

# SURVIVAL <sup>OR</sup> RENEWAL?

IMAGINING THE UN'S NEXT HORIZON



BROUGHT TO YOU BY

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE POSSIBLE

# HOW THIS CAME TO BE

This paper was written by a group of UN colleagues, inspired by the organization's founding ideals and moved by a shared concern for its future.

It draws on practical experiences of many colleagues driving change across the UN system, combined with a broad base of knowledge and evidence – from reform proposals and evaluations to literature on progressive organizations – sparring with AI tools along the way.

Deep thanks to all colleagues and collaborators who offered their insights as peer reviewers. Special thanks to Kening Zhu for the beautiful visualization. We are also grateful to the wide ecosystem of thinkers, practitioners, and communities exploring new ways of working, reimagining multilateralism, and cultivating cultures of care and renewal that have inspired our thinking. We see this contribution as one voice among many in a larger, evolving conversation.

It is published under the name of the Department of the Possible, a fictional UN department that invites us to collectively imagine new possibilities at this fragile moment in time. If you want to follow or help shape what comes next, [you can sign up here](#).

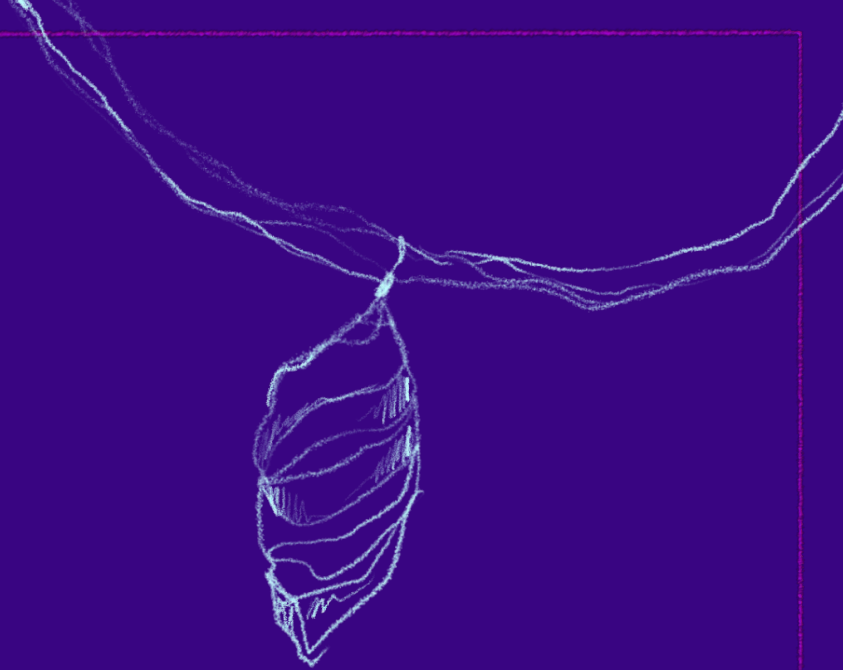
# PROLOGUE

Have you ever wondered how a butterfly forms?

A caterpillar enters a cocoon. Inside, it dissolves – completely – into a kind of cellular soup. From that seeming disintegration, something new takes shape.

Hidden in the caterpillar's body are imaginal cells, dormant blueprints of a flying creature. At first, these cells act alone. The old immune system sees them as a threat and attacks. But they persist. They connect. They resonate.

*With gratitude to Imaginal Labs, where we first encountered this metaphor.*



Then, something shifts. A tipping point is reached. The imaginal cells cluster into a new organism – and a butterfly is born. Not a modified caterpillar but something fundamentally new.

This is not shared as a biology lesson. It mirrors where the UN might be today. What if the form we know is already dissolving? What if the seeds of the future – new ways of working, leading, and collaborating – are already here, scattered but alive?



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## SUGGESTED READING PATHS

If you have 5 mins →  
Read Key Messages + An Invitation

If you have 10-15 mins →  
Read Key Messages, Part 1,  
Shift Summaries + An Invitation

If you have longer → Read it all :)





# KEY MESSAGES

**The UN system has reached a breaking point.**

Demands on the organization are rising amid accelerating ecological, political, and humanitarian crises, while resources decline and the founding ideals on which the UN was built are being eroded.

**It was created in and for a different era.**

The UN continues to rely on structures, processes, and ways of working designed for a very different world. In today's reality of complexity, interdependence, volatility and fast-paced change, these legacy systems increasingly hinder its ability to respond and deliver in the ways that are needed.

**Major change is now unavoidable.**

The UN's current operating model cannot continue as is, yet new rounds of top-down reform will not be enough. We must reimagine how we approach change itself - moving from one-time structural fixes to nurturing the system's capacity to learn, adapt and co-create change every day.

The UN was made for moments like these.

It was born from a world in crisis, a world torn apart by war and turmoil. Yet in that moment, courage and vision coalesced in the UN's creation and founding ideals: peace, human dignity, equal rights, international cooperation, solidarity and justice. That same spirit is needed now, not to preserve what was, but to reimagine what could be.

This moment calls us to reconnect with the original *why* of the UN and reimagine *how* its purpose can be fulfilled in today's world.

This paper proposes four key shifts to do so. Together, these shifts can unlock the UN's collective potential:

turf —————> purpose

control —————> participation

fragmentation —————> collaboration

bureaucracy  
& burnout —————> courage, care  
& creativity



## The seeds of transformation are already here.

Across the UN, individuals, committed teams and self-organized communities are already experimenting with more participatory, dynamic, and purpose-driven ways of working. These efforts reflect a broader movement of working and collaborating differently, already practiced by networks, collectives, governments and companies around the world. Many across the UN already know how to work this way, and many more are eager to do so.



**But these beginnings need support to take root and spread.** The conditions for renewal must now be nurtured. This paper explores what it would take for these early seeds to connect and grow, and it invites readers to act from wherever they are.

