

Peer Review Article

Harnessing Dialogue as a Social Technology for Systems Change in Development Institutions

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Abstract

Across global development discourse and practice can be seen a growing a recognition that deep transformation of social, economic and ecological systems cannot be achieved through new policies, data or technology alone. The capabilities needed for twenty-first century leadership and governance relate to the ability to create new conditions, relationships and pathways for social and moral imagination to flourish. Drawing from an in-depth case study of several interlinked initiatives of the United Nations Development Programme to build such capabilities among development practitioners, this conceptual paper elaborates the continued need for, and pathways and barriers to institutionalizing, more dialogic and process-based approaches to systems transformation in mainstream development processes. It posits that a reconceptualization of dialogue within multilateral and government-led systems transformation frameworks in particular can help valorize the seeds of development impact that reside in the sites where culture, relationships and

shared consciousness are built. Further learning is needed, however, to understand and address barriers that lie in normative perceptions, organizational culture, and accountability frameworks of these institutions, which impede the rhetorical interest in inclusive and transformative dialogue from translating to more process- and relationship-centric ways of working. As a contribution to this learning, the paper considers how conceptual frames that give weight and visibility to the role of social containers in systems change processes, with dialogue as a core technology for container-building, can help advance more transformative development paradigms and praxis that tend to the reciprocal relationship between inner change and societal change.

Keywords

systems change, dialogue, global development, systems leadership, relational systems change

Introduction

In this final decade of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the achievement of which was premised on a radical coming together of all nations, sectors, and communities, more global development attention has turned to the question of what kinds of processes actually enable the ways of thinking and working required for this integration. This can be seen in governments, multilateral, and other development institutions convening discourse on the future of governance (e.g. World Bank, n.d.; Johar & Bergovic, 2020), undertaking experimentation with innovative methods for working with systems and complexity (Annala et al., 2021)¹ and engaging with initiatives that acknowledge the significance of inner development for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).² Whether sparked by deliberate reflection or a forced reckoning with historical blind spots as new forms of insecurity unfold in this age of the Anthropocene and looming polycrisis, more openings have emerged across traditional development spheres to interrogate existing modes of operating and test alternatives. For the most part, this hasn't led to a rejection of the foundational enablers of systems transformation long articulated in global and national development strategies—e.g., co-creation, participatory mechanisms, effective collaborative action, multi-stakeholder partnerships, transparent institutions, innovation—but rather, a deeper examination of the gaps that

¹ See also this list for global government innovation labs: <https://apolitical.co/pages/government-innovation-lab-directory>

² For example, the Inner Development Goals: <https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org/about/> and Conversations on Rethinking Development: <https://council.science/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Conversations-on-Rethinking-Human-Development.pdf>

persist between what we value in theory and where and how we invest our attention and resources in practice.

One aspect of this inquiry that the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the UN more broadly (Hentsch, n.d.), has increasingly explored pertains to the question of what counts as development impact and what forms of innovation and learning are most critical to progress, if the deepest leverage points for change lie in the mindsets and paradigms that give rise to systems (Meadows, 1999). In some spaces, this has prompted renewed examination of the kinds of dialogue processes that can serve as bridges between individual or inner transformations, and work to transform policies and structures in pursuit of social, economic, and ecological regeneration.

This paper draws conceptual inferences from an in-depth case study, framed by my own positionality as both participant and co-designer, of several interlinked UNDP initiatives to build development practitioners' capabilities to lead systems change in ways that give primacy to the role of inner transformation and relationships. Complementing lived experience with theory, it primarily elaborates the continued need for, and pathways and barriers to, mainstreaming more dialogic- and process-based approaches to systems change in multilateral and governmental ways of working. It is premised on the notion that bringing greater attention to the seeds of development impact that reside in the sites where culture, relationships, and shared consciousness are built can create new opportunities for shifts at the level of *how* as much as the *what* of sustainable development, which is necessary for deep change amidst the complexities of 21st century challenges. Situating more learning and value in the dialogue process itself—particularly the ways bureaucratic development institutions build the social containers for shared being and thinking—can help cultivate a development praxis responsive to the reciprocal relationships between internal change and societal and structural change.

The paper builds from a recognition that while many theories and rationale for dialogic based change models and forms of leadership (Isaacs, 1993; Pruitt & Waddell, 2005) exist—as section IV discusses—a key question persists: why have the ideas behind such models remained largely on the periphery of government and multilateral-led development praxis, or applied only to certain development domains and policy challenges? The core analysis in section V explores the value of situating dialogue outcomes against imperatives for systems change, as a way to confront conceptual barriers to the institutionalization of process-oriented development approaches in these contexts. It is organized into four paradigm shifts to bridge divides between systems change theory and development as traditionally practiced by mainstream development institutions, from: 1) linear delivery orientation, to shared meaning making and relationship orientation; 2) immediately moving in systems, to seeing the assumptions behind our directions of travel; 3) reliance on 'objective' or 'neutral' data, to understanding the role of power in knowledge systems and construction of neutral truths; 4) identifying the 'right' technical solutions, to co-creating the wisdom and capabilities that

enable continuous learning. Insights from UNDP’s awareness-based dialogue experiments are included in each shift as examples of effects that can arise from initiatives that *reposition where and how development actors perceive and leverage generative dialogue as a foundational technology for systems change*. Section VI considers some pathways to address persisting cultural and normative barriers that limit governments’ and multilateral institutions’ ability to move from rhetorical appreciation of dialogue to transformations in their core business models based on dialogic change paradigms.

