THE FUTURE



OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

BY DANA DAJANI

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

01. The Future of Humanitarian Leadership is **Feminist**

02. The Future of Humanitarian Leadership is **Fearlessly Decolonized**

03. The Future of Humanitarian Leadership is **Local**

04. The Future of Humanitarian Leadership is **Collaborative Partnerships**

05. The Future of Humanitarian Leadership is **Multi-Polar**

06. The Future of Humanitarian Leadership is **Resilient Systems**

07. The Future of Humanitarian Leadership is **Authentic Storytelling**

08. The Future of Humanitarian Leadership is **NOW**



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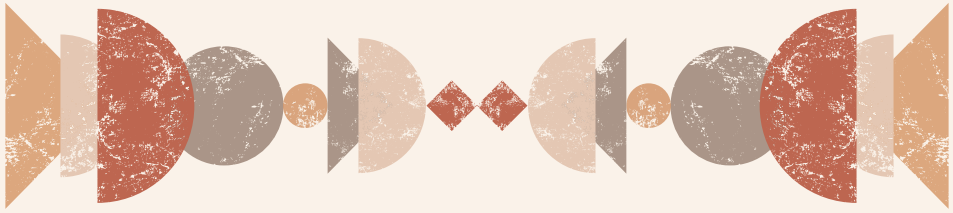
THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS FEMINIST

It begins with **men and women**
addressing **gender inequalities** and imbalances
and working to enable environments
where women and girls can exercise their **innate power**
Don't try to "give them a voice"
but **amplify, value,** and **credit** *their* voices
through **mentorship** and **sponsorship**

With **care** and connection,
building leadership that embraces **vulnerability**,
daring to be **hopeful**,
and radically thinking outside the box—
rooted in solidarity, trust, and **love**

Feminist Leaders know that women are often the **first responders**
to crises in their communities
They organize and mobilize
and **Women Lead Organizations** grow out of these efforts—
labor that the hetero-patriarchal aid system
too often takes **for granted**

Assigned by gender "norms" as **natural** caregivers,
women's humanitarian endeavors
have long gone **unrecognized**—
but do not doubt their **influence**
Women Lead Organizations are **embedded** within their communities,
agile and **vital**
without them, societies will **suffer**



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Yes, Women Lead Organizations
may boldly address **sexual violence** and **reproductive rights**
often all before lunch (while providing **childcare**)
but they don't just "fix **women's traumas**"

WLO's serve the **disabled, ethnic minorities, children**:
communities which are the most **marginalized**
and **politically excluded**
while working towards **environmental justice** as well

Because Feminist Leaders know
that these struggles are **intersectional**
and carry this understanding
into an **anti-colonial, anti-racist** approach
into increasingly **repressive** civic spaces—
contexts where even naming **gender**
can be perceived as "dangerous"

Still, they speak the word without **shame**
even when funding is threatened
and the conversation is politicized
Feminist Leaders **persist**
re-centering women
within movements for **structural justice**
even as backlash grows from the political right and the left

Ten years ago, this dialogue was a **whisper**
Now, it is a **boom**—
and the backlash is proof
that Feminist Leaders are shaking up old systems
as they pave way for the new



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Woven from necessity,
resilience, and **collective care**
Young feminists and girls are leading—
grounded in **healing**, **trauma relief**, and **solidarity**
Building informal **networks**
that stretch across the globe,
crowdsourcing **wisdom**
and refusing to **replicate** the systems
that were never built for or with them

And in the places most affected by **injustice**,
women still carry the beacon of **hope**
holding on to a belief in a better future
to help their **entire community cope**.