**The choice is ours.** Whether this moment goes down in history as the one that tipped the UN system into collapse or the one that made true transformation possible depends on what we choose to centre.



*Join us in imagining  
what's possible & co-creating  
the UN the world needs.*



# WHY THIS PAPER, WHY NOW?

Eighty years after its creation, the United Nations faces an existential choice between collapse and renewal.

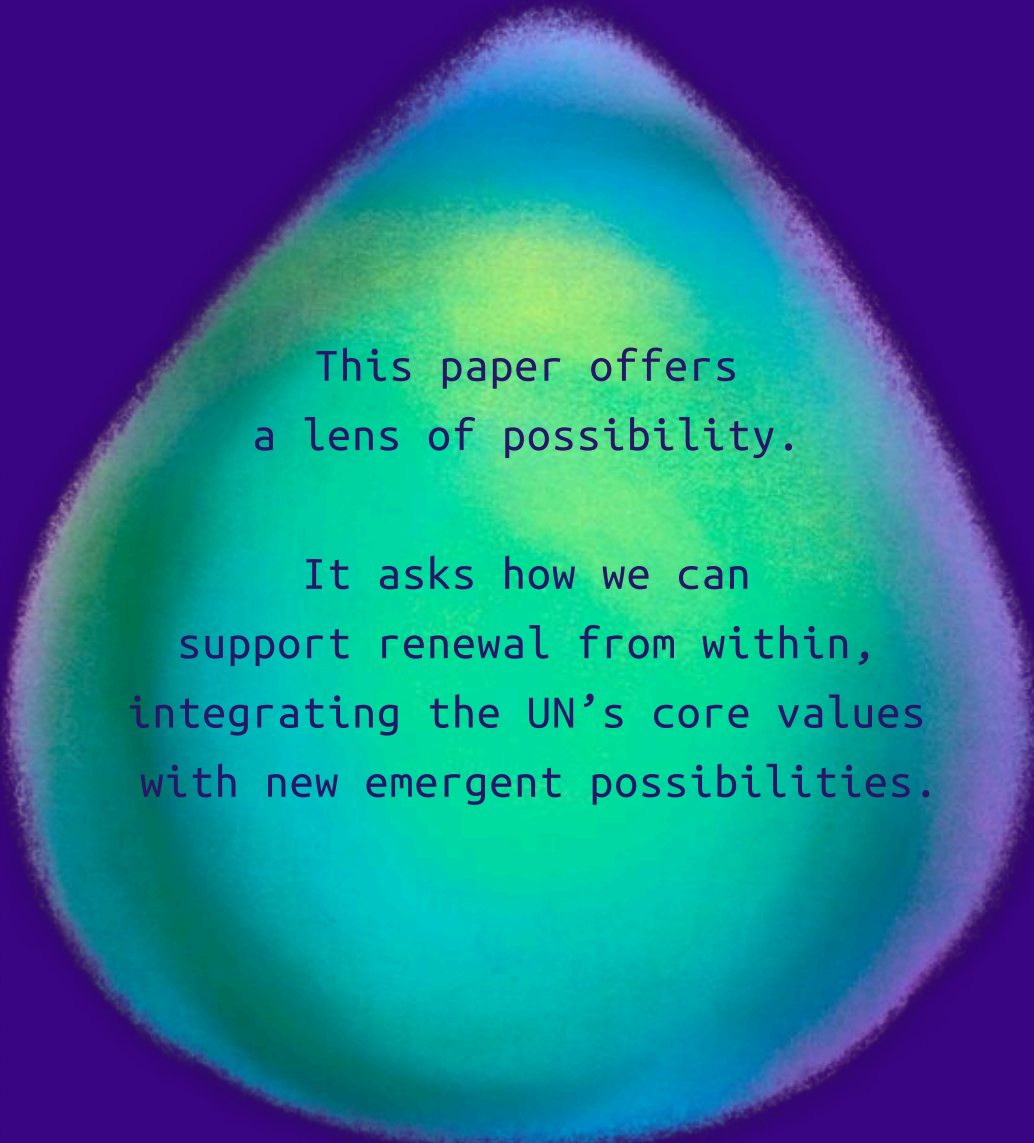
Many are asking: *Where do we go from here? What is the UN's role at this point in history? And will this be the moment that breaks the UN system or will it be a turning point to regenerate and remake it?*

This paper was written by UN colleagues who are deeply committed to the UN's founding ideals – and deeply worried for its future. It began with a shared concern that the global institution created in a spirit of idealism and collaboration to address humanity's most stubborn challenges is eroding before our eyes.

*The UN was founded on a simple but powerful premise: that global problems require global solutions, and that countries working together can achieve more than they can alone.*

Yet today, that idea is being challenged in fundamental ways. For many actors, multilateralism is no longer the default response to global challenges. Meanwhile, the UN system faces huge pressure to deliver, adapt and do more with less, while funding for many of its entities is evaporating. Since early 2025, budget shortfalls have forced widespread cuts across programmes and operations. Sweeping reforms are being rolled out in response, with thousands of posts being abolished and entire teams and functions restructured or closed.

**In this moment, it is clear that significant change is inevitable and that the UN's current operating model cannot continue as it is.** In these challenging times, will our response be to retreat and focus on survival - or to fight forward and boldly reimagine what's possible?



This paper offers  
a lens of possibility.

It asks how we can  
support renewal from within,  
integrating the UN's core values  
with new emergent possibilities.

It makes the case for a vision we feel inspired by and want to move towards. One that we would stand for, take risks for, and mobilize around. Rooted in deep care for the ideals of the UN and the people it serves, it invites us to reconnect with the *why* of the UN and to reimagine the *how* for the world we live in today.

It proposes four deep shifts that are already emerging across the system – visible in scattered initiatives, courageous teams, and committed colleagues – and explores what it would take to help them take root, connect, and grow.