Methodology

The primary data comes from a series of four interconnected global UNDP initiatives—described in detail in section III—conducted in partnership with the Presencing Institute since 2020 to build development practitioners’ literacy in awareness-based systems transformation.³ These virtual dialogue and practice spaces consisted of:

1. Two global dialogue series that helped practitioners to explore the potential of awareness-based collective action to improve development outcomes. The first, a Summer Dialogue Series between June-September 2020 consisted of four dialogues and drew more than 1,000 UN personnel from every region and diverse job profiles. A Transforming Systems Dialogue Series in January-June 2021 built from this with five sessions applying the same principles to the core questions of the 2020/21 Human Development Report (HDR), as a point of focus for co-inquiry into mechanisms for systems transformation.
2. An application-based four-month action learning lab (hereafter referred to as the Action Learning Lab) in 2021, which selected some 400 practitioners from seven UN entities and diverse development contexts, as both individuals and teams, to apply awareness-based systems change approaches to better navigate either specific development challenges of their choosing with governments and other partners or internal institutional change opportunities.
3. A similarly structured five-month leadership certificate (hereafter referred to as the Leadership Certificate) in 2022 tailored to senior leaders, with a first cohort of 35 heads of UNDP Country Offices mainly in South America and Africa, that supported them to cultivate and apply

³ Various definitions of awareness-based systems change/transformation exist; for this paper, it is useful to consider that of Koenig et al. (2023, p. 3), which frames it as a change theory or model that sees the basis of systemic change as “changed relationships,” and that attending to the quality of “inner-outer relationships” is the means by which we “create the conditions [...] for the relational changes that undergird systems change.”

systems leadership capabilities to their organizational and/or policy challenges with partners.

4. A three-month co-design process with participants of the senior leaders' Leadership Certificate, to connect the principles and methods of the course with efforts to engage government, civil society, private sector, academia, and other stakeholders in more transformative policy dialogues inspired by the 2021/22 HDR.

A mix of methods were used to gather insights from these, including UNDP-led post-session reflections among facilitators and designers of the processes, feedback surveys of participants, and real-time reflections on experiences in the programmes elicited as part of the sessions themselves. For the largest initiative, the Action Learning Lab, a team of learning scientists from Parsons School of Design conducted design-based research to learn from participants' experiences of what capabilities—mindsets, skills and perceptions—are required to lead and transform systems. They deployed a range of methods over the four months including qualitative and quantitative data baseline data collection through a survey, semi-structured in-depth interviews to understand the emotional and behavioural effects on participants and their work, and two design-led workshops with small groups. The synthesized insights in this paper reflect the feedback from all four initiatives, while the direct quotes come namely from the Action Learning Lab and Leadership Certificate surveys, focus groups and anonymized real-time reflections from live sessions. They therefore represent the views of a diverse mix of UNDP and other UN participants from varied job functions, levels of seniority, and geographies.

My own positionality is important to highlight here as an additional lens for the data analysis and an acknowledgment of the links between internal and external transformation (Wamsler et al., 2021) which is intrinsic to the learning process. This includes, at different phases, engagement as a UNDP participant, an observer and learning codifier, and a co-designer and coordinator, further informed by nearly a decade of work in diverse UN contexts. At the same time, the analysis is shaped by my personal experiences of the transformative potential of dialogue models from non-UN or professional spheres, including voluntary and faith-based domains for collective decision-making and action. This includes involvement in Bahá'í-inspired community building processes, as well as engagement with voluntary informal staff-led initiatives within UNDP to build new culture and consciousness on issues of antiracism and decoloniality. These processes often stood in stark contrast to multilateral and government processes I had observed with similar end goals. They were characterized in particular by a primacy ascribed to building meaningful human relationships grounded in care, a commitment to the creation of spaces that enable seeing and understanding others' overreaching set goals, and not separating the 'spiritual' or intangible dimensions of change from conversations about material, economic, or social change. The UNDP case examined in this paper was the first example I had witnessed of these same dialogue qualities and outcomes, often found in non-

governmental, community-led processes, being applied at large scale in the UN under the frame of systems transformation. The value latent in bridging these different worlds, mirrored by my own experiences straddling two distinct paradigms for change, is among the inquiries that inform this analysis.

The Case Study: Unlocking Systems Capabilities Through Awareness-based Dialogues in UNDP

As noted, the direct quotes and experiential insights that are the grounding for this paper reflect synthesized learning from a series of interlinked UNDP initiatives. This section provides background on some key features of these spaces and the approaches that underpinned them.

The Initial Experiments

In 2020, the chaos and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 and the UN and governments' degree of readiness to brace its consequences sparked deeper reflections in UNDP on what it takes to move beyond fixing what is broken in existing systems, to instead work in ways that might better create the conditions for new systems to emerge, founded on shared values and solidarity. This overarching question led UNDP's SDG Integration team to partner with the Presencing Institute to co-create several action learning initiatives, starting with a dialogue series in the summer of 2020, which invited practitioners to experiment with more mindful, relational, self-reflective, and systemic ways of leading collective action amidst complexity and uncertainty. These dialogue-based capability building processes were premised on helping development actors expand their *transformation literacy* with an underlying hypothesis that transformational change cannot arise without first cultivating the ability to tap into the power of one's own *awareness* and forge a more collective consciousness.

The virtual learning spaces that followed from this initial experiment, as highlighted under Methodology, took several additional forms including: 1) a second dialogue series with a more applied focus, drawing in particular from the HDR to help practitioners explore the relationship between awareness-based methods for understanding and working with systems, and the nature of complex development challenges in the age of the Anthropocene; 2) A four-month action learning lab for practitioners to deep dive into the practices through testing them on the specific development challenges they were working on with partners or internally; and 3) A similarly structured five-month leadership certificate tailored to senior leaders, with a focus on developing skills for systems leadership.

