JASC
JOURNAL of
AWARENESS-BASED
SYSTEMS CHANGE

Volume 6, Issue 1, pp. 17-32

https://doi.org/10.47061/jasc.v6i1.13030
www.jabsc.org

Commentary From the Field

Gardening Alongside Landscaping:

Dispatches on Planetary Governance From a Shifting System

Georgiana Ward-Booth
Multilateral Engagement Lead, Presencing Institute
georgiana.ward-booth@presencing.org

A Different Kind of Conversation

The conversation at the heart of this commentary took place in the same week that the World Economic Forum convened in Davos. The contrast has stayed with me. In the Swiss Alps, ministers and executives gathered to diagnose the fragility of the multilateral order in a formal and performative manner, with all the production values that such gatherings command. Elsewhere, in a quiet digital space stretching across five time zones and geographies across the planet, three senior United Nations Resident Coordinators joined Otto Scharmer and me in a very different kind of exchange—no agenda, no stage, no prescribed conclusion, no institutional script.[1]

[1] The three Resident Coordinators who participated in this dialogue in mid-January 2026 are Allegra Baiocchi, UN Resident Coordinator in Mexico (serving in Costa Rica at the time of the dialogue); Ozonnia Ojielo, UN Resident Coordinator in Ethiopia (serving in Rwanda at the time of

I approach this piece from a particular vantage point. I spent years working within the United Nations system[2] before joining the Presencing Institute (PI). A highlight of my work with PI was to work on the SDG Leadership Labs, an initiative delivered in close collaboration with the UN Development Coordination Office (UNDCO). In these Labs, leaders from across UN entities, as well as local stakeholders, worked together under the stewardship of the country's Resident Coordinator toward greater collective impact on the cross-sector challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals.[3]

From this professional journey, I carry both deep affection for the system and an honest reckoning with its current limits. I know what it costs to hold integrity and courage inside an understandably compliance-driven and complex institution. I also know what it can produce, in its best moments, when the right people are given just enough space to act from their deepest commitments and the institution's leadership is supportive. And across this worldwide institutional architecture, there are many, many leaders with their hearts in exactly the right place and a sturdy willingness to ensure that humanity has a genuine chance at a good future for all. The three United Nations Resident Coordinators at the heart of this commentary are a remarkable and luminous example of that reality: Allegra Baiocchi, Ozonnia Ojielo, and Pauline Tamesis. This piece is, above all, a tribute to their generosity.

What follows is not a report on the state of multilateral governance. It is an act of witness to what I heard in that dialogue, to what it stirred in me, and to what I believe it reveals about where planetary governance is already moving. Direct quotes throughout this article are faithfully drawn from the dialogue, but those from the three Resident Coordinators have been anonymised to preserve the spirit of the confidential, non-performative space in which the conversation took place—one where stories, doubts, and unfinished reflections were explicitly welcomed. The exceptions are those attributed to Otto Scharmer, who co-led the conversation with me.

It is worth noting again that this exchange was held in mid-January 2026. Since then, the institution has continued to move: the reform process has

---

the dialogue); and Pauline Tamesis, UN Resident Coordinator in Viet Nam. The dialogue was co-facilitated with Otto Scharmer, Senior Lecturer at MIT and Founding Chair of the Presencing Institute. All participants reviewed and endorsed this account.

[2] The author spent nearly a decade within the UN system before consulting for the Leadership Branch of the UN Development Coordination Office (UNDCO), supporting Resident Coordinators directly. Since 2022, she has found her home at the Presencing Institute, where she continues to work on the transformation of the UN and multilateralism with the full breadth of the ambition she has long held.

[3] For more information on the SDG Leadership Labs, see Hogg and Hentsch (2024). *UN SDG Leadership Labs: Answering the urgent call for transformational change. Presencing Institute / Field of the Future Blog*. https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/un-sdg-leadership-labs-answering-the-urgent-call-for-transformational-change-0dcb0f07750f

advanced, and significant efforts are underway to translate its highest aspirations into new structures and ways of working. These three Resident Coordinators are among the most committed practitioners of that effort. What this commentary wishes to highlight is not a deficit but a complement: a capacity I call the gardening function, the ability to listen, tend, and enable what is locally alive, which could help the reforms take deep root and translate into lasting culture change.