THE FUTURE
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IS FEARLESSLY DECOLONIZED

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We are still in **shock**
Witnesses to **system collapse**—
the bare bones exposed,
the foundations of society
crumbling beneath us

We've moved through all stages of **grief**
because the rug was pulled out
and there was **no Plan B**
We know now we cannot continue with
"business as usual"

The **status quo is over**
dissolving right before our eyes
And as we come to terms with this
we understand something **vital**:
there *are* alternatives
and we must take **bold risks**
to ensure **species survival**



The future of humanitarian leadership is **decolonized** because
it **bridges humanitarianism and human rights**
and knows it's not enough to "save lives"
if those lives are **stripped of dignity**
Please, no more "mercenary" or "**missionary**" minds

The system we are leaving behind
was **patriarchal, heteronormative**, and deeply **racist**
It boasted ideals of "**neutrality**" and "**nonpartisanship**"
and was anything but.
Systemic infestation of colonial logic
is why aid favored some crises and **ignored** others
why **empathy** was selective
why history repeated itself

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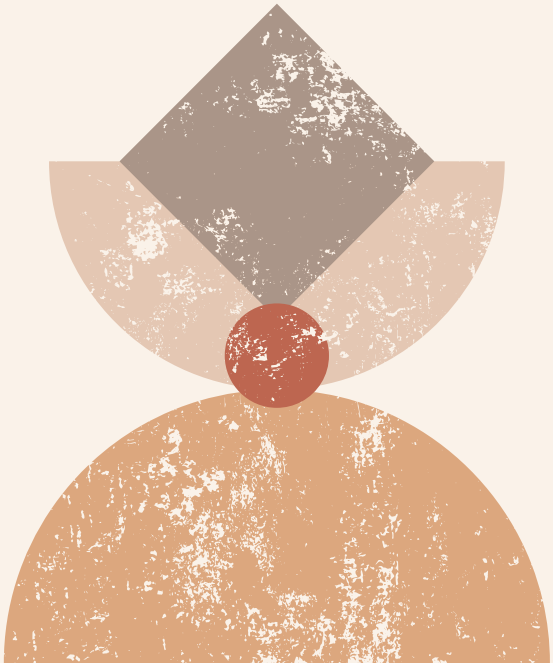
But we are no longer accepting rules handed down from above
The new humanitarian future
is *not* delegated from global North to South
It is **grassroots**
It is **local**
It is **plural**
A **confederation** of communities
that **dictate** the terms
rather than receive them

The future of leadership is **grounded** in lived experiences,
not detached expertise
reclaiming **power for the people**
who have been "**on the menu**" for too long
now claiming their seat at the table
Not asking politely, but **taking their rightful place**
Sorry, not sorry, you must **give way**.



THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS LOCAL

Not from towers, but from **tents**
Not in boardrooms, but from beside broken fences
Local Leadership rises
where dust clings to sweat
and voices tremble but **speak up anyway**

It does not arrive with headlines
or leave through an evacuation route
It stays—
because these are **our streets, our people**
and when the world forgets,
Local remembers

Women feeding families under threat
Youth tracing fault lines in crumbling walls
Diaspora weaving lifelines across distance
This is not called charity
this is **resistance**
Local **resilience**

Grassroots because it grows from our soil;
from shared meals
and whispered strategies
at night beneath candlelight and curfews

It has not waited for permission
it is **already implementing**
Not trained by textbooks
but by the ache of lived experience



THE FUTURE
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IS LOCAL

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So when **public systems fail**
and delivering aid and justice is **criminalized**—
look to the ones
who were **already there**
will always be there
rooted in place because this is their **home**
grounded in family and communal wisdoms

The Local Leaders may not have been asked to lead
they simply **acted with love, autonomously**
because if not, they would be the ones to live
with the **consequences of failure**

In the space between **emergency** and memory
between dignity and **survival**
they endure and **transform** their communities

This is our moment to **honor, support** and **fund**
what is already flourishing on the **ground**
to redefine who leads, and how
This is solidarity from a **structural** perspective
empowering communities to lead their own responses

The future of humanitarian leadership is Local—
it always has been
We're just now
really beginning to **listen**.



THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Humanitarian Leaders understand that
none of us can solve these crises **alone**
and in partnership, we find **amplified power**
and we **grow**
not through dependency,
but **complimentary connection**

Partners, not saviors,
grounded in **cultural humility**
Collaborative, not competitive
cultivating novel strategies that emerge from **shared purpose**

Not transactional, but **transformative**
Partnerships which are equitable
harmonize different perspectives to reach a common goal
This is not the work of one sector
but the effort of **society** as a whole:
private and public systems, philanthropy, governments, and grassroots actors—
from the **hyperlocal to the regional**

Purpose-driven partnerships respectfully **ask the right questions**
then actively listen without judgement:

What can we learn from each other?
What can we do better?
What do the communities we serve truly need?



Partners move from pledge to **practice**, because
It's not just about funding
It's about **relationships**
committed through time, **held by trust**,
creating a culture of **safety** to build openness
because *how* it's done matters

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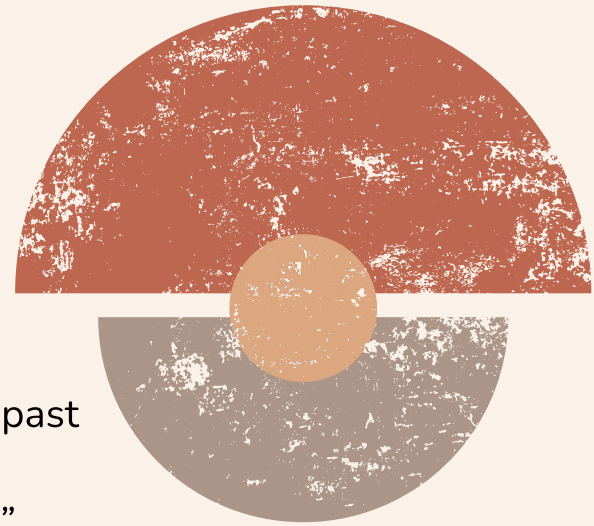
It's about shared or distributed power,
adaptive knowledge and collective decision making
A good partner supports while they reflect,
triaging immediate suffering while asking:
What is needed to sustain this work?

In this multipolar world, leadership shares the mic
and trust-based philanthropy **leads from behind**—
patiently focused on **sustainable impact**
Participatory grant-making flips the script:
What does success look like to you?
And who is missing from this conversation?



Ready to **compromise**
a**ccountable**—with grace
Not top-down instructions,
but strategies which are **co-created**
A good partner is **transparent**, learns from the past
and is not afraid to say:
"This isn't working, let's try something else.."

Ready to **mobilize finances**
with unrestricted trust, and long-term views
not micromanaging funds
channeled **directly**
to those who know how to put it towards best use

Partners provide **liquidity** and promote **advocacy**
so local communities can lead on the ground **self-sufficiently**
Figuring it out together
because frontlines need more than money;
they need **allies**.

THE FUTURE
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IS MULTIPOLAR

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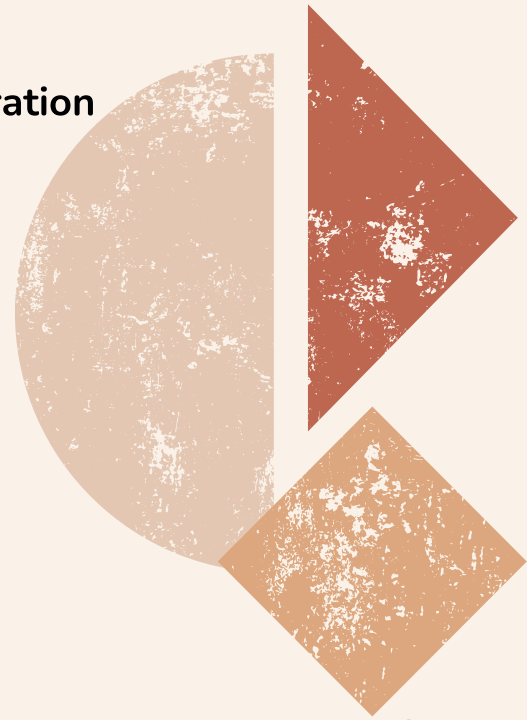
Humanitarian leaders are **grateful** that
the U.S. and others have reduced their aid
not because we don't need **support**—
(It's complex, but not contradictory)
Within the risk lies **opportunity**;
a chance to **re-set the table**
and have new conversations

