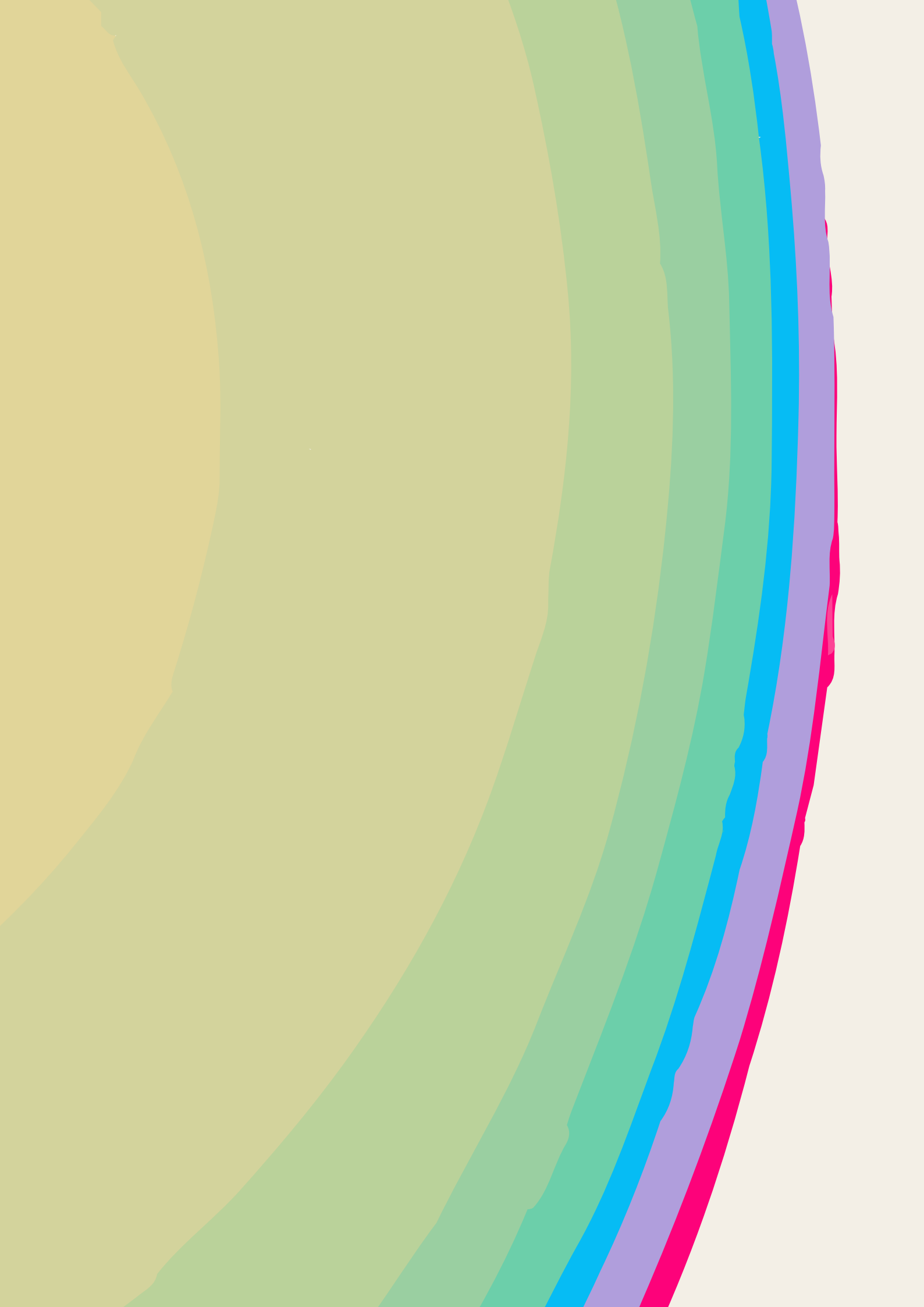


# HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP FOR THE FUTURE

When 2023 is the new 2030



# Humanitarian Leadership for the Future

When 2023 is the new 2030

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# Purpose of this work

In 2019 the IFRC network adopted its global Strategy 2030. While there are many factors, contexts, and situations that will either facilitate or act as barriers in the process of implementing the strategy, leadership is and will remain an essential component to drive the envisioned changes forward.

With this in mind, the IFRC Solferino Academy engaged senior leaders of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in a series of interviews to hear a global perspective and discover what will be important about how we lead in the coming years. We aimed to understand better how our organizations need to change to adapt for the future, and what kind of leadership will be necessary to achieve those changes sustainably.

We aimed to provide spaces for secretaries general, presidents, governing board members, and senior IFRC staff to contribute their perspectives on imagining the critical aspects of humanitarian leadership in the future. This new research showcases leadership reflections from the world's largest humanitarian network, where 15 million volunteers respond to crises and disasters, and support people and marginalised communities in vulnerable situations every day, everywhere.

Leaders talk about the future based on their human experiences, their contexts and perspectives. What you will encounter in this report are not only narratives about the future of leadership and our organisations, coming from very diverse parts of the world, but also a call for change articulated as urgent and crucial, if we are to truly create better solutions for future humanitarian risks and challenges.

We take this opportunity to thank every leader who engaged with us in these conversations. It was an incredible privilege to listen to your stories, personal experiences, worries and strategies to navigate it all. Our hope is that this report not only reveals the richness and diversity of views and approaches

in leadership of our network, but also provides practical ways to strengthen leadership so that it becomes — and remains — future fit.

This is just the beginning. We hope that this initiative will inspire people across the IFRC network to engage creatively and systematically in the search for and support of conditions for leadership to drive transformation.

## Acknowledgements

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## Authors

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**Gintare Guzeviciute** — IFRC Solferino Academy

**Delvin Varghese** — Action Lab, Monash University

# Executive summary

This report seeks to understand what kind of leadership will be necessary to successfully navigate the contemporary and future challenges our organization will face. The research provides a glimpse into the perspectives of IFRC network leaders. Over 30 executive leaders from 30 countries participated in in-depth interviews, below are the key issues, risks and opportunities they identified.

