or implementation. Programmes such as those concerned with improving the quality of community in a neighbourhood, workplace or institution of learning, are an example of such change.

The second type of change occurs at the level of policy. It goes beyond simply addressing existing problems and seeks to reform the underlying policies or practices that are responsible for producing the problems in the first place. The efforts of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines typify attempts to influence the policy framework shaping a given issue. By applying pressure to national governments, the campaign succeeded in the adoption of a new, enforceable international convention governing the use of landmines.

The final level of change – the most difficult to bring about – is structural. It concerns institutions of governance and the mechanisms by which macro-level decisions are made. The slow and difficult steps towards reform at the World Bank for example – being driven by leaders both inside and outside the institution – are aimed at this most challenging, yet most influential type of change.

### *Civil society and the challenge of leadership in the coming decade*

I have been struck often, over the years, that even though civil society organisations are primarily working for change, and often substantive and deep change, most civil society organisations are as resistant to change as business and governments in terms of their own internal practice and particularly in how we address and manage power within civil society groups, whether at a local level or globally. Over the last decade, there have been many inspirational and courageous actions taken by civil society organisations, whether they be trade unions, NGOs, faith-based organisations, social movements and others. We have seen this at a local, provincial/state level, nationally, regionally, as well as globally. But when it comes to tough internal changes that are needed, particularly for older and larger organisations, civil society leadership sometimes displays the inability to change as well. I have argued that critical for civil society organisations is that they must break down the barriers, silos and divisions that prevent a more united response to injustice and exclusion.

The unification of the two global trade union federations (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) and some independent unions that belonged to neither, in December of 2006, stands out as one of the few exceptions. The leadership in these different parts of the global trade union movement, were being faced with several challenges: a changing labour market, growth of informal jobs, increasing union-bashing and union-weakening strategies by employers, and much more. They realised that the best chance they would have in the face of new and distinctly different conditions was to make some difficult and challenging decisions about working for greater coherence, coordination and impact, including facing the possibility that some leadership positions might well be made redundant. For me, this trade union unity process was inspirational. Sadly, such examples of working for unity are few and far between. In the NGO community, even though important steps have been taken towards greater unity, much more can and still needs to be done. The future will not be more just, sustainable and inclusive, unless and until NGOs – and particularly international NGOs (INGOs) – seriously and rigorously embrace the challenge issued by Mahatma Gandhi to ‘be the change you wish to see in the world’.

In the decade to come international NGOs must become far better at changing themselves in response to the world around them. This means that we must become far more change-capable: capable of change on the same kind of scale and implemented with the same urgency as the change that we are all advocating should occur in the world and the

change that we are demanding from the world's powers, including not only governments but also the key entities of the international community including the World Bank, the IMF and the UN at large.

The rationale and the demand for this substantial change to the way we organise, and work, and to the way we think, have been with us for years in civil society. The facts are and have been clear, and yet we have not embraced the challenge of change as comprehensively as is needed. It means that our contradictions are still huge. Indeed, all the features, contradictions and opportunities of society at large are found inside so-called civil society.

To be fair, many aspects of the operations of INGOs are the product of forces well beyond our control. For example, economic realities, including the structural disparities embedded even in currency exchange rates, or the political realities of the dominance of the West: these things are far beyond our direct control. But it remains the case that, even as we are calling for the redress of political and economic disparities in the wider world, among INGOs our own organisational arrangements have the same dynamics that we target embedded in our own operations. We are reproducing the very North-South disparities in our governance and financing systems that we campaign against publicly.

The disproportionate internal influence – which is the product of their relative wealth – of INGOs' numerous European and North American branches (and, in some instances, Australian and New Zealand branches) is evident in the priority setting, resources distribution and decision-making processes we follow, and we have to admit that, in the main, this is just as it is in the wider world. In this sense some NGOs, unwittingly, are replicating the same biases built into the very fabric of the world's systems of power.

I am concerned that if, by 2020, INGOs have not challenged this within ourselves and done so decisively through making fundamental change in the way we work, *and particularly in the way we are governed*, then we surely will have also failed fundamentally in our work for change in the world. And this change that we seek is urgent in the context of a 'perfect storm'.