Each of these learning spaces were grounded in methodologies from Theory U, which is a framework for systems change that supports leaders to collectively develop awareness of the "inner places from which [they] operate," based on the notion that all social action comes into being from this source place (Scharmer, 2009, p. 101). It offers a model for learning and acting "from the future as it

emerges,” which means identifying solutions for change based on visions of future potential and discovering what works through iterative experimentation (Scharmer, 2009, p. 97). This approach turns the focus of change processes to source dimensions of change, such as the “structures of attention” in a system, which shape how people perceive future possibility, and the quality of the “social field,” which Scharmer describes as the quality of relationships that give rise to practical results (Scharmer, 2009, pp. 100–101). The framework draws from a range of disciplines including action research and organizational learning, design thinking, mindfulness, and civil society movements.

Bringing in their own development policy or organizational challenges, participants worked through Theory U principles and approaches, which support a process to co-initiate intentions for change, co-sense to better understand their systems from the whole, connect to their source of highest potential, and co-create their visions of the future through action and network-building. The Action Learning Lab and Leadership Certificate included three-hour monthly workshops with ample time for reflection, connection with peers, and incorporation of the arts as a way to expand sensing; one-on-one coaching to help work through individual goals and limiting beliefs; and small groups that engaged in self-led peer coaching circles—a safe space to practice deep listening and seeing their work in new ways through the mirror of others.

Ultimately, these labs for testing new modes of being and action enabled practitioners to unpack the more intangible dimensions of systems change at play in their work. They offered experiential glimpses into the power of holding space differently, as resonant with ideas from social field theory, relational infrastructure and others that articulate the tangible effects of intangible connections (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023; Rye, 2023), and a chance to reconsider the role of leadership as the work of building infrastructures of connection. Any outcomes borne of these efforts therefore were less attributable to any single tool, method, or formulaic approach to building new capabilities and cultures, but rather, to a broader emphasis on treating social containers as worthy of attention and investment.

Reinforcing Pathways to Valorize and Cultivate Dialogue Differently

In an effort to build from and further institutionalize these awareness-based systems transformation approaches, an emergent stream of this work has focused on supporting practitioners to reimagine modes of dialogue geared to transformation. It aligns with theories that position dialogue as more than mere conversation, but rather a process to build “field[s] of new meaning in which profound collective insight and reorientation appear, out of which people can take aligned and effective action” (Isaacs, 1996, p. 20). While dialogue-based development approaches and investments in multi-stakeholder collaboration was not new in UNDP, the focus here was to double down on and better harness the *generative* potentialities of dialogue models for navigating policy uncertainty,

recognizing the importance of common language and entry points to cultivate this potential. This became the basis for grounding the work in a tangible resource and linking it to policy explorations of the ‘soft’ dimensions of change—such as shifts in values, culture, and other forces that influence choices and behavior—that the Human Development Report (HDR) 2021-22 brought to the fore.

Through a series of co-design sessions with leaders who completed the Leadership Certificate, UNDP’s SDG Integration team and Human Development Report Office with the Presencing Institute produced an HDR Dialogues “field guide”⁴ that offers ideas inspired by Theory U for development actors and others to initiate more generative, relational- and awareness-driven modes of thinking and collaborating via processes geared to complex policy challenges, or efforts aimed at systems transformation. By focusing on dialogue as the container within which to practice new patterns of relationship, and through this, expanded consciousness and understandings of systems, the guide places emphasis particularly on the work of facilitation in leadership. While sharing different approaches for facilitation, it does not prescribe a single type or set of tools, but rather encourages leaders to become more reflexive about the conditions or building blocks required to make co-creative and inclusive dynamics possible, which become the basis for testing alternative approaches and learning and iterating based on their observed effects along the way.

By putting dialogue in the fore, the field guide ultimately prompts practitioners to consider what constitutes an ‘outcome’ within development efforts in the first place, so that more emphasis is placed on the many interim pieces needed to shape more systemic, collaborative, and transformative ways of thinking and working. This approach aligns with findings from the Generative Dialogue Project and similar research that there is “value in making more explicit the goal of deep change and the strategic options for pursuing it; the differences among [different impact levels borne of different] change activities; and the role of dialogic conversation in change strategies” when working to shift stakeholders’ relationship to and investments in dialogue processes (Pruitt & Waddell, 2005, p. 43).

Building Enabling Ecosystems for Existing Wisdom to Land: Not Recreating the Wheel

The methods behind the UNDP initiatives and broader argument for dialogic- and process-based change approaches are not novel. What the UNDP example can offer, however, is insight into where these existing theories and practices

⁴ Full guide available online: <https://www.undp.org/publications/field-guide-human-development-report-2021/2022-dialogues>

might better permeate core sites of decision-making and transform development processes and institutions. Viewed against trends from common practice, as this section touches on, the innovation of the UNDP case lies less in the novelty of the methods, but in where, how, with whom, and for what purposes they were targeted.

While numerous examples exist of transformation-oriented dialogues being applied to national and sub-national socioeconomic processes, one limiting factor is that their perceived relevance often *falls within a limited set of development domains and stakeholder contexts*. Particularly when the dialogue processes entail significant time or cost implications, they tend to be more readily invested in for issues “where conflict is perceived to be a barrier to forward movement” (Pruitt & Waddell, 2005, p. 23), or in the realm of crisis, conflict and peacebuilding interventions more broadly. Many examples cited in literature over the decades fall into this category, from post-apartheid multistakeholder dialogues in South Africa to other “future-carving processes in other conflicts” (Kahane, 2007, para. 12) used to create “safe and open space” (para 9). In such cases, dialogue has been used to build trust among diverse stakeholders as a foundation for larger political transformations. The longstanding field of multi-stakeholder dialogic processes, as defined in literature like *Collaborating: Finding Common Ground for Multiparty Problems* (Gray, 1998), has also often taken as its starting place the idea of collaboration as a means to resolve conflict or for groups to define problems and implement solutions.