*A note on language: Throughout this paper, “the UN” or “UN system” refers to the entire UN apparatus – including its governance bodies, and all UN system organizations. We also use “personnel” and “staff” interchangeably to refer to all colleagues employed by UN entities, regardless of contract type.*



Part 1:

# KEEPING THE WHY CHANGING THE HOW

The UN's purpose and the values underpinning the UN Charter – peace, human dignity, equal rights, international cooperation, solidarity and justice – continue to inspire people around the world. For many UN colleagues, they are deeply personal commitments and often the reason for joining the UN in the first place. They remain as relevant today as when the UN was created in 1945.

The challenges our world faces continue to demand collaboration across borders and systemic approaches – precisely the kind of collective action the UN was created for. Yet today these challenges are more complex, fast-moving, and volatile.

**Climate collapse is accelerating**, as biodiversity loss and human pressures push ecosystems beyond safe limits and fuel mounting disasters.

**Conflict and displacement are escalating**, with more people forcibly uprooted by war, persecution, and crisis than at any time in modern history.

**Geopolitical fragmentation is intensifying**, with rising tensions undermining multilateral cooperation.

**Civic space is shrinking**, authoritarianism is advancing, and trust in public institutions is eroding.

**New domains of power and disruption are emerging**, from cyber warfare destabilizing traditional security to private actors consolidating disproportionate control over critical technologies and digital systems that shape public life.

The UN system is well positioned to grapple with these kinds of pressures yet it struggles to respond with the speed, focus, and imagination the moment demands. In today's world, information travels instantly and social movements can mobilize across continents in days. Local outbreaks can escalate into pandemics within weeks, while misinformation, polarized media, and artificial intelligence reshape public discourse at unprecedented speed and scale.

But like many bureaucracies in the public and private sectors, the UN still relies on structures, governance and ways of working built for another era. They have been repeatedly tweaked but rarely reimagined. Hierarchies and risk-averse procedures slow action at the very time agility is needed.

**This results in both shortcomings in delivery and a deepening erosion of trust in the UN.** The tension is twofold: between the urgency of today's crises and the limitations of our response, and between the values we aspire to uphold and institutions that too often fail to do them justice.

And yet, the UN's creation was itself an act of bold imagination – a belief that humanity could choose cooperation over conflict, solidarity over self-interest, and collective action over despair. That imagination is needed again. In times of crisis, it is not a luxury. It is essential. If the UN Charter's vision still inspires us, then so does the question: how might we live it differently?

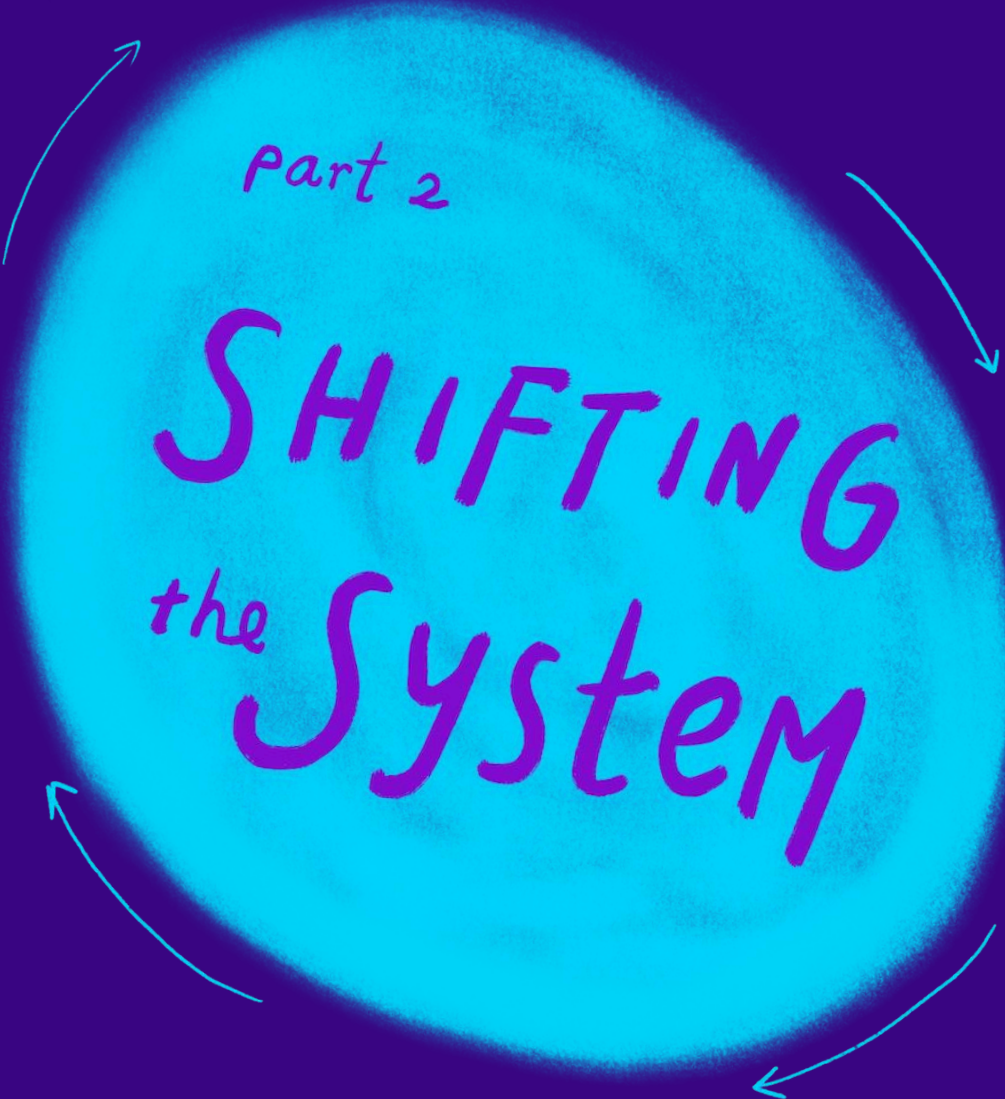
- What if shared purpose – not institutional preservation – became the system's organizing force?
- What if energy and direction came from the many – not the few – making participation a core principle, not a procedural step?
- What if the UN acted more like a living network than a fixed hierarchy – with people and resources moving fluidly across boundaries?
- What if courage, care, and creativity were nurtured as core capacities, enabling the system to adapt, learn, and continuously regenerate itself?