An extra word on what this piece is not arguing. The UN's landscaping functions—the global frameworks, the binding agreements, and the coordination architectures that make collective action on climate, health, and human rights possible—are not only necessary but irreplaceable. This piece does not argue against those functions. It argues that they have crowded out something equally necessary: the capacity to read soil, to tend conditions, to enable what wants to grow locally rather than deliver what was designed elsewhere. These are not opposites. They are complements, yet the second has been systematically underinvested in, and I feel this is one reason the institution has lost the very vitality and relevance that its landscaping functions depend on. What the dialogue at the heart of this commentary surfaces is that this complementary capacity is not absent from the UN system. It lives in many of its leaders, already and quietly working at its frontiers. The question is whether the institution is learning to recognise it before it loses the people who carry it.

In her painting *Bait Al-Mal* (2019) (Figure 1), the Sudanese artist Kamala Ibrahim Ishag maps her childhood neighbourhood not through streets or boundaries but through bodies joined by tree roots: an organic network of human and plant life, mutually sustaining, simultaneously below and above the surface. No architect designed this map. No planner commissioned it. It is a portrait of how communities actually hold together: through roots that run deeper than any structure built above them, and through a living interdependence that no institutional chart can represent.

***Figure 1**: Bait Al-Mal (2019), oil on canvas (Kamala Ibrahim Ishag). Installation view: States of Oneness, Serpentine South. © Kamala Ibrahim Ishag 2022 (photo by George Darrell, 2022).*

I begin here because I want to name the kind of knowing this piece is attempting. Not a policy analysis. Not a governance audit. Something closer to what Ishag does: a tracing of the roots, what connects people in the global governance sphere, what sustains them, what is actually holding the system alive, and the temerity to imagine potential future evolutions based on it. To do that, we must first understand what was built and what is cracking through its walls.

The Cracking of the Landscaping Paradigm

During our dialogue, one of the three Resident Coordinators said something impossible to ignore: "Frankly, I think as a UN, our main job has been to manage poverty. It hasn't been to support countries in developing." And it appeared this was not disillusionment speaking. It was a very lucid pattern of recognition, born of decades of moving through contexts where the gap between the UN's developmental theory and its practice has been almost unbridgeable. Their sense of "suspended belief" began not with the current moment of geopolitical turbulence but further back: with the discovery that Western democracies were not immune to the polarisation, manipulation, and institutional erosion they had

long positioned themselves to cure in others.[4] "The development model we have articulated post-1945 has not examined what this current context means for development within the UN. Because the UN's reason for being is development, and that's the Global South." Our legitimacy, they argued, rests on whether the Global South still accepts us as a useful presence.

To understand why, we need to look at what was built and what assumptions were quietly poured into its foundations. The post-1945 multilateral development architecture rested on a specific cosmology: that development is a known destination, that its route has been charted, and that international institutions, staffed by experts, accountable to donors and to member states, are its most credible guides. This was, in Arturo Escobar's (2011) terms, not a neutral proposition but a particular historical construction: a way of seeing the world that named its own assumptions as universal truths and exported them accordingly. What development discourse called progress, many in the Global South experienced as the enclosure of their own futures: their knowledge systems dismissed, their governance traditions overwritten, their relationship to land and community reframed as obstacles to modernisation. The roots of this logic run deeper than 1945, back to the early modern enclosures that erased relational, land-based ways of knowing across Europe, replacing stewardship with ownership, tending with extraction, and the persecution of the guardians of this other way of being—predominantly women.[5]

For decades, this cosmology held. It organised budgets, careers, evaluation frameworks, and the language through which entire societies were asked to understand their own futures. And then, slowly, as the Resident Coordinators in this dialogue noted, it began to crack.