Dependency has kept us from acting on the knowledge
that there's a better way to **play**
As the world shifts to a multi-polar reality,
more players are stepping up to the plate
Breakthrough **dialogue** in a collective space
will help us to align on **priorities**—
and share **responsibilities**
and this means **shared power**

Governments from emerging economies
are forming **plural systems of solidarity and cooperation**
pooling **influence**
and **breaking monopolies** on authority and funding
so that no one country can ever again
pull the plug
and **drain the life** from our organizations



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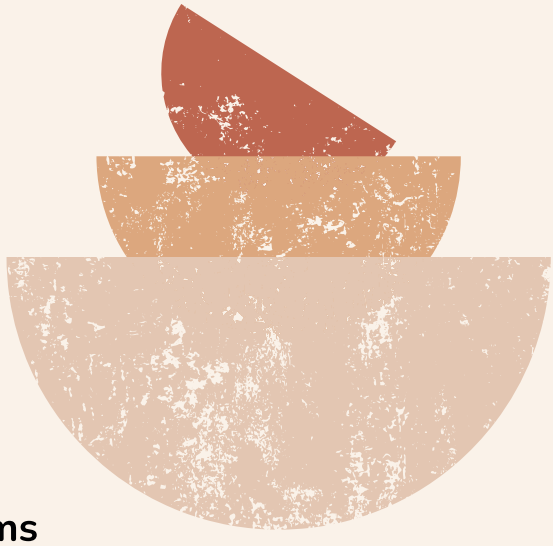
The future of humanitarian leadership
knows it's time to bring our negotiating power **home**—
tapping into **local wealth**,
our own **expertise**,
and our own people to respond to our own **need**



Philanthropy won't fill the gaps left by the U.S.
but it can **supplement** budgets
PS- money is not the solution
We are

Peer-to-peer power cannot be underestimated
It's time to build on **intergovernmental mechanisms**
to engage and influence state and non-state actors
in this new, **dynamic** multipolar world order
which will be: **culturally directed**, independent,
challenging traditional systems,
operating autonomously
based on **strategic partnerships**, and
rooted in **diplomacy**

This is the future of humanitarian leadership in a multipolar world
The roles are changing
no more one-size-fits-all approach
because that one-size has fit NONE
and frankly, we are glad to see it finally come **undone**.

THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS RESILIENT SYSTEMS

As if we were sleeping—
then jolted awake
Not by a single blow
but by the slow **unraveling**
of **what we thought would always hold**

The **crisis** is not the funding cut
The crisis is the **quiet shrug** of shoulders
the **rationed truth**
the line between **complicity and neutrality**
blurring - too often

Governments **delegate survival**
to those with no budgets
who shoulder all the **burden**
As if **civil society** must choose
who lives, who waits,
who disappears uncounted,
who stays behind,
who **dies**

Humanitarian leaders must move—
not within the vacuum
but **across the threshold**

No more silence
while **genocide is normalized**
while bombs are followed by grants
and **soft power**
masks self-interest



THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS RESILIENT SYSTEMS

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No more **“do more with less”**
while the same faces
stay at the top,
firing local staff,
cutting care,
and calling it “**strategy**”



This is *not* the time
to **“make humanitarianism great again”**
It never was to begin with

Let’s be honest:
White Saviorism still defines much of **global aid**
“Leadership” put on a **pedestal**
But power does not indicate **authentic leadership**
and leadership does not imply **power-over**
A new system will **contradict** everything
we’ve been taught to believe about both