## 1 Global challenges

A range of humanitarian challenges and risks were identified as contemporary and likely to worsen in the coming years, including the climate crisis, an increase in the frequency and severity of disasters, prolonged conflicts, rising geopolitical tensions, poverty, inequality, migration, and food insecurity. These challenges are further compounded by decreasing public trust, the politicisation of aid, and inefficient funding.

One of the main concerns expressed in this study is the increasing uncertainty that the organisation will face into the future, with contexts rapidly changing and being disrupted.

The scarcity of financial and other resources to carry out activities and operations will have unfortunate impacts on communities and individuals in vulnerable situations, but also potentially drive fragmentation in the network. Leaders were concerned for the very future of the IFRC network amid rising geopolitical tensions and resource inequity and asserted that new ways of collaborating and rethinking activities and processes will be essential to ensure collective sustainability.

## 2 Legacies that hold us back

A number of institutional, legacy obstacles that impede our ability to innovate and change were identified; a need to shift away from hierarchical structures that over-exercise power and control; to have more efficient decision-making that enables agility, and to make real progress on strengthening inclusion in decision making structures, improved commitment and investment in nurturing future leaders, better mechanisms to address ineffective leadership and a better balance of power and resources both within NSs and across the network.

Leaders also emphasised the importance of organisational culture shifts that would enable greater likelihood of change and innovation to help us function within dynamic environments.

## 3 Anticipation and risk taking

A key focus was on how to become more anticipatory, innovative and less risk-averse in addressing growing humanitarian challenges. Leaders emphasised the need to systematically analyse the changing environment and to establish mechanisms within our organisations to convert early signals of emerging disruptive trends into decisive action. They also saw that there was much to be done to shift both technical capacities and organisational culture in a way that encourages more appetite for risk.

To help drive better intelligence on emerging trends and knowledge, leaders stressed the importance of seeking diverse viewpoints and perspectives, particularly in dialogue with the communities we support.



## 4 Nurturing workplaces that truly care for people

The significance of creating an environment that prioritises the well-being and mental health of staff and volunteers is essential to establish a future-ready organisation. This could be prioritised by institutionalising policies and creating a safe and supportive working environment. This includes fostering a culture of trust, coaching, and autonomy, and encouraging constructive criticism and diversity. It is crucial for our organisations to measure and hold themselves accountable for all efforts to promote well-being and mental health at work, to ensure their effectiveness and commitment to our people.

## 5 Elements of leadership of the future

Resilience and ethical leadership were prioritised, the ability to make sound decisions and maintain a strong sense of purpose under pressure. Investing in the development of sustainable local leadership, particularly in branches and communities, and focusing on the development of young leaders were also important.

In a world with so much uncertainty and the potential for large-scale disruptions and shocks to emerge quickly, traditional approaches to planning and strategy were seen as no longer fit for purpose. It is often not possible to 'predict' the future with any degree of certainty. Instead the ability to explore a range of potential scenarios and to understand what their implications may be are essential for building more agile and prepared organisations.

Finally, the importance of building support systems and networks of peers, mentors, or coaches to ensure the well-being and professionalism of leaders at all levels was stressed.

## 6 Approaches for supporting leaders who can navigate the future

Based on the insights and experiences shared by the leaders involved in this research, a number of key principles and characteristics of leadership were identified. The report presents an invitation to incorporate these principles into our leadership practices in the network. They are a guide for the type of leadership needed to navigate the changing global landscape and effectively respond to humanitarian challenges. They include leadership that:

1. Anticipates early signals of change and turns them into opportunities and actions.
2. Is collaborative and intentionally shares power, knowledge and information.
3. Fosters a culture of innovation and open dialogue.
4. Embraces uncertainty, challenges the status quo, and recognizes inaction as one of the most significant risks.
5. Invests time in nurturing others.
6. Includes marginalised and under-represented people in decision-making and strategy processes.
7. Prioritises mental health and well-being for others, and for themselves.
8. Engages in self-reflection and ongoing learning.

In order to help achieve these characteristics and competencies, leaders suggested a number of concrete initiatives including; transformative peer-to-peer support, spaces for collective learning, study tours, and intensive 'leadership of the future' courses.

Overall, building an innovative, high impact, and sustainable organisation requires nurturing leaders at all levels. Investing systematically in leadership support and providing opportunities for honest conversations and experimentation is essential to foster a culture of learning and create a more dynamic and sustainable organisation.

# 1 Report on the Future of Humanitarian Leadership

## Global challenges

Before delving into the specific leadership requirements for the humanitarian sector in the coming years, we sought to gain insight from IFRC leaders on their perceptions of the biggest future humanitarian challenges and risks. The following is a summary of their main observations.

The climate crisis, an increase in the frequency and severity of disasters, prolonged conflicts, rising political tensions, poverty, inequality, migration, and food insecurity featured prominently. These challenges are further compounded by decreasing public trust, the politicisation of aid, and unequal funding. Many of these have been identified and profiled previously, including in our IFRC Strategy 2030, however a few themes particularly emerged;

## Higher Uncertainty

It is clear that *“the future will put us in positions of uncertainty”* while at the same time we must continue to assist communities in vulnerable situations as humanitarian needs continue to increase. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted this reality, demonstrating how quickly that uncertainty can arise, and how difficult it can be to predict and plan for. We must accept that *“we will be operating in higher uncertainty in the future”* and develop ways to continuously make sense of what is emerging to adapt our strategies and solutions as necessary.

Uncertainty intertwined with misinformation and disinformation alongside decreasing trust in institutions adds another layer of complexity that will require leaders to be more transparent, diligent and flexible when making crucial strategic decisions. Polycrisis will require us to explore multiple integrated initiatives rather than singular vertical responses. *“How do I move around in complex scenarios? What solutions do I bring and not one solution?”*

One key aspect of this will be the ability of leaders to rapidly try multiple different approaches and to recognize when things are not working out, and be willing to “drop it and try something new.” By continuously experimenting and innovating, leaders will be able to *“survive and navigate in a very complex situation.”* This, however, requires different institutional cultures and processes than we may currently have.