And the cracking of an old cosmology is not only a crisis. It is also a clearing. Indeed, as all three Resident Coordinators in the dialogue remarked that the reform of the UN development system was, and still is, at the very core of the institutional reform process started by the current UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, in 2017.[6] For example, the Cooperation Framework, one of the institution's most recent planning tools through which UN country teams organise their collective support to a country's development priorities, was designed precisely to follow a new logic: to begin with national context, to listen

[4] Among the events named are Brexit, the 2016 U.S. election, the Panama Papers, and the speed with which OECD countries produced tax transparency rules for Europe while the same conversation was suppressed in the Global South.

[5] For a compelling argument, see Federici (2004).

[6] The reform process began in 2017 when Secretary-General António Guterres proposed a set of reforms to the UN development system. These were formally mandated by General Assembly Resolution A/RES/72/279 on 31 May 2018, with implementation beginning on 1 January 2019 and additional reforms being currently discussed.

to what the place is asking for, and to build collective responses around locally defined priorities rather than siloed UN agency mandates.[7]

Many of the SDG Leadership Labs curated by the Presencing Institute, in which all three Resident Coordinators participated, were developed around this tool, using it as a living laboratory for exactly the kind of collaborative, place-based governance this piece advocates. The question the institution has not yet fully answered is how to cultivate the leadership culture needed to use the tool in this intended way–especially as other incentives in the UN system are going in the opposite direction. It is indeed both unfortunate and unsurprising that, as these new tools are tested, some of the more performative and extractive logics persist across the system.[8] Changing the underlying mindset, the system's incentives, and its organisational culture is what will really support a shift towards the UN's gardening function.

During the dialogue, one participant coined a phrase I have not been able to set aside: "institutional gaslighting", the practice of projecting an aspirational future while refusing to speak honestly about how hard the present actually is. "Stop being so performative," they said, addressing an imagined institutional audience. "Sit down and have really uncomfortable conversations that people want to have. They want to talk about hard, difficult moments." The people most hungry for that honesty, this Resident Coordinator had found, were the communities the UN most struggles to reach and yet most want to serve: those who had lived through enough broken promises to recognise the illusion of performance, and who needed to hear not that everything would be fine, but that someone was willing to sit with the painful truth.

Visiting Indigenous territories where communities had spent decades fighting simply for the right to determine their own development, one of these Resident Coordinators arrived with the habitual UN instinct: to bring something, to offer solutions. But they soon realised that their leadership posture needed a profound adjustment. These communities did not want to be abandoned, but rather to be deeply respected and not preached to: "Give me my rights. I want to be the one to decide what development is for me. I can feed myself. I know which stars to plant by. I know which harvest to defer. I have been doing this since before you arrived with your indicators."

The conclusion this Resident Coordinators drew is worth sitting with: "We are not here to bring something [...] We are here to enable something that is locally grown." In this commentary, I argue that this sentence, if taken seriously,

[7] General Assembly Resolution A/RES/72/279 of 31 May 2018 — "Repositioning of the United Nations development system in the context of the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system".

[8] See the *System-wide evaluation on progress towards a "new generation of United Nations country teams"*: https://www.un.org/system-wide-evaluation-office/en/system-wide-evaluation-progress-towards-new-generation-united-nations-country-teams

could reorganise the entire logic of multilateral development cooperation. Indeed, it already points toward a different paradigm: one that listens before it speaks, that tends rather than delivers, that trusts the soil rather than imposes the design. This is the highest aspiration of the UN development system reform in action.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), whose work on Indigenous ecological knowledge illuminates what this different paradigm might feel like from the inside, writes:

> Action on behalf of life transforms. Because the relationship between self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us. (p. 340)

The Audacity of Purpose

There are moments in governance work when the textbook runs out. The three leaders in this dialogue have each stood at moments when the situation and the institution's deepest *raison d'être* demanded more than the procedure allowed.