> *What if we built models of community survival and alternate economies from the wisdom of those who’ve always done more with nothing?*

Because the **Global South** is already imagining what comes next:
there are **intrinsic collective practices buried deep in our national psyches**—
rooted, **indigenous**, community-minded
ecosystems of **dignity** not dependency
till now suppressed by a global order that feigned to “know better”
No longer subservient, co-opted or compliant
It is time to **unearth them**
and re-center them around our **values**

THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS RESILIENT SYSTEMS

A new social order
begins **within our own borders**
National strength must precede international reach
there can be no international solidarity
without **local cohesion** first

So, **bridge the silos**
step outside of organizational lines
not to rescue
but to **redefine the future**

We are not broken
even if the system is
Humanitarian leaders **dare** to finally end it
and build anew what will truly **benefit the collective**

This is the moment—
not for reform
but for **reinvention**

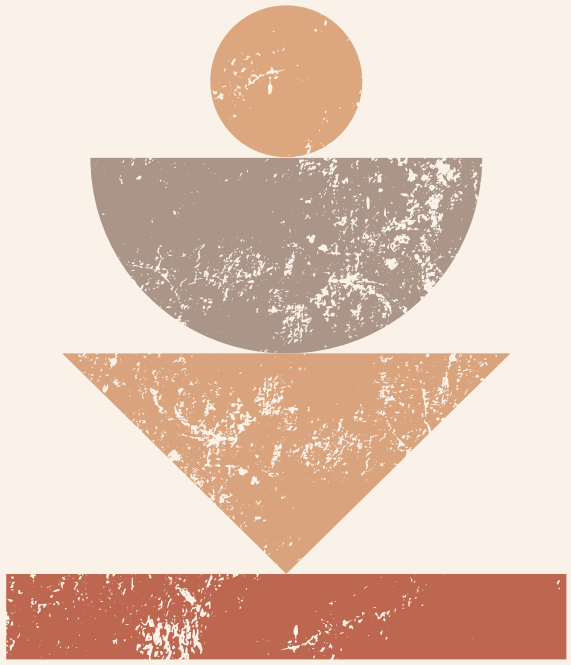
Time is short
Let's be **bold**
bravely step cross the threshold
into **solidarity** that doesn't perform—
but **persists**.



THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS AUTHENTIC STORYTELLING

The future of humanitarian leadership
cannot be calculated on a spreadsheet;
it is a **cacophony of voices**
it is an **audience carefully listening**

Humanitarian Leaders know **when not to speak**—
but to **pass the mic**
and how to give space
to those **long silenced**
without broadcasting their “generosity”



It is not about “helping”
it is an **obligation**—
to truth
to justice
and **to each other**

You can not **whitewash** pain
with polished language
or cinematic slow-motion
It is not a comms problem,
it is a *problem* problem

The future of humanitarian leadership is **narrative based**—
qualitative, not quantitative
It’s not told through the “savior’s” lens,
not about the outsider looking in,
not a crisis framed as
“a sudden storm”
instead, **contextualizing the weathered history**
that brought the issue on

THE FUTURE
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IS AUTHENTIC STORYTELLING

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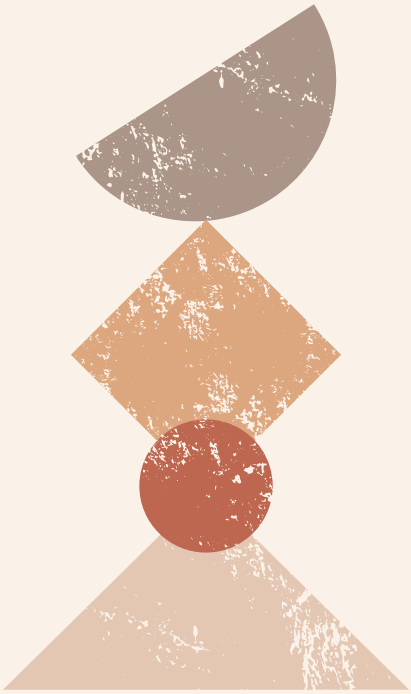
Did you ever stop to think-
Do these communities call themselves "poor"?
Or do we strip away their agency with our "Humanitarian" copy?
"At risk."
"Vulnerable."
"Bearing the brunt."
Words like **walls**
around voices that never asked
for **pity**,
just a **platform**