## Resource scarcity

Resource scarcity in the humanitarian sector compounds many of the challenges we face.

*“There are more issues across the world that will create serious resource constraints. We should prepare for those times when we would have very limited resources with higher humanitarian challenges to address.”*

Leaders agree that resource scarcity would worsen the vulnerabilities of already at-risk individuals and communities. Furthermore we are experiencing what is often referred to as a permacrisis, where the global humanitarian outlook we are facing is marked by consistent crises persisting across multiple domains, including those that may likely not go away such as the climate crisis.

*“The resources are going to get even more scarce. Obviously with scarce resources there will be more vulnerabilities. In terms of severity, in terms of vulnerabilities, it is only going to get worse”.*

There were diverse views on how resource scarcity is being experienced by different National Societies. Reflecting on the humanitarian response to COVID-19, some of the leaders talked about the collective power of the Red Cross and Red Crescent coming together in solidarity.

*“In our region we came together in solidarity to support each other in terms of expertise, peer to peer support and learning experience”.*

This reflection was shared by some IFRC regions that used the pandemic as a catalyst to work better together. Indeed there is much to be proud of in terms of how quickly and selflessly the network rallied to support each other in some areas, and some positive experiences to build on for the future.

This experience was not necessarily felt equally across all areas of the world, we also heard that *“we were not capable to bring the ones who do not have resources on board equally as we wish”*. For some there was a feeling of being further left behind and unable to cope with the magnitude and severity of the challenges.

As the number of people in need continues to rise, it becomes crucial for leaders to find ways to effectively allocate limited resources and work together *“in solidarity, dialogue and mutual respect”* to support communities in vulnerable situations.

*“When you have fewer resources, you have to make choices, and good leaders make good choices and decisions”.*

This includes looking for innovative solutions (including new approaches to financing), pooling resources, and finding more efficient ways to support National Societies that may have limited opportunities.

## The fight for water

The climate and environmental crisis is an urgent issue where dramatic and unforeseen changes are already happening faster than expected. Among

these is the exacerbation of the water scarcity crisis, already driving tensions, conflict, hunger and migration in some areas. It is estimated that by 2040, global warming will have reduced freshwater availability by a fifth.

*“Water will be a major risk for the time to come. It has repercussions with climate and all these things also, but really the water will be a problem. We will be fighting for water all over the world”.*

## Unity in a time of polarization

The IFRC network will continually be *“exposed to the politicisation of aid leading to huge imbalances in funding”*. There was an observation among some that the increasing geopolitical splits and tensions around the world are influencing our network and driving further fragmentation within it. This leads to the unequal positions and capacities of National Societies to respond to humanitarian crises and having crises that are painfully underfunded. It also layers in complexity in collaboration, humanitarian access, and funding that is increasingly tied to trade, security and other geopolitical influences.

Our future impact and sustainability, therefore, will in part depend on how well we collaborate as a network. While this may have always been important, the current trends and outlook lead many to foreground this as a particular priority.

*“When we talk about strategy, we need to be together. If the network's value is poorly invested and cared for, there can be catastrophic consequences”.*

We stand out among other organizations because of this diverse, local and unique network of National Societies. *“We will need to constantly experiment with how we work as a network to make sure our interactions bring the biggest value for all.”*

The future will also require the IFRC network to find a better balance between accountability and flexibility. *“On the one hand we have money and humanitarian aid, on the other hand, there are people who need this help. But often, it takes a lot of time to connect these two objects”.*

The value of the Red Cross and Red Crescent is in its prompt response to the challenges that arise. To achieve collective sustainability in the future the IFRC network will have to re-evaluate the value chains and ways of working *“finding balance between accountability and excessive bureaucratization”*.

### **Prompts for reflection:**

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How can we improve our ability to read the external environment, including trends and geopolitical changes? How should these insights be turned into actions and integrated into our strategy?

How could we find new transformative ways to collaborate better globally?

How can we enhance our approaches to innovation within our system to find new solutions?

## 2 Legacies that hold us back

We asked leaders about the barriers that currently impede the IFRC network's ability to innovate and change, linked to longer term institutional legacies and cultures that needed to be confronted and interrogated.

*"I don't know why we don't openly discuss these issues throughout the network. I think we are not properly addressing them on a wide scale. That's where the criticism lies."*

### Legacy 1

## "Hierarchical in Essence"

*"Hierarchical structures that exist will not hold for long. It will collapse at a certain point, sooner or later".*

Many noted that our organisation was "hierarchical in essence" in terms of bureaucracy, the power that functions through control, decision-making processes, risk appetite, partnerships and collaborations. This is both fuelled by and in turn, fuels an inability or reluctance to adjust. The future world and its future crises and vulnerabilities will require us all to do better.

While one interviewee felt that *"Hierarchies are natural and have always existed and will always exist"*, they can still be improved and modified to better serve the needs of the organisation, the communities it serves and striving to make organisational structures and processes more inclusive and effective.

Leaders were pointing to the "long and slow decision-making processes" that do not enable National Societies to "move quickly from zero to action" when a crisis happens, particularly unusual or unfamiliar ones. This raises a risk of the organisation "becoming irrelevant and ill-positioned to respond efficiently".



*“What makes us relevant and also ready to respond is our ability to adjust”.*

To increase our adaptability, we need to move away from the “one size fits all” model at times used in our humanitarian responses and instead look for innovative models that would allow a National Society to receive all the necessary support and to design its response quickly.

We also need to become much better at “reading our external environment” and to improve our future literacy skills as this *“should be an organisational competency and not just curiosity”*. These competencies have to be spread throughout the organisation and our decision-making processes should enable us to access these different points of knowledge quickly.