## These are not utopian ideals.

They echo practices already alive in the world and used by institutions, networks, and companies to navigate complexity and stay responsive: from city governments experimenting with participatory budgeting, to global companies organized around self-managing teams, to grassroots movements growing across borders.

Similar patterns are emerging inside the UN – in scattered experiments and pioneering teams already working differently. Taken together, they reveal the outline of a deeper movement – one that orients around purpose, participation, collaboration, and renewal.





Part 2

# SHIFTING the System

Across the UN system, new ways of working are beginning to surface. Often they emerge at the margins, sometimes in tension with established structures, but they share a common direction – pointing toward a more connected, adaptive, and human-centred system. The question is what it would take and what might be made possible if they were supported more intentionally at scale.

The pages that follow outline four shifts that, taken together, can catalyse transformation. For each shift, we explore why it matters, what it demands, and how it is already beginning to take shape in practice.

**Purpose** becomes the organizing principle – the driving force that re-aligns the system around what matters most. **Participation** and **collaboration** give that purpose form, through shared voice, connective practices, and enabling infrastructure. And **renewal** sustains them all – the conditions that nurture learning, care, and the energy for change to take root and endure.

SHIFT 1

PURPOSE

*From defending turf to advancing shared mission.*





# THE SHIFT:

Move from turf-defending that is entrenched and rewarded at every level – where people are expected to protect their team, agency, or budget – to shared purpose becoming the gravitational pull that everything orients around.

This means realigning governance, funding, accountability, leadership, and everyday incentives so that mission, not preservation, becomes the force shaping decisions and action.

## WHY IT'S NEEDED *and* THE POSSIBILITIES IT BRINGS

Over 80 years, the UN has grown into a complex system of more than 50 entities. Each was created to meet a pressing need of its time. But while the UN has been good at creating new structures, it has been far less good at adapting, merging, or retiring old ones. The result is fragmentation: multiple entities often work on the same challenge – from climate resilience to child rights – but through separate strategies, funding streams, and reporting lines. Instead of reinforcing one another, efforts compete, duplicate, and drain energy.

This siloed logic plays out not only across agencies, but at every level, from member states and funders to UN personnel. Leaders defend institutional turf, managers seek recognition for their own units, and staff are incentivized to deliver on narrow mandates rather than shared goals. These behaviours are reinforced by how the system sets priorities and allocates resources.

Even when the UN commits to collective outcomes like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), delivery and recognition continue to follow siloed lines. Funding is heavily earmarked, transaction costs rise, and collaboration remains the exception.

Realigning around purpose does not mean uniformity. Even in a diverse and decentralized system, agencies and teams can align around a shared intent while adapting to their contexts and strengths.

*What must change  
is the organizing principle:  
outcomes first, institutional  
boundaries second.*

*When purpose leads, agencies  
become contributors to missions  
bigger than themselves.*

System-wide goals and frameworks provide shared direction, and complex problems that require systemic approaches are addressed more effectively. Collective mandates set boundaries & accountability without micromanaging individual contributions.

Funding also becomes more flexible, with less earmarking, so resources can follow whole-system priorities. The system can then mobilize and self-organize to deliver – with teams forming around the work that matters most, personnel moving fluidly to where they add most value, and agencies bringing their strengths to shared outcomes.

# THIS SHIFT CALLS US TO ...



**Design governance models that are light and adaptive**, setting boundaries and priorities for the whole system while enabling teams to self-organize around delivery.

**Reimagine mandating practices through regular reviews**, sunset clauses for outdated functions, and thematic clustering to streamline efforts and reduce duplication.

**Define system-wide goals and accountability frameworks**, using shared direction, metrics, and mandates to guide collaboration and align contributions with collective outcomes, not just agency-specific agendas.



**Enable flexible, purpose-driven financing**, by expanding pooled and adaptable funding mechanisms and reducing earmarking, so that resources flow to shared missions rather than fragmented silos.

**Incentivize cross-system mobility & contribution beyond roles**, making it easier for personnel to move across teams, functions, and entities, and rewarding collaboration over protection of silos or status.

**Strengthen purpose as a priority at every level**, ensuring teams and roles at all levels reflect contributions to shared goals, not legacy silos or institutional ownership.



# SEEDS ALREADY GROWING



**System-wide strategies and accountability frameworks are aligning mandates around shared priorities,** including on gender equality, disability inclusion, youth, biodiversity and water.



**Joint systems analyses are helping to build shared evidence bases and strategies** at country and regional levels, enabling planning to shift from parallel strategies toward more coherent and effective approaches.



**Cross-functional and inter-agency teams are being deployed in crisis and humanitarian contexts,** showing how staff can work across boundaries to deliver on shared outcomes when purpose demands it.



**Regional cooperation frameworks are aligning multiple UN entities around long-term missions,** including the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) for the Pacific (2023–2027) which brings together over a dozen UN entities around the 2050 Blue Pacific Strategy.



**Financing is beginning to shift from siloed projects toward pooled approaches that support collective outcomes.** The Joint Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Fund and the UN Peacebuilding Fund show how pooled financing can align multiple entities and drive collaboration across mandates.