Examples of more transformation-oriented dialogue processes are also commonly found within non-governmental contexts for cultivating trust and solidarity across diverse segments of society, for example in civil society-led initiatives such as those of the US National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD, 2024). Thought leadership in the realm of representative deliberative democracy (OECD, 2020), participatory governance, and more imagination-based planning also speak to the necessity of spaces that enable shared being and thinking, including the creation of “intelligence assemblies” (Mulgan & Demos Helsinki, 2020, p. 27).

What the UNDP case study argues for, on the other hand, is applying the same types of principles and methods already found in many of these non-governmental spaces, or in a limited range of policy contexts, much more systematically across all stages of governmental and multilateral policy and programming processes aimed at systems transformation. In particular, it recognizes that many of the dialogue processes enacted in high-level bureaucratic fora, or with the aim of bringing many stakeholder groups into government policy processes, do not arrive at forms of dialogue that might be considered “generative,” or bringing “forth creative energy and collective intelligence out of a personal sense of connection to the whole” (Pruitt & Waddell, 2005, p. 8). While certain actors might serve as skilled facilitators in these processes, less often are the processes themselves designed to build mindsets and intentions of “dialogic leadership” across the group, or the capacity to consistently uncover through

dialogue “the hidden creative potential in any situation” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 2). The incentive structures behind such processes often render them more a box-ticking exercise than a genuine investment in building spaces that allow people to “evoke [their] genuine voices, [...] listen deeply, [...] hold space for [...] other people’s views, and [...] broaden awareness” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 2).

A related gap in bureaucratic contexts lies in limited examples of dialogues being used to *disrupt or call into question existing power structures or institutional ways of working*. This might be seen, for instance, in the example of UNDP itself having a history of supporting effective, transformation-oriented dialogues via its programming, from support to democratic dialogue and conflict prevention to combatting climate change (Pruitt & Thomas, 2007), but these same approaches seldom applied with the same level of rigor within its own organization’s capacity building or planning and decision-making processes. As Bohm & Weinberg (2004, pp. 7–8) reflects, what are “often considered to be dialogues” in the United Nations are in fact “more like trade-offs or negotiations” because the participants are “not really open to” or incentivized via the expectations and tone of the spaces to “[question] their fundamental assumptions.” However, as section VI explores, the forces that dictate whether dialogue is leveraged as a genuine tool of social change instead of surface-level display of inclusion, may in part be influenced through strategic efforts that can render more visible the links between dialogue design and power, and between small-scale intangible change and large-scale systems change.

Another potential shortfall lies in *over-emphasis on the role of individual skills gaps as a root cause of ineffective dialogue processes* in multilateral and governmental contexts. Many field books, for example, offer techniques to design and facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships (Hemmati, 2002). It is not that the theories and tools do not hold merit, but that the *ways* by which they are brought into institutions, and to whom they are targeted, may be too limited in scope. In particular, when these tools are incorporated into cultures that prioritize rigid definitions of efficiency and outputs for development without accompanying work to interrogate the value of these definitions, there is less incentive to apply them in ways that entail significant disruption. Despite their rhetorical interest in dialogues that pave the way for systems change, the continued accountability to these definitions and outcomes mean these institutional processes continue to give “little attention [...] to the relationship between [...] the ‘what’ and the ‘how,’ and the ‘doing’ and ‘being’ of transformation,” or ways of working that valorize this relationship (Bentz et al., 2022, p. 498). Similarly, dialogue models like those found in liberating structures or wisdom circles (Wenger, 1998) where a primary aim is to cultivate “microstructures that enhance relational coordination and trust” (Liberating Structures, n.d., Introduction, para. 9) are often more readily applied to team-building exercises or in engaging target populations of innovation-oriented development interventions, but less often as tools to systematically reconfigure more traditional, outcome-driven government or multilateral planning mechanisms.

Shifts in Dialogue as Levers for Transforming Paradigms and Systems

This section contextualizes some of the emergent insights from UNDP's four interlinked initiatives described in section III within the kinds of macro-level paradigm shifts needed for cultivating the relational bedrock for systems change. It offers one frame to help development practitioners reconceptualize how the application of different dialogue-based methods or intentions can enable shifts from processes that reinforce existing mindsets and cultures, to those which support the development of systems capabilities and intangible outcomes critical for deep change.

Common paradigms reinforced by dialogue models	Alternative paradigms or outcomes dialogue can cultivate	Example approaches or principles to shift dialogue outcomes
Linear delivery orientation	Shared meaning as fuel for non-linear transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflecting on the values and mental models that frame thoughts • Success not pinned to specific outcome or end result • Time and space for trust-building
Effectiveness as immediate actions / urgency as speed	Effectiveness as mindful action / urgency as depth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivating imagination and shared visions to guide action • Interrogating assumptions and biases as part of ideating • Ample space for individual and group reflection • Use of play to spark new modes of thinking
Objectivity and quantitative knowing as gold standard	Embracing pluralistic modes of knowing, to understand systems and shift power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying power analyses to the decision-making process • Methods that integrate multiple forms of knowing (e.g., embodied intelligence, intuition) • Inclusion defined not only by who is brought to the table, but who determined the protocols for engagement
Finding technical solutions	Co-creating the wisdom and capabilities that unlock new learning pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using the tone and format of spaces to encourage divergent thinking • Methods to continuously reframe the problem and system • Investment in relationships that inspire new modes of action

Table 1: Four paradigm shifts for systems change & dialogue levers to cultivate them.