## Legacy 2 “Failing in Mental Health”

Although during the past few years our network took major steps forward in terms of prioritising emotional well-being and mental health of staff and volunteers, much more needs to be done. There seems to be a worry among leaders that if the IFRC network does not institutionalise these commitments into concrete policies and sets of objectives that we measure and hold ourselves accountable to, we will not make a necessary shift for the future.

The future world will not only require more resilience from our staff and volunteers, as almost unanimously pointed out by the leaders, the future world will also require our organisations to provide conditions where people can bring their full human identities to work and feel safe and supported.

Leadership that prioritises its staff and volunteers is crucial for building sustainable and capable organisations. There seems to be a misalignment by prioritising mental health for the communities we serve and how we exercise it within the premises of our organisations.

*"I always say that our first point of vulnerability is our own staff. If we do not have an environment where people feel safe, feel confident, they feel like this is a place that they can thrive in, then there are going to be many issues for our organisation."*

## Legacy 3 **Power imbalances**

This legacy questions the power dynamics in the IFRC network, questions unequal capacities and resources and how those inequalities translate into who gets to make decisions and how.

*"There is polarisation among ourselves — the ones who have, they get more, and the ones who do not have, they get more and more marginalised."*

Leaders talked about a need *"to admit and recognize the power structure"* and how power and uneven distribution of resources are contributing to the lack of collective leadership. Increasing nationalism and decreasing space of the civic society actors were seen to be complicating this. *"These are also the elements which might drive us to even more fragmented leadership"*.

There is a need to investigate who dominates decisions and resources and how that translates into allocation of funding and making programmatic decisions. *"Without having this power concept in your thinking, you can meditate and maybe do some mindfulness, but if you don't recognize this power aspect of it, it doesn't change so much."*

Leaders also discussed the need to reflect on the universality of Red Cross and Red Crescent values in the context of global anti-racism and anti-colonial movements, recognizing that the IFRC network may have a more Western-centric perspective.

*"we have been defending this universality of the red cross red crescent values not really admitting there is this Western attitude coming from an up to down approach instead of looking at the grassroots."*

Another noted,

*"The cultural differences continue to pop up and at times they are more divisive than they should be. I hear Red Crosses versus Red Crescents."*

Some argued that this led to a reinforcement of more "unipolar thinking" within our network where *"more and more debate on some issues is not tolerated. There is only one way of thinking."*

This dominance of thinking and conceptualisation could also impact how we view our work, and the people we support; *"We need to change our way of looking at what is the vulnerability from the white perspective"*

Leaders suggested engaging in deeper self-reflection and open discussions about the organisation's collective leadership, values, and identity as a value-based community. And that a similar reflection on the role that power plays within the organisation's frameworks, approaches and thinking plays out across the network.

## Legacy 4 "Bad leadership lasts too long"

A few leaders noted that, in some situations, people *"who achieve positions of power don't want to let them go."* Not only is there not much space for innovation and change, but the whole system, instead of embracing new leaders, seems to be built in a way that *"represses the development of the next generation of leadership"*.

Leaders were asking, *"What is our role as a collective to call for the system change that would have safeguards for such situations not to prevail for too long?"* How do we build incentives where changes in leadership happen not only when "there is a scandal" but as a systematic way of creating space for young leaders to grow and take up leadership positions?

## Legacy 5

## “Inclusion — What we say and what we do are two different things”

Within the IFRC network, *“we say we want the youth in leadership. We want more women, we want equality. But what we see now, although things have improved, still not at the rate at which an organization like us should be changing.”* Some leaders were saying that *“inclusion of women seems straightforward”*, and still, in many ways, this has not led to the necessary changes in leadership and the necessary speed of change.

Looking into the future, we know already today that the conversations around inclusion will have to be much more complex, taking into account the intersecting human identities and vulnerabilities. It is not just about having under-represented voices at the table. To be just and effective, the future leadership will have to take braver steps *“moving towards collective leadership”* that *“considers diverse sources of knowledge”* and creates an environment where *“decision making power is shared”*.

### Prompts for reflection:

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What are the alternatives to the hierarchical structures that exist within the IFRC network to enable more effective decision-making in times of crisis?

How can we address the root causes of power imbalances and inequality in the IFRC network to have just and equitable distribution of decision making and resources?

How can we ensure that ineffective leadership is identified and addressed in a timely manner within the IFRC network?

What mechanisms can be put in place to advance the next generation of leaders within the organisation?

## 3 Anticipation and risk taking

Respondents felt that there is a clear need for change in the way the humanitarian sector addresses global challenges. Humanitarian actors have traditionally been viewed as reactive rather than proactive, and overly risk averse. However, with changing environments, there is an increasing need to learn and adapt to external dynamics not only in anticipation of shifting trends but to achieve better results with our humanitarian responses.

“I always say that our Red Cross is an organisation that learns to learn. We learn to learn from our own experience, our own activities, and our own situations. And that’s crucial for us to make it better and to go further.”

This section highlights some of the perspectives of leaders on how to effectively become more anticipatory and less risk-averse in addressing global challenges.

### From Reactive to Proactive

There was a consensus that the IFRC network is reactive because of the nature of our work, *“surely when doing some reviews and introspection, as a National Society, we discovered that most of the time we are reacting, we are responding.”*

The opportunity then arises once the crises have been addressed. *“How we can prepare for this disaster so if it comes again, we know whether we will have a different way to handle it.”* As leaders expressed *“it is becoming too expensive to be reactive.”*

Most shared their ventures into implementing Forecast-Based Financing (FBF) projects and developing early preparedness plans.

Others argued the importance of *“being involved at policy level and understanding the country’s future plans.”* It happens that National Societies are sometimes not in line with their countries’ developmental agendas, and that alignment is what helps them to be proactive on various issues.