*These are only a few examples. But many more seeds are surely sprouting across the UN. If you know of other seeds for any of the shifts in this paper, share them here – together we can make them known, and help them take root and grow.*



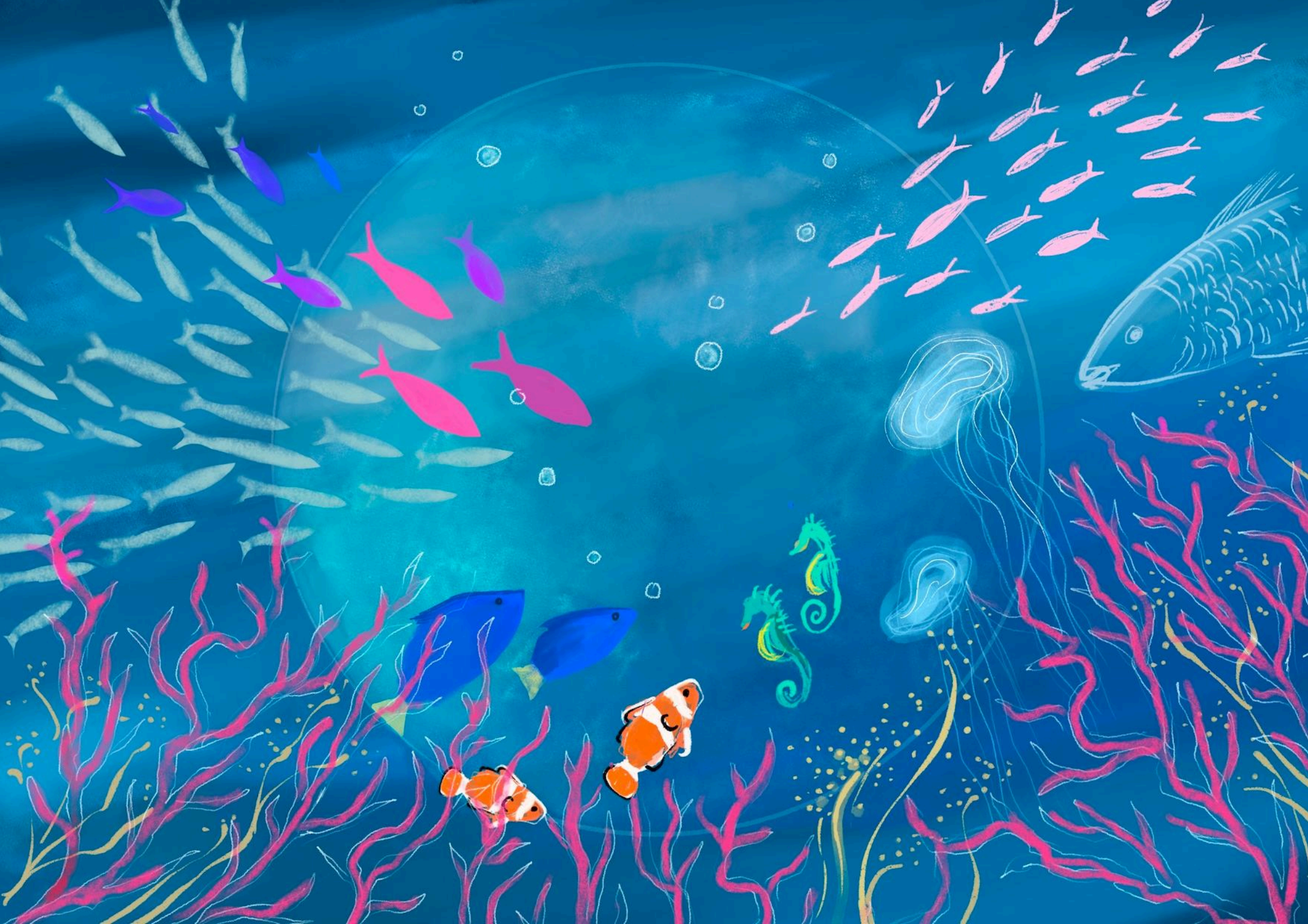
Reorganizing around shared purpose is only the beginning. To unlock the UN's potential, that purpose must be co-owned. This means rethinking how decisions are made, who shapes direction, and how power flows. The next shift looks at how participation can become a core operating principle.

SHIFT 2

# PARTICIPATION

*From top-down control to shared power and voice.*







# THE SHIFT

Move from top-down control and procedural consultation to collective ownership and distributed leadership. This means enabling more people – across roles, generations, and regions – to shape decisions, initiate change, and take responsibility. In a complex and fast-changing world, participation is not a courtesy but a requirement for institutions that want to stay relevant and effective.

## WHY IT'S NEEDED and THE POSSIBILITIES IT BRINGS

At the time the UN was created, decision-making involved fewer actors and limited public engagement. It was an era of telegrams and typewriters – when bureaucratic stability was the prevailing logic, and hierarchical structures were seen as the most rational and effective way to organize institutions.

The world has changed radically since. Today, crises and major disruptions erupt at speed, cascading across borders, sectors, and platforms – shaped by an expanding array of actors with unequal power and competing interests. In such a world, no handful of leaders – however capable – can grasp the full complexity, hold all the knowledge, or steer change alone. Yet decision-making remains concentrated at the top, while those closest to the work too often carry heavy responsibilities but little influence.

Ideas move through endless approval loops, and fear of overstepping formal roles stifles initiative. The results are predictable: bottlenecks, risk aversion, and a system that too often disempowers the very people it depends on.

Experience across sectors shows the same lesson: rigid hierarchies often struggle to cope with complexity, while distributed leadership enables faster and more effective action. When participation is broadened, systems become more intelligent and alive. Diverse perspectives ground decisions in lived realities, while shared ownership builds trust, credibility, and commitment.

But participation is not only a practical response to complexity – it is also a matter of values. Systems shaped by top-down authority can come into tension with the UN's ethos of equality and dignity. Expanding participation honours those values by treating people not as subjects of decisions, but as agents in shaping them.