One described a moment of sudden political crisis: one of those compressed, clarifying instants when a system hangs in the balance and the mandate offers no instruction. What the moment required was not authorisation. It required presence: a voice, a call for calm, a public appeal to national actors to choose dialogue over escalation. The action was taken without waiting for permission. The situation moved toward resolution. Yet the first institution's response focused on whether the action had been authorised, not on its quality or its results. Although that is what ultimately mattered and what was, afterwards, praised.

Another described navigating a situation where embodying the UN's own human rights commitments put them at direct risk. When they turned to the institution for support, the response fell short of what the moment required. Not much guidance, not much solidarity. And, as it happens, the gap between what the UN says it stands for and what it does when that stance costs something, was quietly absorbed by the person caught in the middle.

What strikes me, holding these experiences alongside each other, is not the institutional tension they reveal, though that tension is real. It is the quality of leadership they showcase: a capacity to read a living system in real time, to sense what the moment was asking for, and to respond from that sensing. To act from the emerging future rather than the inherited past:[9] from an open mind that sees what is actually present, an open heart that is genuinely moved by it, and an

[9] See Scharmer and Kaufer (2013), especially the framework of open mind, open heart, and open will as the three instruments of inner knowing.

open will that commits to act from that movement rather than from a procedure written elsewhere for a different time. As Otto Scharmer observed while witnessing these stories unfolding in the dialogue, "What you did was attending to the situation and embodying the purpose of the UN, and to do so you had to deviate from procedural rules and actually act on your ethical intuition."

This is not recklessness. It is closer to its opposite: a disciplined attentiveness that is possible only because these leaders, like many others in the system, know the structure intimately. They have internalised every mandate, every procedure, every institutional expectation. And it is precisely that deep knowledge, coupled with a deep connection to their purpose, that enables them to depart from it when the situation demands. They do not abandon the score. They play the solo that the score, in that moment, makes necessary.

This is the paradox that good leaders hold all the time, and that these three Resident Coordinators reminded me of with particular grace. Not procedure or improvisation. Not compliance or courage. Both, simultaneously, in dynamic and responsive tension. Researchers such as Harrison (2017), who have studied jazz improvisation as a model for organisational leadership, describe this as exploring the spaces between the notes, where creative interpretation meets and responds to uncertainty and unpredictability:

> The response to an ever-changing future is improvisation, redirecting emphasis to the spaces between the notes, to see music-as-performance as more than just the sequence of notes on the score. It is, rather, a dynamic, interpretative, creative process that engages both performer and audience. (p. 90)

The jazz musician who can improvise is not the one who has abandoned the music of the piece being played. It is the one who has gone deepest into its essence, its purpose, and, from there, learned to listen for what the moment was asking beyond what has already been written.

What the institution may sometimes misread as overreach, a jazz ensemble calls the solo. And what makes the solo possible is not individual brilliance or connection to purpose alone. It is the quality of the ensemble: the shared language, the mutual trust, and the capacity to hold each other while one of you steps into the unknown.

Which raises the question this chapter has been building toward: what would it look like for an institution to genuinely cultivate this kind of individual and collective leadership? What if the key question for UN80[10] was what it would mean to renew an institution around its most purposeful, courageous people, honouring them as its most valuable asset and cultivating them accordingly?

[10] UN80 refers to the United Nations' 80th anniversary reform process, launched in 2025, which seeks to adapt the institution's architecture to contemporary global challenges.

It would recognise ethical improvisation as a form of intelligence. It would have a way of saying, retrospectively, "you were right," and meaning it, structurally, in career terms and institutional culture. It would treat failure, the kind that comes from trying something new in service of the mission, as data rather than as a verdict. It would build incentives that truly support collaboration and listening to what the moment—and the audience—calls to creatively shape together. And it would understand that the people closest to the situation are, in almost every case, the ones best positioned to hear it, read it and play with it. And, last but not least, it would build peer support and spaces for the renewal of purpose into the design of leadership roles.

The Richness of the Underground

What the musicians find in the spaces between performances, these three leaders have often found in the margins of their official roles. One of the Resident Coordinators offered one of the most honest accounts of what it actually takes to keep going. "I will not sugarcoat this. Maybe it's not politically correct. […] The peer support comes first: reaching out to trusted colleagues not to escalate or report, but simply to be heard. It's not even about what you do. It's about somebody listening to you, empathising, and making you feel that you're not a failure."