But not all leaders felt the need to become anticipatory. *“I think there’s nothing wrong with reacting, if you do it quickly. There are think tanks that do that. It’s not our role. Our humanitarian actors are to react and react well and react rapidly. I’m not ashamed of that.”*

## From thinking to anticipatory action

There was strong agreement that the sustainability and effective response of our organisations depend on our ability to anticipate — or at least detect — early warning signals. But a difference was noted between being able to identify new emerging threats or opportunities and to actually convert these insights into strategy, policy and operations, the mechanisms that need to be implemented within our organisations to turn these early warnings into action.

*“It appears that something is going to happen, but there have not been any mechanisms in place to convert this thinking into action. All the learning about preparedness and anticipatory actions have not been fully institutionalised yet!”*

## Diversifying sources of knowledge

Leaders emphasised that to actively be ready for anticipatory approaches, there is *“a need to diversify the sources of knowledge”*, prioritising the knowledge that comes from the communities we serve, communities of volunteers and staff that are constantly engaged in humanitarian responses.

*“I’m not dressing the Red Cross vest on my expensive suit just to show that I’m part of them. No. I’m wearing their shoes and I’m walking their way every*

day because this is about making it happen. And in this situation I'm much more ready for the anticipatory approach."

*"We can, you know, with reasonable prediction, predict what is going to happen a few months, a few years down the line."* We can apply our advantage as community-based National Societies to gather the necessary knowledge to plan ahead and invest in "building your own data"

Leaders also expressed the importance of preparing the communities to mobilize themselves as the first ones affected by these global challenges.

"Preparing our communities, not just Red Cross volunteers or emergency teams that are prepared and trained to respond. That kind of same training or that same kind of knowledge should be placed in as well. They know what to do and that will avoid dependency when they wait for help from outside."

## Becoming less risk averse and the risks of (in)action

How do we manage the risk associated with more anticipatory action and agile management?

*"Leadership is about not shying away from risky decisions and when there is a need for those — taking them decisively."*

We heard a resounding agreement that we, as the IFRC network, have to take more risks, otherwise we would lose our relevance and *"there is nothing that can grow without any risk"*. We also heard that *"they have to be calculated risks"* where proper assessments are conducted of external factors but also our internal capacities, giving leaders a better informed "helicopter view".

As there are a lot of self-imposed limitations to what leaders feel comfortable doing, several have discussed that *"we need to rethink the way we function in*

*society, that means we have to look at boundaries, to clearly understand these red lines and where we can move or cross.”*

There were two main areas that worried leaders because the risk of inaction “*would definitely prescribe our demise*”. One area is volunteering and the other is resource mobilisation. To be successful in driving new volunteer engagement and capitalising on all the opportunities that innovative finance mechanisms offer, we will need to rethink our risk-taking approaches and appetite. We will have to examine change all across our value chain and processes if we are to tackle these issues and this is highly complex.

It was observed though that risk taking may be easier for some than others: “*some parts of the [IFRC] network can have a higher capacity, more resources, more leverage to take risks*”. We, therefore, should reflect on how these risks could be shared collaboratively across the network so that opportunities can be provided to those National Societies who are ready to innovate, experiment and learn, but may not have the resources to engage in frequent experimentation.

*“some actors can have a higher capacity, more resources, more networks to take risk. Because for me the risks are always linked with your capacity.”* Specifically some leaders identified our capacity in risk management processes, “*Our capacity to, or willingness to do this risk analysis is where we need to be better — to read the situation from the risk point of view.*”

Others saw this as less of a capacity issue and more of an organisational cultural issue, that is ingrained in the network and hard to shift, but urgent to address.

*“The culture that we have had (around risk) for a very long time, will not take us in the next hundred years.”*

Mindset within our people and teams was seen as important, finding people that balance one another in the team. “*Conservative and too risky*” helps when having rational discussions on what’s possible to do, but this needs to be balanced with others who have more capacity for risk absorption and a strategic intent to accept more risk.



Some leaders asserted that we cannot continue being organisations that try to do everything everywhere. This behaviour, they felt, makes risk management almost impossible. *“Setting direction and ensuring alignment and focus becomes especially important when you have resource scarcity”*. It is needed because it would allow us to take more risks *“because then, you know what your focus is, what are your strategic priorities, what aren’t your priorities. You know the more focused you are, the more conscious you can be about the risks”*.

In general, leaders clearly expressed that in order to be less risk averse, there needs to be a change in the way the IFRC network approaches challenges.

*“We need to dare. We need to be daring. Daring to think out of the box, daring to have a vision.”*

### **Prompts for reflection:**

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How can the IFRC network make shifts to anticipatory action and adapting to shifting trends much more quickly and effectively?

What concrete strategies could leaders implement to address organisational cultural barriers that encourage risk reluctance?

How can the IFRC network diversify its sources of knowledge and tap into the expertise of its community members and volunteers?

## 4 Nurturing workplaces that truly care for people

Humanity is the first fundamental principle of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and “putting our people first” stands out as a crucial leadership concern and intention. A need to do more in building caring working spaces and turning important declarations into a set of concrete institutional commitments was identified.

*“An important aspect that creates a nurturing organisation is changing the productivity mindset by understanding that happiness is the new productivity. When people are mentally, emotionally stable, harmonised and happy, they produce much better. There is a higher collaboration between the teams”.*

Leaders stipulated that more intentional attention to the topic was required. The role of the leader *“is not just sitting and making big strategies, but making sure that people with whom you are working, they know they are supported, they have a safe working environment.”*

### What does a safe and supportive working environment entail?

It seems to resonate among the leaders that one element of safety is *“a culture where people dare to say ‘I might have this and that problem’, or ‘I need support’.”* This requires a change in the language we use and the ways in which we lead. A supportive working environment calls for *“a coaching way of leading”* where leaders engage with their teams as facilitators and coaches. Trust becomes a crucial element in building such relationships as *“trust is essential to provide people space to give their full potential”.*

*“We don’t understand as humanitarians where the boundary is between giving back to society and feeling depleted”.*

Creating conditions for people wanting to do their best requires *“fostering a sense of purpose”, “trust in people’s capacities”* and *“employees having autonomy and ability to fulfil their ambition”*. Coaching becomes especially important in the light of growing uncertainty and complexity. Instead of control, leaders should act as coaches *“providing for a safe working environment with support systems for people”*. An environment that fosters each individual’s capacities, helps people grow while providing space for autonomy and being supported throughout the journey.