Participation in this sense is transformative. It means that voices beyond the usual decision-making circles – civil society, youth, frontline staff, and communities most affected by UN policies and programmes – help shape direction rather than only respond to it. It calls for cultures where authority is decentralized and where people are encouraged to speak up, take initiative, and assume responsibility.

*And it redefines leadership  
as creating space: removing  
barriers, backing ideas,  
and supporting others  
to engage and thrive.*

# THIS SHIFT CALLS US TO ...

**Redistribute authority** by moving decisions closer to where knowledge, responsibility, and impact sit – whether in operational teams, technical functions, or local contexts.

**Design organizations for participation** by moving beyond rigid hierarchies toward structures that distribute authority, share information openly by default, build peer accountability, and enable teams to take responsibility together.

**Use participatory processes** to shape strategy, reform, and programming with those closest to the work and most affected by it.

**Redefine leadership as enabling others to succeed**, shifting from control to creating the conditions for initiative, shared responsibility, and trust. Embed this in how leaders are selected, supported, and held accountable.

**Create decision-making spaces that reflect diversity**, inside and outside the UN, bringing in people across roles, regions, generations, and lived experiences, especially those traditionally excluded.

**Develop capabilities for collective ownership** by equipping personnel and managers with practical methods – such as facilitation, feedback, and systems thinking – that help build cultures of initiative, inclusion, and shared responsibility.



# SEEDS ALREADY GROWING



**Advisory groups are expanding who shapes decisions**, giving younger and non-traditional voices influence in strategic processes. Examples include UNDP's shadow boards and the Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate.



**Leadership is being redefined**, with initiatives in UNICEF, the UN System Staff College, and elsewhere equipping managers and senior staff to lead through trust, inclusion, and systems thinking.



**Networks and communities across the UN are incubating more inclusive and participatory ways of working.** Examples include [UNIN](#), [Young UN](#), [UNLOCK](#), [#NewWork](#), and [UN 2.0](#) communities, which are fostering experimentation, peer exchange, and influence beyond formal reporting lines.



**Participatory design practices are helping diverse stakeholders co-create solutions**, from staff and entrepreneurs to national partners and end users, with examples across UN innovation initiatives including the [Beyond Lab](#), [ITC Innovation Lab](#), [UNHCR Innovation Service](#), and [UN Global Pulse](#).



**Cross-agency joint programmes are showing how shared decision-making can accelerate results**, with examples like the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities enabling faster, more coordinated action.

**Participatory budgeting and community decision-making are giving local communities direct power** over how resources are allocated and results assessed. In some programmes, this has shifted participation from one-off consultation to genuine co-ownership of priorities and outcomes.





But participation on its own is not enough. Without systems that connect ideas, people, and actions across boundaries, these efforts risk staying fragmented. For participation to gain momentum, it needs structures that weave voices and actions together across the system. The next shift explores how collaboration can become the norm rather than the exception.

SHIFT 3

# COLLABORATION

*From fragmented structures to a connected UN ecosystem.*







# THE SHIFT

Move from siloed and duplicative infrastructure to a connected UN ecosystem where collaboration is the norm - supported by systems and ways of working that align investments, incentives, tools, and practices. It also means investing in the people and roles that hold the system together - those who build trust, bridge boundaries, and translate shared goals into coordinated action.

## WHY IT'S NEEDED *and* THE POSSIBILITIES IT BRINGS

The UN is a system in name, but too often a set of disconnected parts in practice. Despite shared goals and common frameworks, most agencies still operate through parallel structures - with separate planning, funding, reporting, and data systems. Even where joint delivery is essential, teams often face duplicative processes and misaligned tools that make collaboration harder than it should be.

This fragmentation leads to duplication and delays - driving up transaction costs and stalling decisions. Personnel spend valuable time navigating incompatible systems, while critical data remains siloed. Instead of reinforcing one another, teams compete for resources, recognition, and visibility - eroding trust and weakening collective effectiveness. The result is inefficiency at best, and incoherence when speed, coordination, and trust are most needed.



Beyond these inefficiencies lie even greater missed opportunities: innovations that remain local, insights that fail to spread, and collective solutions that never take shape. In today's complex and fast-changing world, no single entity can solve global challenges alone. The UN's ability to respond with agility, creativity, and legitimacy depends on its capacity to collaborate across boundaries.

*The challenge is not a lack of will, but a lack of enabling conditions.*

Collaboration remains the exception, because the system was never designed to support it. Addressing this requires rethinking the connective tissue - how strategies align, how resources are shared, and how teams engage across entities. But infrastructure alone is not enough. Systems don't collaborate - people do.

Effective collaboration also depends on those who bridge boundaries, hold a view of the whole, and foster the trust that makes joint work possible. These roles are often overlooked and under-supported, yet they are vital enablers of coherence and collective success.

*When collaboration is enabled both structurally and relationally, the system becomes more connected, more resilient, and more capable of delivering what no single entity can achieve alone.*

# THIS SHIFT CALLS US TO ...

**Strengthen and expand spaces where collaboration already thrives**, from communities of practice within and across UN entities to joint initiatives that foster collective learning and action over competition. Ensure these spaces are properly resourced, and support the people who make them work – the stewards and coordinators who sustain them and enable collaboration across the system.

**Pilot new approaches that unlock collaboration by removing structural barriers** such as interagency transfer costs and procurement rules that hinder cross-system collaboration and engagement of smaller, community-based, or unconventional partners.

**Incentivize collaboration through funding and accountability mechanisms**, expanding pooled financing and rewarding collective outcomes over institutional visibility.

**Design cross-entity initiatives with collaboration built in from the start**. Align systems and processes for joint delivery, through shared ownership of results, interoperable tools, shared data, and simplified workflows that make it easier for teams across functions and agencies to work together effectively.