These contradictions between what we work for and how we work are not just the product of thoughtlessness on our part but they do reflect a failure on our part to critically engage with the implications of the contexts in which we operate. I see this in a number of dimensions:

Consider for example, the impacts of the post-9/11 reality. Not commented on frequently, but surely ranked among the most troubling consequences of the way that the world's powers reacted to the events of 9/11, is what we can call the 'curtailment of civic mobility'. Since that time, anyone who 'looks' different from a very narrowly drawn Western stereotype has found their movement across borders drastically curtailed. Delegates to meetings are denied visas. Visa applications have become book-length processes. For many of us, the exercise of our right to transit across borders has become marred by what amounts to racial profiling. This is more than an irritating inconvenience. It comes at serious cost to our participation in international forums, adding to and further entrenching the problem of exclusion already present in our organisational architecture, our decision-making and the forums in which we operate.



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Witness too the speed with which the world's governments worked together to tackle the global financial crisis, which sits atop the flawed global economic system. This exposed just how wealth-centric are the policies that governments promote and protect, at great cost to ordinary people. Think of the cost and the remarkable immediacy of the last 18 months of bank bail-outs. The urgency and scale with which these initiatives were introduced as compared to the appalling inertia of governments' delivery of their promises in respect of poverty reduction and debt relief efforts underscores my point.

Governments are responding to global problems that bring severe local consequences, with attempts at global solutions. But measured in terms of who is advantaged and who is forgotten, these solutions are not robust or sustainable. To be so, they must be contested effectively by global civil society, of which INGOs are leading actors. Yet, while these global dynamics may be change-resistant, they nonetheless tell the story of our own failings as INGOs to achieve change of the needed scale. By 2020, if our claims to global relevance and sustainable impact are to be made more fully genuine and – critically – more palpably effective, we, as INGOs, must have brought our organisational systems and delivery into a truer alignment with our stated goals, including those of inclusion and engagement, and we must have done so on a global scale.

Why? Imagine the not unfeasible prospect of a more genuinely democratically governed World Bank. It is possible that the World Bank will end up with more representative decision-making, reflecting contemporary global-power arrangements, and will do so by incorporating more thoroughly the voices of governments of the South

such as the BRIC countries. In such circumstances, therefore, it is also possible that the INGO community will be found to be well behind these developments. This would be more than unacceptable. So until we have addressed such weaknesses in our own claims to representativeness, the relevance and thus effectiveness of international civil society is open to serious question. This is a matter related to vulnerability in our credibility and it demands our urgent attention.

This means we have to question not only our own approaches to governance but also our staffing arrangements and our operational leadership: until representativeness and inclusion are found among our key drivers, the capacity we exercise to deliver our goals will be seriously hampered.

I understand that these can be painful issues for us to address organisationally, just as the changes we demand of governments and the business sector are painful to make. And, given the aging of larger INGOs, I also understand that our operating cultures are now long-standing, if not even perhaps fossilised or calcified. Arguably, they are now contaminated by their years of experience and their organisational longevity, which are now at some distance from the original inspiration, super-relevance and political dynamism that were key features of their early founding.

If I look at which NGOs are now the most effective, I have to observe that they are those that are travelling light. Most often these effective NGOs are more newly formed – that is, they are younger. They are more responsive, fleet of foot and adaptable. They move quickly because they are not weighed down by the dense, Northern-bound governance systems of the longer-standing NGOs, which simply do not allow real-time decision-making. These newer NGOs are more directly connected to the impacts they have on the ground and can move swiftly in response to opportunity and to feedback, which means they can also recognise and respond to matters of urgency.

For me, this means that the challenge of 2020, and of the preceding years, is not captured by concern with INGOs' continuation or even their sustainability but with their capacity for self-renewal. And with their capacity for re-establishing, even at the cost of things they otherwise hold dear, their relevance – as measured against current external realities rather than by the terms of their past.

One measure of this will be the extent to which INGOs are ready to strengthen and deepen their understanding and embrace of the or-

ganisational and operational implications of the interconnectedness between our various missions. This work has begun of course, being evident in campaigns such as the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP), which brought together, in coalition, a range of otherwise diverse NGOs and other parts of civil society. Likewise, with the Global Campaign for Climate Action, which organised a large part of civil society in the run up to the Copenhagen climate summit. But as we discovered, this was an alliance not of ‘oranges with oranges’ but of a whole bowl of different fruit. And, we find that we are not all well organised for delivery of effective collaboration across, for example, humanitarian aid, development, human rights, environment and so on. While this work of coalition building is tough and challenging it is something that we cannot but avoid; and importantly, the ‘boiling point’ we have reached demands this from the leadership of such movements.



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At the heart of our struggle in the coming decade will be the working assumptions we hold about the nature of social change. It seems extraordinary to me that only one INGO – Greenpeace – engages consistently in civil disobedience. By 2020, we will have changed our understanding of the dynamics of change and reformed our approach to securing change or we will have deteriorated in standing and in the respect we earn. To date, INGOs have sometimes mistaken access for influence. Just as we have sometimes mistaken speaking for being heard.