For example, naming a self-sustained network of women Resident Coordinators, anchored in mutual trust and the human necessity of not being alone in difficulty, one of the Resident Coordinators commented: "It is incredible to think how much that has helped many of us work through our anxiety and our despair."

On top of peer support, there are the individual's inner practices: prayer, meditation, and physical movement, all directed at resting their deep attention on the question that matters, "Why do I do this and why does it matter?" And family, not as comfort but as a compass: "I need to show my sons that there is a better future that we're working towards and I can't give up."

A third named, with dark humour and evident feeling, the personal toll the role exacts, and the accumulated weight of weeks spent holding complexity with limited support. And when a crisis strikes, the system moves on quickly, with little space for grief or processing. "It can be a very lonely job, and the system's mechanisms for emotional and psychological support have not yet caught up with the demands of the role."

And yet these same people, often working ahead of institutional guidance, are the source of the UN's most generative responses to the moment. Innovations that headquarters later celebrate frequently originated not from any directive but from the leaders' own reading of what the situation required.

I sit with these details because I do not want to move past them quickly. Here are three of the most experienced, committed, intellectually serious people the UN system has produced. And much of what sustains them is not entirely

invisible to the institution they serve nor specifically accounted for—or substantially invested in.

There is a concept recently developed by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer (2025) that feels precise here: *social soil*. The invisible substrate of relationship, trust, and shared meaning from which genuine institutional life grows. Like ecological soil, it accumulates slowly, through the layering of honest conversations, mutual vulnerability, and the willingness to be present to one another's actual experience. And, like ecological soil, it is largely invisible until it disappears, at which point nothing grows.

The peer community is social soil. The calls at crisis moments are social soil. The daily practices of returning to purpose are social soil. They are what keeps this institution capable of responding: not only the strategic frameworks, nor the coordination mechanisms, but the living web of relationships that a number of committed people have quietly cultivated, season after season, in the spaces between the notes. The institution has not necessarily designed this. In many ways, it has not even noticed it. And, deepening the inquiry from the previous chapter, the question that arises is one of the most important in any governance reform conversation: what would it mean to recognise this, to tend it, to nourish it, to let it spread?

This is not merely a question of well-being programmes, though those matter. It is a deeper question about what governance actually is and where it actually lives. When one participant declared, "I serve at the pleasure of we the people of the UN"—not the procedure, not the hierarchy, not the donor, but the people—they were articulating a theory of accountability that is relational rather than bureaucratic, rooted in the living situation rather than in a framework designed elsewhere. And when, at the close of our conversation, another simply thanked us for "a safe thinking space that we sorely need", something became visible that no reform document has yet named: the hunger, among the UN's most courageous leaders, for exactly the kind of space that nourishes the quality of the social soil. The space to think. The space to doubt. The space to feel each other. To shift our attention towards what truly matters. The space that is intentionally non-performative, where improvisation is welcomed and celebrated. The space where the culture that will shape the institution's future is woven. The space to plant, as one put it, "a seed, a little seed that maybe we'll never see grow. But it doesn't matter. We've put the seed."

This is cathedral thinking in action (Krznaric, 2020), the quiet commitment to planting for futures one will never inhabit, to tending for hands one will never meet. These leaders are not only sustaining themselves through the underground. They are, in the very act of doing so, building the relational foundations that the next generation of governance practitioners will inherit, whether the institution notices or not.

These are not marginal departures from the institutional model. They are the seeds of what the institutional model most needs to become, and what it probably was at its inception. And something more: they are a living rehearsal

for it. The quality of listening, trust and mutual recognition that these leaders practice in these “informal spaces” is precisely the relational grammar that planetary governance needs at scale.

Krishnamurti (1950) argued that "action has meaning only in relationship; without understanding relationship, action on any level will only breed conflict. The understanding of relationship is infinitely more important than the search for any plan of action" (para. 1). The understanding of the relationship comes first. Everything else follows from it.