**Encourage mobility across roles, teams, and organizations** by reforming rigid HR systems, so personnel can move fluidly across contexts, adapt their responsibilities and contribute where they add the most value.

**Make time and space for genuine human connection that supercharges collaboration**, by ensuring regular opportunities across teams and entities that focus on building trust and relationships, not only on immediate tasks or outputs.



# SEEDS ALREADY GROWING



**Crisis-driven collaboration has shown what is possible**, as seen in joint emergency task forces during the COVID-19 pandemic and major humanitarian responses, where agencies aligned rapidly under shared leadership, pooled tools, and common goals.



**Shared operational infrastructure is providing a backbone for collaboration.** Integrated Service Centres in locations like Nairobi and Bonn provide common human resources, finance, and logistics services across agencies.



**Digital and data interoperability is advancing**, with initiatives such as UN INFO, the UN Data Strategy, and the Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) harmonizing platforms and standards across entities to reduce duplication, improve transparency, and support joined-up action.



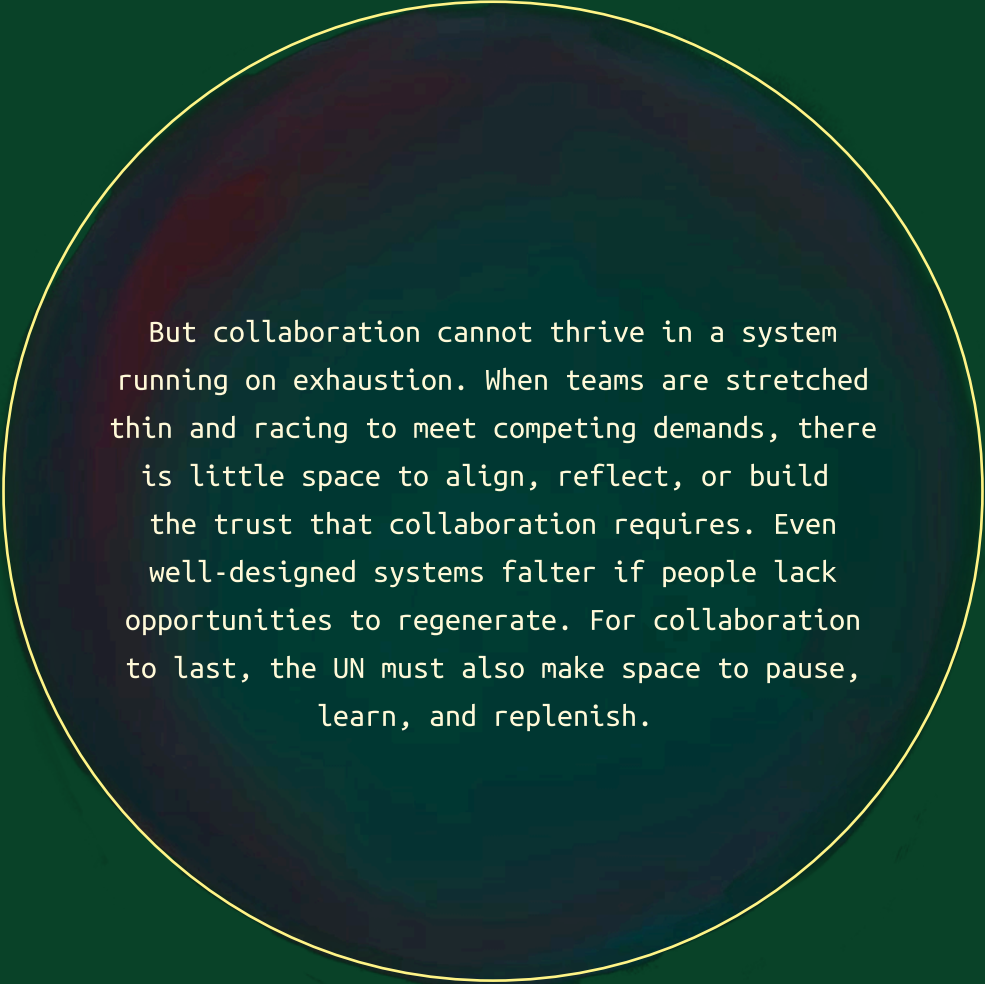
**Efforts to improve mobility and interoperability are underway**, such as the development of the United Nations Digital Identity, a system-wide initiative to reduce administrative friction and enable easier personnel movement across entities.



**Cross-agency learning spaces are helping build the relationships and shared understanding that collaboration depends on.** UNHCR's Innovation Fellowship, the Global Pulse Accelerator Programme and UN 2.0 communities bring together colleagues from across the UN and beyond to explore innovation, learning, and the future of the system.



**New operating models are emerging**, such as UNDP's portfolio approach, which shifts from isolated projects to clusters of work organized around shared missions. This enables teams to collaborate across silos and levels through adaptive learning and collective accountability.



But collaboration cannot thrive in a system running on exhaustion. When teams are stretched thin and racing to meet competing demands, there is little space to align, reflect, or build the trust that collaboration requires. Even well-designed systems falter if people lack opportunities to regenerate. For collaboration to last, the UN must also make space to pause, learn, and replenish.



SHIFT 4

# RENEWAL

*From bureaucracy and burnout  
to courage, care, and creativity.*





# THE SHIFT

Move from bureaucratic systems that drain people and treat change as a one-time intervention imposed from above to ones that see renewal as a core capability – the ability to reflect, learn, adapt, and replenish energy at all levels.

Renewal is a living practice, integrated into strategies, resources, and everyday ways of working. It means creating space for authenticity and imagination, embedding care into how we work, and co-creating change with colleagues and partners across teams, levels, and contexts.

While the first three shifts focus on reorganizing around purpose and making it real through shared power and connection, this shift is about how the system regenerates itself – not as a machine optimizing inputs and outputs, but as a living system that can learn, adapt, and evolve.