Know that **truth tellers** are already being silenced
because they are considered a **threat**
It's time to meet your **humanitarian commitments**
and **protect** and **amplify** THEM
Not just through **ethical** storytelling,
but **authentic** storytelling that asks:
Who is being represented?
Who is being centered?
And who is being heard?

Do these "subjects" ever see their photos before your collateral goes out?
*And if so, would they feel **seen***
*or **surveilled**?*
*Dignified or **demeaned**?*
Ask them
I dare you
And, see, if it makes you shudder to think of doing so
know you are probably **propagating unconscious bias**

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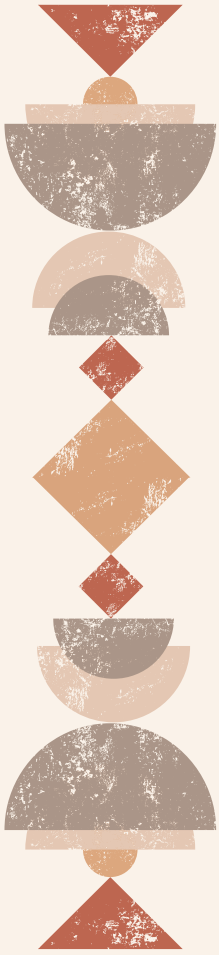
THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS AUTHENTIC STORYTELLING

To **dispel stereotypes** and **challenge discrimination**
in your communications
you must **include your stakeholders** from **conception**
not post-production
Communities must **own** their stories;
they are not clients
they are **power brokers**
and **you do not "know better"**

So don't tinker at the margins
Authentic storytelling means **contextualizing** numbers:
because it's not just data— it's **legacy**
Let storytelling carry
relevant, **healthy pressure**
soft power with backbone
Let it **critique**,
reflect,
and refuse to forget
what was and **what was not said**



The future of leadership
is **not quiet neutrality**
It is **narrative out loud**
a co-created, collective strategy

Authentic storytelling
is not the end—
it is the **beginning**
of a new kind of leadership
that **sees itself**
and **sees others**
clearly

So let us speak with **humility**,
share with **integrity**,
and **step aside**
when the story is not ours to tell.

THE FUTURE
OF HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP
IS NOW

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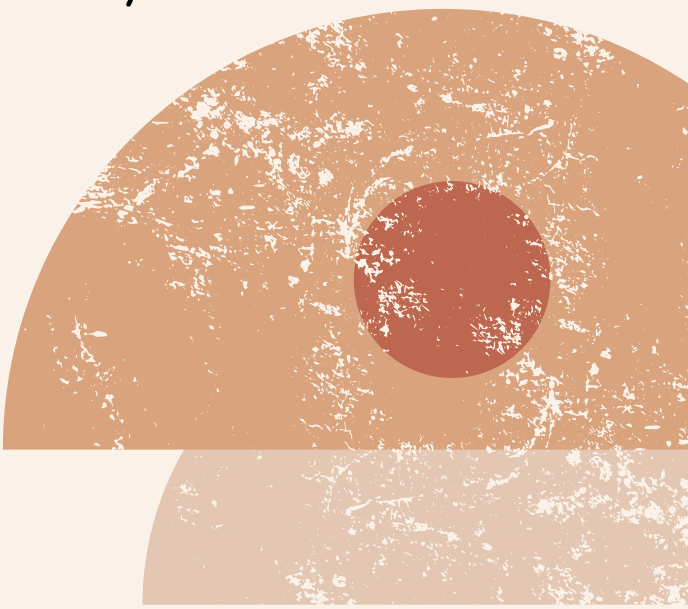
We are the **future ancestors**
What we do today will echo into **eternity**
and has the power to create change **exponentially**