This is what the three leaders we held the dialogue with know in their bones. The question is whether the institution can learn it too, before the soil it has not tended runs out. And one of them, with quiet encouragement, noted that the institution is indeed beginning to move in this direction. Twenty-four Resident Coordinators have been invited to serve as a sounding board for senior leadership on the UN’s most recent reform agenda: a tentative but real signal that the system is beginning to listen to those closest to the ground.

It is worth sitting with both what this signals and the honest question it raises. Twenty-four voices out of a global system of thousands is a beginning, not a transformation. And consultation, however genuine, is not the same as a cultural shift from an institution that asks “have we delivered the framework?” to one that asks “have we tended the conditions?”, “How can the institution support you so that you can tend better?” This shift has to be nurtured with the same intentionality required by any top-down process. And frankly, it’s harder. It requires the institution to change not only its structures but its habits of attention, its relationship to failure, and its willingness to be surprised by what grows when it loosens its grip. None of that is easy. All of it is possible.

The Desire Lines of Planetary Governance

We asked the three UN Resident Coordinators where, through their work in the various corners of the planet they had served in, they had observed or sensed the future of democracy and governance already being enacted. They answered with a clarity and specificity that no policy document could replicate.

In one context, the youth that polite institutional discourse had written off as disengaged were showing up. Three weeks before a presidential election, the very people who had said they didn’t care, who dismissed all politicians as corrupt, and who had refused to participate, were doing something very different. “They are starting to say, come on, guys, we have to go vote. Who do we vote for? Let’s look at the data. Let’s fact-check presidential debates. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” Nobody organised this from above. It grew from accumulated anger and an impatience with a political culture that had stopped listening to the texture of their lives. The Resident Coordinator did not lead this movement. “How have we been able not to lead it at all, but to support it,” they reflected, “being that force that holds space for dialogue?” That is a different verb. And a different theory of governance.

In another context, a country undergoing deliberate structural transformation offered an unexpected lesson about what the UN's role might yet become. "From anxiety to ambition," one described, watching a government set its vision, restructure its institutions, and move with coherence toward a future it had defined for itself. "Seeing the role of the UN in how middle powers can also be the platform for the Global South and the multi-polar world to show how multilateralism works in this era." Not the expert arriving with solutions. The platform through which a country's own ambition enters a global conversation as something other than a recipient. To echo rather than speak over. To make visible rather than to deliver.

And across the African continent, something is stirring that one participant described with evident feeling: "The gloves are off in terms of a reconceptualisation of what development should mean for Africa." An emerging space for intellectuals, leaders, academics and practitioners to articulate an alternative development discourse—not as political resistance but as conceptual reclamation. "How do their people understand development? How do their people relate? What does it mean for you now?" And the financing question is reframed entirely: Africa invests 1.8 trillion dollars annually in European sovereign wealth and pension funds. "Imagine if you put those funds back in Africa." The resources for a radically different kind of development already exist. What is being painstakingly built is the conceptual soil in which they might one day be deployed on different terms. And the role of the UN in this? To create a space, to provide the analytics and data they need and want, without controlling how they are used. It is up to them to decide whether the UN framework on governance and development works for them, and whether they want to modify it.

What is remarkable, looking across these examples and what was surfaced in the preceding chapter, is that the *inner* governance logic practised in the less formal spaces of the UN system is not separate from what is emerging in the outer field of planetary governance. It is the same logic, operating at different scales. The peer community that holds leaders through crisis without hierarchy or procedure. The space created for a presidential candidate to speak to anger rather than perform hope. The platform offered to a continent to articulate its own development vision. The youth movement held rather than led. These are not coincidentally similar. They share a grammar: relational rather than transactional, enabling rather than delivering, rooted in the living situation rather than in a framework designed elsewhere. The UN, in its most courageous informal registers, is already practising what the outer field most needs.

These are not success stories. They are emergences: desire lines worn into the ground by people who decided not to wait for the official path. They share an orientation: place-based, beginning with listening, treating local knowledge as foundational rather than supplementary, and oriented toward enabling rather than delivering.