Creating conditions for exchanges of diverse ideas and constructive conflict also emerged as a feature of a supportive working environment.

*“We need diversity in every aspect, especially in thoughts. We need a culture where constructive conflict is encouraged at every level to foster good leadership”.*

Constructive conflict signals a healthy working environment where people are truly engaged in issues that matter to them and can courageously challenge existing ways of thinking and doing things.

*“Whole language has to be changed in order to nurture that culture where people dare to speak out and a culture where constructive conflict is encouraged.”*

Putting people first also requires intentionally looking at how people who are underrepresented and marginalised are included and feel within the organisation. There was a call to build organisations where people can bring to work their whole humanness – *“a more holistic view of human beings that they are not only employees, but they are people who have a whole life.”*

This would require an environment that acknowledges people’s intersecting identities and the challenges that come with that, and building conditions where marginalised groups feel heard and can shape the way an organisation grows, transforms and adapts to the changing world. *“What we do need to*

*be is part of the conversation and to be able to be confident that any decisions made at that table are informed decisions and not based on assumption.”*

## Measuring mental health

The IFRC network also needs to keep itself accountable and measure how much and whether we do enough to promote well-being and mental health at work. As humanitarian responders, we are good at holding ourselves accountable in terms of the quality of our services, how fast our response was, and what the scope of it is.

Constant crisis (or permacrisis), however, is a permanent mode in some National Societies and it often comes at the expense of the mental health conditions of our staff and volunteers. And still today *“there are not any indicators like a trauma or mental problems, tiredness or burnout”*.

Leaders reflected about the strategic decisions needed to institutionalise mental health policies. Such policies and actions will need to introduce accountability mechanisms to actually see how our people are doing in terms of mental health indicators and what is our role to prevent or alleviate mental health challenges and improve people’s satisfaction at work.

Nurturing a healthy working environment was viewed as a shared responsibility of everyone. It is equally important to build *“a culture where people take responsibility for each other and support each other — even if you are not their manager”* and also self-responsibility for your own well-being. The future-fit culture is the one where there is space for it all — working, learning, relating, and caring.

### **Prompts for reflection:**

What specific strategies and actions can leaders take to create supportive working environments that foster trust, autonomy, and personal growth?

How can leaders promote diversity and inclusion within the organisation and create conditions for the exchange of diverse ideas?

What measures can be put in place to hold the IFRC network accountable for promoting well-being and mental health at work?

## 5

## Elements of leadership of the future

Leaders agree that the fast-changing environment, uncertainty and complexity of the world and its humanitarian challenges will require IFRC leadership to build a broad set of skills and behaviours to respond in the future.

The below is not an exhaustive list of the leadership attributes. Indeed, although not explicitly mentioned, the principles of integrity, accountability and transparency as part of the overall IFRC strategic framework will need to be constantly strengthened to ensure impactful and ethical leadership.

This section tries to bring forward skills and behaviours that will enable leaders to be future fit. Together with specific skills for the future, leaders constantly stressed the importance of certain human characteristics, without which they believe our organizations would fail to achieve its humanitarian mission.

As noted by one leader *“the future leader will have to be prepared and willing to accept change and adapt to whatever comes with those changes”*. What will be essential for that to happen?

## Leadership that is resilient and ethical

During the conversations, we often heard resilience as an important leadership characteristic, to be able to operate under immense pressure and not only cope with disruptive changes, but also to be able to do it ethically and inclusively.

A resilient leader is the one *“who is able to absorb the pressure that comes with a lot of scalability of operations but still is able to maintain an ethical operation”*. They

are a leader *“who is able to act under pressure, but still make good decisions and good judgments and is able to pull all the structures of the organisation together”*.

A resilient leader is also one that has a clear purpose and engages frequently with questions such as *“what is the reason why I’m here?”* Resilience also involves leaders taking care of their own mental, physical and emotional well-being. It is about acknowledging that leaders need to build support systems and encourage those support systems provided by networks of peers, mentors or coaches.

*“It is no more a one [person] hero” story.*

*“The leadership and ethics should not be treated as the undertone. We have to be deliberate about it because the more we talk about it, the more people will appreciate that it is not a compromise for the Red Cross to maintain ethical leadership”*.

## Leadership that looks forward

Leaders need to build their capacities *“to accept a certain level of uncertainty and have greater capacities to read the external environment”*.

We will need skills and tools that would enable leaders to be anticipatory, and engage with trends and future signals with curiosity and openness. We need to *“become more knowledgeable about international relations and geopolitics”* and engage with broader geopolitical trends and changes.

Even more importantly, we need leaders who are able to turn those insights into concrete policy actions that make a difference in people’s lives. Without concrete policy actions that are informed and based on the insights we gather, we risk being aware of the changes facing us but unable to adequately shift the institution to be able to confront these disruptions.

One practical tool mentioned by the leaders was the use of scenario planning. Before any major strategic decision is taken, building scenarios around

the key questions we are facing can help reveal potential future contexts we may face, but more importantly provide insight into the diverse options we can consider to adapt to the different versions of the future.

In a world with so much uncertainty and the potential for large-scale disruptions and shocks to emerge quickly, traditional approaches to planning and strategy are no longer fit for purpose. It is often not possible to 'predict' the future with any degree of certainty. Instead the ability to explore a range of potential futures and to understand what their implications may be are essential for building more agile and prepared organisations.

## Innovative Leadership

Leadership is perhaps the single most important feature in whether or not our organisation will successfully embrace innovation. The role that leaders, at all levels, play in promoting cultures of innovation, on creating conditions for innovation to thrive and for helping to grow practices of risk-taking and experimentation are essential.