History teaches us that when facing global challenges – challenges of the magnitude of slavery, apartheid or patriarchy – change comes only when good people stand up, stand out and stand against. Therefore in our campaigns for enduring global change, however strong one organisation – one NGO – is on its own, we can be sure that change will only be won through alliance-building and coalition formation. Organisationally, we have to develop cultures and the personnel that enable these alliances to form and operate effectively despite the things that make us different one from the other. Alliances are not ‘home’: they can and should exist despite the disagreements we have. It means that by 2020 the competencies of compromise and cooperation will be key determinants of our success.

In my view we need to be more honest about the nature of change and to tackle the distortions of organisational form that I believe prevent the NGO community from being truly effective. If we look at our relative expenditure at different levels in the context of the dimensions of changes needed, we can see that most NGOs are spending far more on the micro level of direct or individual services where

the evidence of impact is often immediate than on the meso or macro level. This dimension is very appealing in a donor-led organisation. Most NGOs invest less, and find it hard to measure the outcomes of investing, in the meso level of public advocacy where the impact we seek may be some two to five years away, if achieved at all. The promise of real change – sustainable and enduring impact – is a long-term macro-level project taking perhaps 10 to 25 years. This is the dimension of global mobilisation – which would see fundamental change in public consciousness and public institutions. Here, however, we as NGOs are spending far less – less in terms of effort, money and human resources. It means we are not investing in long-term change but are caught in the change equivalent of a hand-to-mouth existence: ‘effort today, change tomorrow’ is a false formula and we would be politically dishonest not to deal with this.

Our methods of funding, the various income streams we rely on and that we promote – work against investment in the longer term. The consumerism that is afflicting the world at large is also infecting us. The hunger for instant satisfaction that drives consumerism and underpins global capital manifests in our own impatience to demonstrate immediate outcomes and our desire to feed these to donors. By 2020, we need to have built and promoted the case for long-term investment in longstanding change.

This begs the question that we should be asking ourselves: if we as INGOs were setting up today, what would we choose to look like? I am certain that if we could, we would avoid the bureaucracy, privilege and comfort that characterise the organisations we have created. I know, once again, that these are enormously painful things to admit and to change in ourselves. To tackle the inequities in the remuneration systems we operate with as INGOs – which see our staff in the North inevitably far better off than those working in communities living with grave disparity – is painful. But, in the next decade we will have to push past internal discomforts such as this to a more a just solution.

In essence, our job now and in 2020 is to move people. This is the long-term answer to global challenges and the solution to global problems. But it means that while as INGOs we have become global organisations we must emerge in 2020 as genuinely global movements.

For all of this to happen the leadership of all of civil society will be challenged as never before. We will be challenged to innovate new and more dynamic, as well as more participatory and inclusive leadership.

### *A final word*

As stated earlier, the key message of this book is this: if we are to deliver justice, then civic groups must become a lot better at focusing on the many things that unite us, while deciding to respectfully disagree on the finer points of difference between us.

This is a project that will create a variety of challenges for civil society. Challenges that it has faced and overcome before, but given the combined severity of the issues that need to be addressed, these challenges are liable to prove as hard as ever, if not more so. Within civil society we shall have to continue to exercise vigilance, tolerance and an energetic passion for positive change within the societies we inhabit. Civil society, as has been noted, can act as a conscience for the world, and it's up to all of us who constitute civil society to ensure it continues to do so. We need to be aware of our responsibilities as citizens, heeding the lesson to think locally and act globally, as well as to think globally and act locally, so that our contribution can be made to count at a macro, micro and meso level.

I would hope that this volume will support individual and collective efforts around the world, helping the agents and activists of civil society to be aware that they belong to a community which straddles the globe. Often the hardest part of being a campaigner is the sensation of being completely alone in your struggle. Realising that there will be others out there who are facing their own struggles, and whose help might in some way be brought to bear, is more than a mere consolation, it can also prove to be of vital practical importance.

In the end I would hope that, whilst this volume has looked at the crises facing the world, it will also be seen as an optimistic text. There are solutions for the problems we face, we just need to find a way towards realising them. The right kind of leadership can help to achieve this. However, leaders are only as strong as their followers, and in the final count there's an obligation on all of us to do what we can to take up the baton of civil society and change the world for the better. My experiences and the people I have known have convinced me it is possible to bring about the necessary changes, if our energy is harnessed and used towards the right ends, recognising the urgent issues that need to be addressed and acting in collaboration with our brothers and sisters within the space we know as civil society.



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