The South African artist Igshaan Adams has spent years weaving desire lines into tapestries: the informal paths worn into the grass of apartheid-era

Cape Town, between communities the state had designed to be separate (Figure 2). Collective mappings of where people actually moved, as distinct from where they were told to go. The desire line, in his work, is both record and possibility: evidence of a different geography already being enacted, underfoot, every day.

Figure 2. Heideveld (2021), Igshaan Adams. Installation view, Blank Projects, Cape Town. © Igshaan Adams (photo by Mario Todeschini).

The question, therefore, grows wider: can the institution choose to cultivate these desire lines not only in its interiority, but as the animating principle of its presence in the world? And what is the right posture to do so? The answer, I want to suggest, lies in the wisdom of the gardener.

Toward a Gardening Practice

A gardener does not impose a blueprint on the soil. A gardener reads the soil: its texture, its history, its particular hungers and resistances. A gardener tends conditions—moisture, light, the right companions, sufficient space—and then watches closely for what wants to grow.

This is a profoundly different orientation from multilateral governance as it has predominantly operated: top-down design first, then implementation; global framework first, then local participation; mandate first, then situation. The gardener's logic inverts this sequence. Situation first. What wants to grow here? What conditions does it need? What do I bring that might genuinely help, and what might I withhold, knowing that my presence can also crowd the light?

Each of the three Resident Coordinators here quoted, like many others in the organisation, had already arrived at this orientation. We have heard it in their words throughout these pages: in the insistence that we are here to enable something locally grown, not to bring something externally designed; in the commitment to holding space for a country's own vision rather than delivering a framework from elsewhere; in the readiness to be a platform for ambition rather than an arbiter of outcomes. These are not three personal philosophies. They are the embodiment of the UN's efforts to reform in pursuit of its highest aspirations. They are a convergent, field-tested insight: that the most durable governance contributions emerge not from the imposition of frameworks but from the patient cultivation of conditions—relational, institutional, epistemic—in which local intelligence can surface, connect, and act.[11]

Governance practised as presencing looks less like institutional machinery and more like ecological attunement. Less like a master plan and more like compost: the patient, unglamorous, absolutely necessary work of creating conditions in which new—or ancestral—life becomes possible. What the institution must now ask itself, through UN80 and beyond, is not only how to restructure its architecture, but how to recognise, resource, and protect the people who are already embodying the practice that will enable new paradigms of democracy and global governance to emerge—those who are already gardening.

This is not a call to dismantle the institution's coordination, measurement, and framework functions. Those are load-bearing. It is a call to cultivate, with equal intentionality, the complementary capacity that makes those functions come alive in the world: the capacity to listen before speaking, to tend before delivering, to enable what is locally alive rather than impose what was globally designed. An institution that does both—that landscapes where shared architecture is needed and gardens where local intelligence is ready to germinate—would be not only more relevant but structurally more capable of addressing the power imbalances that its current model perpetuates. Because gardening, practised seriously, redistributes agency. It places knowledge and ownership with those closest to the soil. It creates conditions in which development, governance, and democracy are not done to people but grow with them and from them. This is what a genuinely transformed UN could look like. Not smaller. Not dismantled. But differently alive.

The challenge is not whether this is possible, nor whether the institution aims at this, although not as radically as some would wish. It is a matter of whether there is political will to make it happen and make it happen systemically and deeply. "The challenge that we face is how to expand this group? How do you expand that cohort of innovators to become much more

[11] Scharmer and Pomeroy (2024) begin to theorise what they term "fourth-person knowing": the capacity to sense and act from what the social field itself is asking for, beyond individual or collective intention. This dialogue offers vivid field-based evidence of that capacity.

mainstream than the exception?" The answer lies not in finding more exceptional individuals, but in building the conditions, the culture, in which this quality of leadership can become ordinary, expected, and, above all, held and supported.