The role that leaders play in enabling a system to innovate was seen as critical for the future. However it was also strongly identified that leaders should possess their own capacities for innovation.

*"We will need leaders who are able to innovate, who are able to think of new ways of doing things. We desperately will need to find new ways of doing things. Because if we don't, we might even lose that which makes us unique — our volunteers".*

*"An innovative leader, for me, is somebody who can learn, borrow ideas from different spectrums and bring them or design them in a way that they suit their own context."*

Having the curiosity and courage to look for new solutions and create conditions that enable a National Society to engage with new approaches and new ways of working is no longer seen as a specialist skill-set but will need to be a part of all leader profiles.



There were however concerns that we were not doing enough to help leaders adjust to this, to learn the skills of innovation, that *“very few people have been trained on how to take risks”*. A call for the IFRC network to invest in training our leaders on how to take risks and to utilise innovation approaches was seen as important for future leadership development strategies.

## Sustainable Local Leadership

Leaders called for structured investment into the development of local leadership in branches and communities with a special focus on the youth. *“Localization begins with developing local leadership, local capacity to lead at local levels”*. We will be ready to face the future *“only when we will have strong and resilient leadership on all levels of the organization and for that we need to intentionally build support and investment”*.

*“The next president of the National Society today is in one of the branches”*.

Building local leadership also means investing in our volunteers so they are not seen as *“just followers instead of them also taking the lead”*. Our efforts need to prioritize equipping youth and volunteers to think at a higher strategic level and engage them into strategy development instead of volunteers *“only operating as followers or implementers”*.

While it was seen as essential that we continue to identify and recruit new leaders from outside the organisation, there is significant underinvestment and lack of attention paid to how we nurture our internal leaders and a concomitant strong call for investment in strategies to reverse this.

## Leadership that practices self-reflection

The more chaos and uncertainty the future brings, the more intentional efforts leaders will need to dedicate to self-reflection. *“This has to be part of our job description”.*

One of the key aspects of self-reflection has been — and is — that we have to admit and recognize the power structure. Leaders called for courageous self-reflection on decisions and actions we take, on connections we have, positions we occupy and the impact and legacy we will leave for the generations that will follow us. *“What are we doing to ensure that the next generation will have a solid foundation?”*

Self-reflection seems to also offer a way to strengthen our commitment to humanitarian values and principles. *“There will be many things in the future that will tempt us to move away from those values and principles. But I think we must have a commitment to those values and principles. Otherwise, we’ll lose being who we are”.*

Finally, self-reflection offers immense learning possibilities that we are missing out if we do not constantly reflect.

*“The first work starts within me. How can I lead people if I’m not able to lead myself”?*

## Leadership that listens and treasures feedback

The future will require leaders to create structures for constant feedback flows. Leaders should invite feedback from people across the organisation, especially *“from people who could question her or him and say things that leaders might not want to hear”.*

And this should be an intentional and institutionalised practice that would support and help leadership to consider diverse perspectives and approaches

but also create pathways for better decisions and actions. This will require a mindset shift where leaders come to *“listen to learn and not to respond”* and behaviour changes where *“nobody dominates the conversation”* but where *“constructive conflict is encouraged”*.

## Leadership that never stops learning

The success of the IFRC network will happen only if a learning mindset dominates across our leadership.

*“As leaders we have to be open to the fact that it is a continuum. It is something that you have to be open to learn continuously”*.

Leaders agreed that learning should never stop. This is something that calls for a multidimensional approach, as learning should happen in all the formats, from formal events to peer-to-peer informal interactions. *“It is very important to not stop learning”*.

In today’s rapidly changing landscape, leaders must be able to adapt to new technologies and the evolving nature of work. As one indicated, just seeing the potential of artificial intelligence, there will be a need for new skills, knowledge, and capabilities that could radically change and improve our humanitarian responses.

## Humility, honesty, commitment

As one leader pointed out *“humility, honesty and commitment”* are the drivers for change and impact. Together with kindness and compassion they form leadership attributes that will be essential for our network today and in the future. *“Likeability can help you build trust, engage people to get support, good ideas, and understanding.”*

*“Take responsibility when there is a failure and give credit when there is success” — this sounds like simple behaviour, but do we see enough of that in our network?*

### **Prompt for reflections:**

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What are the conditions and ways to nurture effective leadership that is prepared for the future?

How can we ensure that investment in local leaders is sustained and structured, to build leadership at all levels of the organisation?

How can the IFRC network ensure that leaders — particularly those from under-represented and marginalised communities — have opportunities for growth and development within the organisation?

## 6 Approaches for supporting leaders who can navigate the future

A set of key leadership principles emerged according to the leaders who participated in this research. These could serve as contributing to a guiding framework for the just, sustainable and future-ready IFRC leadership that is needed:

1. Leadership that anticipates early signals of change and turns them into opportunities and actions.
2. Leadership that is collaborative and intentionally shares power, knowledge and information.
3. Leadership that fosters a culture of innovation.
4. Leadership that embraces uncertainty, challenges the status quo, and recognizes inaction as one of the most significant risks.
5. Leadership that invests time in nurturing others.
6. Leadership that includes marginalized and under-represented people in the decision-making and strategy processes.
7. Leadership that prioritizes mental health and well-being for others, and for themselves.
8. Leadership that engages in self-reflection and ongoing learning.

These leadership principles and other insights from the senior Red Cross and Red Crescent leaders interviewed have informed a (starting) list for the ways forward to strengthen the IFRC's leadership capacities to transform and adapt to the future challenges and opportunities. Although the formats and the ways of engagement would differ, they would aim to support leaders to

continuously make sense of what is emerging, and adapt when the dynamics are changing.

Leaders overwhelmingly agreed that building an innovative, high-impact, and sustainable organisation requires nurturing leaders at all levels. Investing in leadership development and providing opportunities and spaces for leaders at all levels to lead and experiment, fosters a culture of learning. Building a learning culture that rewards creativity, flexibility and accountability results in a more adaptive and resilient organisation that is better equipped to respond to the ever-changing needs of the communities it serves.