## WHY IT'S NEEDED *and* THE POSSIBILITIES IT BRINGS

Across the UN, many teams are stuck in survival mode. Expectations keep rising while resources shrink. Change processes are mostly carried out top-down, with little room for reflection or ownership. Learning, when it happens, is too often treated as an add-on – a workshop, a review, a retreat – rather than built into the system itself.

At the same time, compliance-driven reporting and overloaded calendars dominate, while well-being is treated as an individual responsibility rather than a shared priority. The result is a system that drains energy faster than it replenishes it. Over time, creativity withers, trust erodes, and with it the courage to question, experiment, or stand up for values under pressure.

This is not just a cultural issue, it is systemic. When systems lack the capacity to learn, care, and adapt, even the most promising efforts fail to take hold. Lessons are missed, innovation stalls, and inspiring pilots and bold experiments remain isolated - unable to spread, connect, or shift the system as a whole. Institutions become more fragmented, harder to coordinate, and slower to respond.

When change is done *to* people rather than *with* them, it rarely succeeds - often leading to resistance, disengagement and anxiety.

Renewal offers a different logic. When change is co-created, ownership deepens, imagination returns, and courage becomes contagious.

When learning, not compliance or box-ticking, drives how we work, teams learn, adapt, and improve together with agility. When care is embedded structurally - not left to individuals - energy is sustained and trust begins to grow. The system becomes not only more effective, but more human.

*Renewal requires everyday courage: to pause amid pressure, to name what is not working, to take risks worth taking, and to adjust course together.*

It is a long-term capability: the ability to stay grounded in purpose, navigate uncertainty, and regenerate from within - especially in moments of disruption. It provides the soil in which new ways of working can flourish. Renewal doesn't just help the UN survive pressure. It creates the conditions for it to thrive.



# THIS SHIFT CALLS US TO ...

**Reimagine change and how it happens**, creating systems and platforms that support personnel and stakeholders to co-create and drive change - shaping, testing, and adapting how organizations evolve through strategies, reforms, and everyday practices.

**Integrate renewal into system design**, so that strategies, budgets, and operational routines allocate time, resources, and incentives for reflection, learning, and adaptation.

**Shift accountability from compliance to learning**, changing how reporting, evaluation, and performance systems work, so they reward experimentation, informed risk-taking, feedback, reflection, and course correction over procedural compliance.

**Treat well-being as a shared responsibility not an individual one**, embedding care, psychological safety, and workload sustainability into organizational planning, leadership practices, and team ways of working.

**Equip leaders to foster renewal**, strengthening their capacity for facilitation, trust-building, and adaptive leadership, and holding them accountable for creating space for learning and care.



# SEEDS ALREADY GROWING



**Participatory change processes are emerging**, with personnel-led design efforts and co-creation spaces shifting how reforms are shaped and experienced from within.

**Values are being translated into everyday behaviours.** The UN Secretariat's Values and Behaviours Framework defines how core principles like humanity can be lived in practice, while the Global Pulse's Creative Practice Competency Framework visualises the attitudes and behaviours to embed creativity in daily work.

**Dedicated time for learning and reflection is gaining ground in pockets.** From evaluations to peer-learning forums and internal reviews, diverse spaces are opening up across the UN system that allow teams and leaders to pause, reflect, and adapt together.



**Mental health and well-being are becoming organizational priorities**, embedded through formal strategies, expanded support services, and leadership practices across entities including UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO.



**Short-cycle experimentation and feedback loops are expanding**, through platforms like the UN Innovation Network (UNIN), UNDP's Accelerator Labs, and the Beyond Lab, which foster low-risk prototyping, real-time learning, and adaptation.



**Internal facilitation and coaching capacity is growing** to support trust, dialogue, and adaptive team cultures – such as FAO's trained network of facilitators and cross-agency leadership labs and peer coaching.





Part 3  
an  
INVITATION

*So, what now?  
Survival, or renewal?*

The choice is ours to make: staff, teams, senior leaders, member states, partners, and all who care about the future of the United Nations.

Can we pause, zoom out, and reimagine the how: how we work, how we serve, how we stay true to the purpose that brought us here – the promise of dignity, peace, and a better future for all people and our planet?

Across the UN, cracks in the old system are widening. Yet alongside them, seeds of renewal are sprouting: pilots, new practices, and communities of colleagues already putting the four shifts into action. The question is whether they will wither in isolation – or connect into something strong enough to reshape the whole.

To choose renewal and support it  
to take root across the system,  
we can start by:

- **Investing time, trust, and resources** in the seeds that already exist – and in the shared ground that allows them to grow together as a system.
- **Creating spaces for collective sensemaking**, where colleagues, member states, and other stakeholders can name what is shifting and explore what needs to happen next.
- **Gathering what works** through living libraries that collect and share practices, experiments, and lessons worth spreading.
- **Nurturing coalitions of champions** inside and outside the UN, aligning political and financial support behind promising directions.

But renewal doesn't need to wait for big decisions at the systems level. Each of us has a role to play →

It also begins with the questions  
we each choose to ask ourselves:

- **As member states and partners:** How might we use our influence – through mandates, funding, and political signals – to incentivize collaboration rather than fragmentation?
- **As UN personnel:** How might we bring these shifts into our daily work – in the way we run meetings, contribute to projects, or shape our team culture?
- **As networks and communities:** How might we deepen and connect the spaces already emerging, so learning and experimentation spread more widely across the system?
- **Wherever you sit:** How do these shifts resonate? Which feel most natural, which feel challenging, and which spark a sense of possibility or curiosity?



***This paper is an invitation to co-create.***

We do not offer a polished plan, but an opening,  
a set of key questions and emerging possibilities.

If you are working on similar questions, or tending seeds  
of change where you are, we invite you to share them -  
and to help shape what comes next.

Survival, or renewal? The choice is ours.  
A new horizon is within reach.