"Just take away the leash," one of the dialogue participants said. "Allow us some degree of imagination. We will be able to come up with amazing opportunities and options to support our member states and the people." And allow them to model, as they are already doing, the culture they wish they had been held in: one that tolerates failure, rewards curiosity, trusts people who act from purpose rather than procedure, and never confuses the map with the territory it is trying to describe. This is the only possible culture that will sustain the flourishing of democracy and a new planetary governance paradigm.

As Otto Scharmer remarked at the close of our dialogue, the three Resident Coordinators had been "creating and nurturing and fostering the seeds of the future, out of which future governance will grow"—and in coming together they had made "these seeds visible not only to ourselves, but to all the other fellow travellers on this journey towards new forms of governance, in which the UN will not be the only, but one of the key players that will be helpful for shaping these new forms."

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy of northeastern North America has long held that decisions carry responsibility toward the seventh generation hence, while equally honouring the wisdom of the ancestors who came before (Rick Hill Sr., as cited in WXXI Public Broadcasting Council, n.d.). The gardening practice this piece points toward asks the same of the UN: to look forward while reconnecting with what the seed bank already carries. Some forms of locally rooted, relationally sustained governance were never lost. They were buried

. And presencing, at its deepest, is precisely this meeting point: between the ancestral wisdom held in the soil and the future that wants to germinate from it. And the awareness that there is not a single gardener, but many, and that the most successful are the ones able to stand at that threshold, tending both directions at once while collaborating with each other.

Some of the seeds planted today will be tended by hands we will never meet, in seasons we will not live to see. It is how living systems work, and how the most enduring forms of governance have always worked, long before the architects arrived. The question is only whether we are willing to plant in this communal spirit and, finally, whether we can learn to nourish and trust the soil.

Amongst other things, the Resident Coordinators at the centre of this commentary and many other leaders across the system are restoring public trust in one of the most invaluable infrastructures of planetary governance available at present. They trust the institution. They uphold its highest purpose and future potential. And I would like to trust that the institution will increasingly trust them to steward its reform from within. As one of them quietly observed: "As a Resident Coordinator, one of the most important contributions I can make is to build trust. Trust in the institution, trust within leadership and UN

Country Teams, trust among all partners. Without trust, seeds of hope land on barren ground."

To observe a wildflower emerging from unexpected territories, sense the ecosystem it carries, and seal its strength in long-term memory: that is my version of freedom. And I believe it is also, quietly, the future of democracy and governance.

References

Adams, I. (2022). *Desire Lines* [Exhibition]. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, United States.

Escobar, A. (2011). *Encountering development: The making and unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press.

Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation*. Autonomedia.

Harrison, R. T. (2017). Leadership, leadership development and all that jazz. *Leadership*, *13*(1), 81–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715016681120

Hogg, K., & Hentsch, R. (2024, March 28). UN SDG Leadership Labs: Answering the urgent call for transformational change. *Field of the Future Blog*. https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/un-sdg-leadership-labs-answering-the-urgent-call-for-transformational-change-0dcb0f07750f

Ishag, K. I. (2019). *Bait Al-Mal* [Oil on canvas]. Serpentine Gallery, London, England.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Krishnamurti, J. (1950, January 22). *Relationship* [Radio talk, 2nd radio talk, Colombo, Ceylon]. Krishnamurti Foundation. https://jkrishnamurti.org/

Krznaric, R. (2020). *The good ancestor: How to think long term in a short-term world*. WH Allen.

Scharmer, C. O., & Kaufer, K. (2013). *Leading from the emerging future: From ego-system to eco-system economies*. Berrett-Koehler.

Scharmer, C. O., & Kaufer, K. (2025). *Presencing: 7 practices for transforming self, society, and business*. Berrett-Koehler.

Scharmer, C. O., & Pomeroy, E. (2024). Fourth person: The knowing of the field. *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change, 4*(1), 19–48. https://doi.org/10.47061/jasc.v4i1.7909

WXXI Public Broadcasting Council. (n.d.). *Seven generations: The role of chief*. PBS. https://www.pbs.org/warrior/content/timeline/opendoor/roleOfChief.html