From Linear Delivery Orientation → To Shared Meaning Making and Relationship Orientation

The Divide Between Theory and Practice

Whereas many development processes continue to cater to that which is most easily measurable via quantitative or pre-defined indicators, often equating to solutions that are predictable or look at an isolated facet of a system, a more “complex systemic perspective lets go of controlling [...] interactions and instead focuses on designing conditions, infrastructures, or enabling platforms that promote the emergence of new behavior and learning within human relationships” (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm, 2020, p. 397). This mode of operating is one that is attentive to emergence, or the “collective behaviours” (Bar-Yam, 2011, para. 1) and “qualities and capacities” (Wheatley & Frieze, 2006, para. 2) of systems that do not come from any one person or component alone but arise from their constantly evolving interrelationships. A theory of change grounded in emergence does not deny the uncertainty inherent in complexity but works with it by treating change as something that continuously unfolds from specific conditions, not as “a point at the end of a process” (Design Justice Network, 2018, Principles, para. 6). As a result, it emphasizes principles such as “critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, [and] listening with all the senses of the body and the mind” (brown, 2017, p. 5). Numerous movements embody this lens, such as that of design justice (Design Justice Network, 2018) or the growing field of systems leadership (Dreier et al., 2019), but these largely remain on the margins of mainstream development.

Levers for change through dialogue

Much of development is organized around a “scientific rationalism [...] which recognizes as real only that which can be measured and therefore excludes the knowledge that comes from the heart or from relationships between people” (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012, p. 97). Dialogues can act as a tool to unlock pathways for culture change when designed to promote the development of shared meaning, as opposed to simple or singular solutions based on existing understandings of a problem. It is through dialogue specifically that people can unpack the process of thought behind their assumptions, or change “the way the thought process occurs collectively” in order to get to the heart of insoluble problems, which are only insoluble as a result of being continuously produced by our thoughts (Bohm & Weinberg, 2004, p. 9). Dialogues that are about mirroring our assumptions and values back to us so that we can be more intentional with the ones we apply to decision-making are also those that valorize the “endeavor of unfixing, of dismastery, of community-supported bewilderment” as part of transforming systems (Gay, 2023, p. 166). These approaches also help overcome the “limitations of subjective [...] understanding” in many decision-making

processes, by giving space for the formation of intersubjective agreement instead (Karlberg, 2020, p. 59).

The necessity of unfixing something in order to make space for something more generative and co-creative in its place showed up in numerous ways through UNDP's Leadership Certificate. Some practitioners shared explicit intentions, for example, to use the space as a chance to “deconstruct [their] inner reality and vision to co-create a different one” or to “abate some social norms still nestled in [them].” Having the permission and space to do this also led to discourse on the role of delivery pressures and time constraints on their ability to listen or to “actively make space for others” to be their authentic selves in multi-stakeholder dialogues. For some leaders, it reinvigorated their commitment to carve the protected space for their own teams to think and connect outside the daily pressures of their work.

Through the action learning processes, practitioners also gained greater appreciation for the level of intentionality, time, and iterative learning required to actually foster the conditions needed for true co-creation and collective leadership. In a sense, it was a chance for many to return to the ‘basics’—such as how we think together, listen, reflect, or formulate questions—and trace their connections to the broader work of transforming systems and structures. As one practitioner noted, “it's a little bit of learning how to [create] a dialogue, how to have a conversation on basics.”

From Immediately Moving in Systems → To Seeing the Assumptions Behind our Directions of Travel

The Divide Between Theory and Practice

Whether viewed through the lens of the “capabilities approach, development as freedom, physical and mental well-being, [or] basic human needs,” diverse understandings of human development share an “ethical core, an embedded notion of value underpinning [the] conception of human development (International Science Council, 2020, p. 30). If we consider goals of development like “helping people lead their lives by expanding their capabilities” and freedoms (UNDP, 2023, p. 11) or as a means by which to build the social foundation through which people can “cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness,” (Bahá'í International Community, 1995, Section V para. 1), then an imperative includes investing in that which can also guide the release of assumptions and social structures that do not expand freedom and well-being for all. However, development goals that focus on primarily material or economic markers of progress such as GDP or processes that rely on linear understandings of change often foreclose engagement with the “transcendent” dimensions of human life in the spaces where social and economic initiatives are deliberated, including values, traditions, and perceptions, which are deep motives for action and catalysts for unlocking “the creative capacities within

human consciousness” (Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, 2008, p. 2). Mulgan & Demos Helsinki (2020) similarly underline the significance of consciousness and spirit in the pursuit of social and material progress, which have ramifications for the forms of data sought and produced to make decisions. Since there can “be no hard evidence for an imminent change in consciousness,” it follows that “over-analytic, incremental or evidence-based approaches,” at least in the limiting Western and neocolonial approaches to defining evidence, cannot serve development goals of this magnitude (Mulgan & Demos Helsinki, 2020, p. 30).

Levers for Change Through Dialogue

Whereas many existing policy processes prioritize modes of discussion and consensus-building that enable the quickest route to implementation, there is also a role for dialogues that pause to consider, what is it that we are speeding towards and why? Dialogue can function as an “invitation to test the viability of traditional definitions of what it means to be human,” and thereby make space to propose and practice the implications of alternative definitions that may be better foundations for realizing social and economic systems that benefit all (Nichol, 1995, p. xvi). Waddell (2005, p. 17) even defines “generative dialogue” as a process of “re-visioning’ future possibilities.” Given that “to take part in truth we must see our part in it,” (Senge, 2004, p. xiii), the opportunity to practice new patterns of relationships through dialogue can help reveal more truth-based change pathways by helping people “not only imagine new worlds, but also to imagine [themselves] differently” (Kaba, 2021, p. 4).