This is not someone else's moment—
it is ours so we will own it
and speak plainly
Unafraid to call a spade a spade
inviting frank, **robust** discussions
because neutrality doesn't save lives—
honesty does

The future needs more than **innovation**
It needs lots of plain **common sense**
90% grounded **logic**, 10% **inspiration** to take **risks**,
with dash of **boldness** to build what does not yet exist

Leadership that endures must inspire **cross-sector collaboration**—
across philanthropy, civil society, governance, and communities

and to do that, we need:
r**igor, optimism,**
collaboration and **inclusion**
so that every voice can contribute to
this **new vision of the future**

Leaders who are:
strategic thinkers
convene with purpose,
flex when the moment deserves it
Yet just as happy to step back with **humility**—

THE FUTURE
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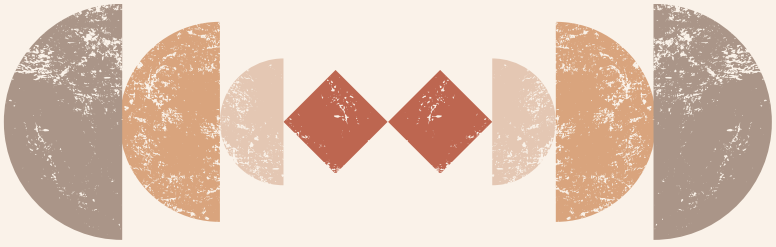
IS NOW

willing to **admit** when a method no longer serves,
put old **assumptions** back on the table
and unpack them to **rework**

The **global landscape** is changing at a fast speed
so as humanitarian leaders we must be agile, **proactive**, and **responsive**
Building trust in philanthropies and partners
who **loosen the reins** and **stretch the timelines**
so our species has a chance to survive
and our systems can transform then **thrive**

Because global **solidarity** is more than a statement—
it is the **foundation** to move forward as a community
and **accountability** is the bridge that will take us there

Humanitarian Leadership today must be **action-oriented, transformative**
Rooted in **courage**, **curiosity**, and **care**
Willing to ask the **hard questions** about the **future**
and then find a way to **get us there**.



These conclusions are a collective **tapestry**
woven from all of the **conference's voices**
I hope you hear yourselves, and see the thread of your **vision** reflected within it
Now that we've had the conversations, let them inspire your **movements**
because **the future of humanitarian leadership is already here**
and it looks like us.
It is us.

ABOUT THE TEXT & POET



This text was written by **Dana Dajani** and crowd-sourced from presentations during the **Humanitarian Leadership Conference 2025: Transformative Leadership in times of Poly-crises** hosted by the **Centre for Humanitarian Leadership** and the **Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies**

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Dana Dajani

Keynote Listener, Poet & MC

Dana Dajani is a proud **Palestinian** writer, performer, and humanitarian advocate.

As a performance poet, Dana uses her theatrical background to bring her spoken word pieces to life while addressing various themes of **social justice** through her characters. Part spoken-word, part one-woman show, Dana employs gesture, character, and a simple scarf to transport audiences through different themes, personas, and perspectives.

Dana has performed in **global icons of culture** such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Sydney Opera House. The creative influencer has hosted and performed for a plethora of exclusive brands including Van Cleef & Arpel, Swarovski, Damas, MindValley, Expo 2020, Etisalat, Blackberry, Huawei, Tag Heuer, and countless others.

Dana was honored as Emirates Woman "Artist of the Year" and received the “Young Arab Award for Entertainment” in 2016. Dana was recognized by Stylist Arabia as one of the "50 Influential and Inspirational Women in the UAE".



Dana Dajani

Writer • Performer • Activist

LET'S STAY CONNECTED

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