Leaders specifically suggested some of the following strategies we could invest in:

## Transformative peer to peer support

Coaching, mentoring, peer to peer support and reflective conversations — leaders prioritised the value that such one-on-one interactions could bring. This was seen as one of the best ways that leaders could “*support each other in a journey of change.*” A network of leaders as diverse and rich in experiences and learning as the IFRC network is, could be utilised to connect leaders with one another based on their contexts, needs, and experiences around transformational challenges. These interactions could provide a spectrum of support, from walking side by side through a complex transformation to a lighter conversation addressing specific questions.

Many leaders and their teams in the IFRC network are driving profound and ambitious transformations in their National Societies. One-on-one sessions would offer an opportunity for leaders to hear new ideas and learn new approaches, but also have frank discussions around conditions, strategic options, conflicts, challenges and other prerequisites to navigate and lead through uncertainty with vulnerability, courage and openness.

## Spaces where “collective learning can happen”

Despite all the meetings that leaders are engaged in, there seems to be an interest and need for spaces “to foster a new kind of leadership where it would be safe to reflect without risks of being shamed”. By focusing on the strategic questions, hard dilemmas, interconnectedness and systemic risks through the lens of the future, leaders could collectively look for new solutions and ways of working through honest, in-depth, reflective leadership conversations.

Such innovation spaces would invite leaders to examine their assumptions, increase self-awareness and think at a higher level of complexity. Entering such spaces with an open mind and admitting that we do not know all the answers would invite leaders to unpack complex challenges through multiple differing perspectives.

## Study Tours

This initiative would invite National Society leadership to visit another National Society in the process of transformation. It would work as a contextual exchange mechanism for leaders aspiring to lead organisational change.

Such an opportunity to visit, witness and experience would not only help National Societies to better understand the environment and a unique set of conditions that enable or hinder the transformation efforts of their sister Society. It would also give space and time to have in-person conversations about the difficult questions and human experiences without which no transformations can happen.

# Leadership of the Future Program

For leaders who are curious, eager to learn, seek being challenged and step into the unknown, the Leadership of the Future Program would offer an intensive, creative and inspiring journey. Focusing on the changing world and its implications for the IFRC network, this Program would bring thought leaders, inspiring speakers, practitioners, insights and methodologies to re-imagine our organisations and the role of leadership in driving change forward.

The Program would provide an opportunity for leaders to step away from their daily routines and focus on personal and professional development in a new environment. It would invite leaders to wonder anew about the assumptions and biases that so boldly guide our work. Leadership Program would offer insights, space and time to experiment and innovate and collectively create new conditions and pathways for transformations. It would offer opportunities for creativity, personal growth, increased awareness, clarity and focus to lead with impact, humility and trust.

## Prompt for reflections:

Is there a need to create a global approach to leadership at the IFRC network guided by the collectively shared leadership principles?

Could the IFRC network create and agree on a set of competencies and skills for future forward, just and sustainable leadership and way to measure these?

What would be concrete pathways to nurture and develop such leadership across the IFRC network, including bringing in external perspectives and experts?



## 7 Methodology

This research paper is based on a qualitative research methodology using an inductive reasoning approach to unpack what is essential if Red Cross and Red Crescent leadership is to prepare for and navigate future humanitarian challenges successfully.

### Data Collection Sources: Interviews with IFRC Network Leaders

The main form of data collection consisted of semi-structured open-ended interviews. These interviews were carried out virtually. An interview protocol was developed, capturing key research questions based on the research objectives, information from the desk research and conversations with thought leaders and change-makers outside the IFRC. These questions were initially tested on the first set of interviews and were then slightly altered to gain more insights from the participants. The interview process had an interviewer present in each session that lasted around one hour. The interviews took place between September and December 2022 and were all recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Participants

The participants represented National Societies coming from all IFRC regions and operating in different diverse contexts and environments. They consisted of 30 participants; 18 of whom were men and 12 were women leaders. Participants varied in various aspects from age and experience/ years in the line of work to get a holistic perspective on their experiences. The participants interviewed also varied in terms of their roles – secretaries general, presidents, governing board members, and senior IFRC staff.

## Ethical Considerations

Several ethical issues were taken into consideration as this study involved interviewing secretaries general, presidents, governing board members, senior IFRC staff as well as thought leaders and change-makers outside the IFRC network. Before each interview was carried out a recruitment process was done, whereby participants were provided with a general overview of the project and what it entails, to which they gave their consent through email. Before every interview began, the interviewer explained what was expected of the participants and verbally requested their consent to record the interviews for data collecting purposes. The participants were assured that their anonymity would be respected and assured. Hence the interviews were anonymously coded to keep the participants anonymous, and each interview was carried out by a single interviewer to ensure this.

## Limitations of Data Collection

There were a few limitations related to the research. The design of the data collection — which mainly focused on interviews — brought about some limitations, as well as the fact that the research was done virtually. We do not claim that the perspectives coming from 30 participants that were interviewed represent the general conclusions across the whole IFRC network.

As the process of interviewing was done virtually there were instances whereby there were connection problems thus in some cases certain words and or phrases were missing in the recordings.

## Data Analysis

During the initial phase we also did desk research where we mainly looked into the future of organizations, leadership and the very broad global challenges that will inevitably affect our ways of working and leading. We have also

had conversations with change-makers, futurists, thinkers and practitioners coming from other organizations exploring the future of leadership and the future of the humanitarian and development sectors. This helped us shape the initial direction of our research questions.

During the analysis process we made sense of the gathered data by focusing on the responses that directly addressed our research questions. Through that we were able to get several codes, which were narrowed down by coding using the themes that began to emerge. The codes were based on their similarities and differences, to get a clearer idea of the leaders' insights and experiences. Hence a data structure bringing together the codes, themes and quotes was established to address the objective of this research.