The idea that impact emerges in the spaces where we are reflecting, as much as the spaces where we are doing, was a message repeatedly surfaced by UNDP’s awareness-based programmes. As one participant of the Leadership Certificate expressed, we tend to “juxtapose urgency with slowness without [reflecting on] what it is that we’re moving towards” in part through the ways “our organizational culture is structured.” The ability to practice slower and more introspective ways of being through the UNDP Action Learning Lab had a particular influence on participants’ ability to reorient their connections to themselves, each other, and the systems around them. Some noted as a result a greater capacity to engage stakeholders in more meaningful ways, often translating to greater ability to understand a problem in new ways. As one participant said, “There is this magnificent opportunity... to see their emotions, to talk about what their feelings are. [In] regular meetings [...] we do not go into details [about] the feelings which are linked to those problems.” Participants also expressed shifts related to the ways they approached roadblocks or blind spots when addressing complex challenges. One noted, “I always thought I was a good listener, but I [learned I am] a dreadful listener. Because I filter everything according to my own templates.” Another observed, “Taking a step back and listening to where the system seems to be refusing the change and understanding where it’s coming from [...] has helped.”

From Reliance on ‘Objective’ or ‘Neutral’ Data → To Understanding the Role of Power in Knowledge Systems and Construction of Neutral Truths

The Divide Between Theory and Practice

When development planning is geared to elicit immediate ideas that can easily translate to action plans, little space is left to attend “more carefully to the processes by which we create our plans and intentions,” which is what enables stakeholders working to address issues for which there is no blueprint or silver bullet solution to “develop greater capacity to know what to do” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 155). While there is increasing use of innovation methods meant to help understand systems—for instance, to sense the dynamics of systems, reframe perspectives, expand data sources, and identify signals of change (UNDP, 2022)—these processes are often detached from a deep examination of the role of power and history in influencing the frames for arriving at knowledge and understanding, preferred narratives of the future (Milojević & Inayatullah, 2015), or modes of data considered relevant to an issue. As Giroux (2021, p. 22) articulates, “there are few institutions left that enable a collective consciousness capable of developing a critical stance, engag[ing] history, and hold[ing] power accountable.” This in turn impedes arriving at holistic understandings of social, economic, political, and ecological systems and effective levers for change within them, because power is a critical part of the landscape from which truth manifests.

Levers for Change Through Dialogue

One critical role for more intentional dialogue design is to help practitioners look at the ways that knowledge is constructed, recognizing that “knowledge is always produced through power” and that a disparity lies in the ways that non-Western embodied experiences are often categorized as culture as opposed to knowledge (Sengupta, 2022, 09:02). The process of colonization works by devaluing the knowledge of some and debasing certain cultural practices, which continues in present day systems (Adyanga, 2014, p. 80). Consultative fora that claim to be inclusive by drawing from and learning from groups like Indigenous communities, for instance, without centering the protocols or governance methods by which such communities arrive at shared knowledge, repeats “patterns of behaviour and decision-making that continue processes of extraction and erasure” (Brown, 2022, p. 10). Shifting the protocols for dialogue processes to embrace different ways of being and knowing offers pathways to better address the “fundamental defects in the knowledge system that defines today’s world” (Arbab, 2016, as cited in Karlberg, 2020, p. 7). Dialogue processes that disregard the role of “bodily ways of knowing [in] contributing to genuine knowledge,” for

example, reflect a form of exclusion by rooting dialogue practices in singular, often Western, philosophies about knowledge creation (Dell, 2021, p. 1).

While the UNDP dialogue series and learning labs may not have immediately radically transformed the knowledge practices they brought to their work, they did create the space for many to acknowledge the limitations of existing processes to enable truly inclusive collective intelligence: an important foundation for change. A participant from the Action Learning Lab, for instance, noted, “I’ve seen many initiatives that bring in people from the Global South, but we need to bring the thinking from the South, not just the people.” More broadly, the incorporation of the arts—in the form of music and visual scribing, among other elements—woven with reflective moments allowed many to drop into different states of thinking than normally experienced in formal meetings. One practice helped participants engage movement and touch to identify new opportunities for the future by inviting them to use physical objects to build ‘sculptures’ of the systems they were exploring, then physically moving around to literally and symbolically shift their perspectives. Many noted the ways engaging different senses as part of their reflection, whether with music, visualizations, or the chance to play and touch, helped them share more freely or view their situations with different eyes. Such experiences helped reinforce, or at least open people to the idea, that gathering data about complex systems and what to do about them is not merely an intellectual exercise but requires learning to engage different ways of knowing.

From Identifying the ‘Right’ Technical Solutions → To Co-creating the Wisdom and Capabilities that Enable Continuous Learning

The Divide between Theory and Practice

Development that does not only focus on combatting harm but also advancing actions that build radically different worlds starts, in part, with having a compelling vision of those alternate worlds. Shared future visions, coupled with recognition that the world as it structured now is not a given but already “fundamentally structured by the social imagination,” help direct actions and the focus for learning from them away from validating existing assumptions about the world, towards that which lays the foundations for the formation of new worlds (Oldham, 2021, para. 11). While there exists some efforts at bringing imaginative thinking into policy processes, its impact continues to be hindered by limited efforts to seriously invest in the related work of “creating the ‘container’” in which people can actually “explore together each other’s visions and start to see the emergence of something beyond their individual vision” (Eisler, 2015, p. 5). Likewise, where diverse imaginations and hopes for the future are already elaborated by communities or even collected as part of a development planning exercise, they are still rarely incorporated as legitimized data points in the

decision-making of national policies and programmes, because they are not accompanied by efforts to evolve the institutional culture (Dhar & Aurora, 2022).

Levers for Change Through Dialogue

Often, development dialogues rely on statistical data or insights from past or existing approaches to inform what needs to happen in the future, in part because they do not invest in the conditions that allow people to think and act in more future-oriented ways. It is also important to situate evidence or data within the relationships from which they were forged, including culture and value systems. The warm data movement highlights that reliance on “information without interrelationality” can lead us to conclusions that “further destructive patterns” (Bateson, 2018, Warm Data, para. 5). To help combat this, dialogues might be grounded more firmly in “technologies of humility” (Jasanoff, 2007, p. 33). This means “disciplined methods” that enable people to work with the limits of scientific knowledge, such as those which guide groups to reflect on the sources of complexity and ways to “reframe problems so that their ethical dimensions are brought to light” and addressed (Jasanoff, 2007, p. 33).

Another important aspect of navigating uncertain futures and creating new systems is understanding what societal capabilities are needed and how people develop them. Some of the capabilities most vital to transformation processes, such as innovation, creativity, and flexibility, do not merely come about through individual training or skills-building alone because “different settings and people evoke some qualities from us and leave others dormant” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 35). Within the UNDP case study, more than the introduction of new tools and concepts, the relational containers offered by the dialogues helped create a sense of psychological safety that encouraged new behaviours. They acted as microcosms of cultures that valorized norms like openly embracing failure as part of the learning process, asking hard questions as part of transformation, and sitting in shared vulnerability with colleagues as a foundation for building enabling ecosystems for change. One participant observed a kind of generative letting go emerge through the process, noting “I am giving myself completely, I am taking risks, approaching others as equals, showing my fears, learning from everyone.” Experiences like these of participants in the Action Learning Lab suggest that emotions are triggers for decision-making and as such, they should be engaged with intentionality to expand systems leadership capabilities. In this, the work of building new capabilities for systems transformation is as much a process of building new fields of belonging and safety as it is an individual and inner learning journey.

Addressing Gaps in Where, How, and Why Dialogue-based Change Approaches are Applied

Many dialogue-based development processes exist to fill the gaps of international and national institutions, with actors “establishing norms and coordinating

action without the coercive power or hierarchical forms that are characteristic of government-led institutions or initiatives” (Pruitt & Waddell, 2005, p. 2). While often easier to establish more inclusive and process-based orientations to change outside of highly bureaucratic institutions, or assert their relevance in contexts characterized by conflict and urgency, the UNDP case is one that explores the possibility of seeding openings for these shifts in contexts that are not primed for embracing these orientations, or may even be resistant to them.

Three strategies from UNDP’s learnings might be considered here:

1. Exposing practitioners to the experience of more awareness-based systems approaches at the micro level, while continuously helping them see the links to the macro.

Part of the barrier to scaling more mindful, awareness-based, and relationship-centric approaches to systems change is a conceptual one. While global evidence for the utility of these models exists, few theories of change in traditional governmental or multilateral development processes explicitly draw the links between small-scale, interpersonal, or inner modes of change, and the changes sought at the macro structural, programmatic, or policy level. Without shared frames to name or effectively visualize these relationships, it remains challenging to systematize, scale, measure, or valorize their effects as substantive drivers of change of equal and interlinked significance to more financial, material, or technical development inputs.

Section V may be seen as one simplified example of this conceptual dot-connecting work, particularly using a given institution’s own rhetorical ambitions as a frame for positioning the outcomes of a dialogue process. These types of analyses can likewise benefit from the growing adoption of development frameworks aimed at measuring for shifts in intangible qualities and relationships. Models such as Outcome Mapping (Earl et al., 2001), for example, among many others can help to make possible more adaptive and relationship-based, rather than material outcome-based, guides to development investments, action, and learning. However, a core challenge remains in creating openings for the use of such frameworks in the first place, in ways that can gain traction within prevalent development logics.

While there is no singular solution, the UNDP experience in working to create these openings and attending to the challenges as a continuous trial and error process suggests that much more context-specific experimentation and research is needed that focuses on which strategies help to valorize the use of such approaches. One approach might be in linking the ‘soft’ with the ‘hard,’ by placing the intangible outcomes of generative dialogues within conceptual frames from social innovation that elevate the role of relationships as “infrastructure” or “containers” that shape how individuals and societies co-create knowledge and drive *how* they interact with the world based on that knowledge (Rye, 2023; Dark Matter Laboratories, 2022; Imagination Infrastructures, n.d.; Eisler, 2015, p. 5).

2. Leveraging dialogue among the facilitators, conveners, or norm-setting bodies to help the system see itself.⁵

While development organizations may invest in interventions targeting social relationships and mindsets, many tend to focus on helping ‘beneficiaries’ of development programmes build social capital, bridge social divides, or interrogate norms. They are rarely turned inward, however, to examine the links between the harmful cultural norms ‘out there’ and the ways they are perpetuated through the very dialogues and decision-making protocols that shape policies and programmes meant to address their effects in societies. Moreover, despite some recognition that intervening at the level of process, relationships, and paradigms is fundamental to work that aims at transformation of systems, there remains little consensus about how best to intervene at this level.

The UNDP Leadership Certificate gave senior leaders access to consistent collective spaces and processes to work with alternative tools and approaches in ways that went beyond thinking about what they themselves might change in their offices or support to governments and other partners, to thinking about the systems they and their counterparts were a part of. It encouraged reflection of what might need to be confronted or disrupted in order to make the systematic application of those alternative approaches possible in their contexts. They considered more seriously the *network-building, culture-shaping, and ecosystem-evolving work* that must accompany their own transformation and what roles they might play.

For example, one country-specific dialogue initiative inspired by the Leadership Certificate sought to reimagine a longstanding dialogue between government, private sector, and Indigenous populations on mitigation of social and environmental harm from extractive industries in the region by infusing methods to encourage trust, play, and divergent thought. The types of honest reflections on power imbalances elicited through the creation of this safe space compelled UNDP co-conveners to consider more meaningfully “which cultures [they were] promoting” and “whose concept of time” was being prioritized by the dialogue format and approaches. It even surfaced reflections on ways that protocols can be rooted in “processes of colonization,” and how UNDP, government, or other stakeholders with power might be coming in “with a concept of how human development can look.” While resolving deeply entrenched power structures takes time, the reflective space to acknowledge their existence reaffirmed the significance of taking the time to properly “develop the soil for dialogue” as a precondition for this.

⁵ Inspired by statement from Otto Scharmer that “The essence of Systems Thinking is to make a system see itself.” (<https://twitter.com/ottoscharmer1/status/987424211663818752>)

3. Approaching capacity building as a function of relational infrastructure, rather than individual skills or tools alone.

A dialogue-driven approach to systems leadership or relational infrastructure-building may help disrupt the largely Western, colonial-influenced ideologies that depict inner transformation or mindset and behaviour shifts as a primarily individual endeavour, rather than something inseparable from social conditions and context. One aspect of this includes rooting development in a praxis that is more responsive to the fractal nature of systems. Given that all actions by individuals arise from “conversation that generates, coordinates, and reflects those actions” (Ogden, 2015, para. 1), large-scale systemic change starts with “small groups of people in unlikely combinations in a new quality of relationship” (Tippett & Lederach, 2022, 07:30). Making shifts in how space is designed and held entails paying attention to “how we are at small scale” and learning to live our solutions locally, such that we can better know what is needed to implement a just governance system regionally, nationally, or globally (Brown, 2017, p. 55). This notion applies as much to the many localities of culture that exist within a development institution as it does to society at large.

While theories that posit that organizations change because “there are a few people who are willing to take a stand [...] for a process which is open-minded and open-hearted—for carving a better future” (Kahane, 2007, para. 13) may stand relevant, the UNDP approach which started from a place of seeing individuals’ consciousness and motivation as inextricable from the influence of their social fields also recognizes that this “willingness to take a stand” can be built through the cultivation of like-minded networks and microcosms of new culture. The experiences also underlined that there is often a divide to be addressed between an individual’s interest in a certain paradigm or framework for being and doing, and their translation of that interest into action. As described in section V, this is not just a function of skills gaps, but often of *poor relational soil or infrastructure capable of inspiring the confidence to act amidst uncertainty or risks*. This is particularly critical for transforming bureaucracies, as attempts to alter ways of doing business or invest in transformative dialogue processes may clash with entrenched ideas about value for money, efficiency, or definitions of data and impact for development. Since shifting the core structures that guide the work of institutions takes time, the intermediate work of shifting mindsets and creating openings for different patterns of doing inherently comes with reputational, financial, social or other forms of risk, with different implications depending on individuals’ relationships to power. The work may not be rewarded or validated by the current structures, rendering alternative incentives like shared power-creation, psychological safety, a sense of belonging, and other relational aspects borne of these microcosms within larger institutions all the more significant to sustain movements which can in time transform culture and structures.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to elucidate, through UNDP's learning journey to apply transformative dialogue tools and approaches to complex development challenges, the crucial role of levers for change that target the relational aspects of systems transformation. By centering dialogue in particular, there is immense potential to help development practitioners and other change agents better understand the reciprocal relationships between internal change and societal and institutional changes. While more development discourse today is recognizing the significance of individual transformation to the achievement of the SDGs, the ways that individual consciousness and creativity is shaped by context, culture and human connections means more learning is required to build and maintain the social structures for collective sensemaking, dialogue and decision-making with this relationship in mind.

Steering large bureaucratic institutions with entrenched mindsets and modes of operation towards more dialogical-based processes remains challenging, however. Initiatives that alter the mindsets and capacities of individuals alone have often proven insufficient to alter the core modes of operation in favor of more transformative processes. An important part of the work includes expanding spaces within development institutions and governments to collectively understand, acknowledge and test strategies to address barriers that lie in normative perceptions, organizational culture, and accountability frameworks, which impede the rhetorical interest in inclusive and transformative dialogue from translating to more process- and relationship-centric business models. Building from the UNDP case study, the paper explored some pathways by which conceptualizing and convening dialogue differently might support practitioners to tend to divides between the rhetoric of systems transformation and predominant ways of working. Its analysis is framed by my own involvement as a co-designer as well as participant in these processes, offering a lens that connects multiple modes of learning, including experiential, as resonant with the themes of the paper.

Situating more attention and learning in the ways that mainstream development institutions could better hold space for collective being and thinking may help cultivate a development praxis that is rooted in the ability to recognize our own assumptions about, roles in, and relationships to the systems we work on changing. It gives more weight and visibility to the role of social containers in systems change processes, and the idea that impact emerges in the spaces where we are reflecting, as much as the spaces where we are doing. In other words, in shifting the lens of where development impact sits to encompass the spaces where culture, shared thinking, relationships and consensus are built, new openings emerge to better attend to what goes into the co-creation or collective intelligence process itself. More emphasis is placed on the 'how' of development, beyond the 'what.' This shift makes possible more investment in efforts to co-design and practice the tools of the heart and mind, as what give meaning and

power to the tools of the hand, such as programming methods, formal structures, and financial resources.

While the disconnect between mainstream development approaches and the scale of transformations needed remains vast, the growing focus on initiatives aimed at shifting our ways of relating to each other and ourselves, as central to how we understand and work on systemic challenges, is a promising move towards bridging the divide.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including UNDP or the UN Member States.

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