

Simon:

The only way to meet the social and environmental challenges we face today is to do so together, to leverage the power of we to accelerate and scale our efforts. Yet as admirable as that sounds, doing so is not so easy. Uniting all nations around a single cause such as the climate crisis is daunting, especially when debates rage and range from whether it's a crisis at all to how to solve for it most effectively. So I'm thrilled to share a very special episode of Lead with We, which is called Our Point of View or POV episode, where we don't do the regular interview with CEOs or founders, but rather I speak with a subject matter expert so that you get to hear our one-on-one discussion through a specific lens. And that lens today is global partnerships. That's why I'm very excited about today's guest.

Ilze Melngailis is the senior director for global partnerships at the UN Foundation, an independent charitable organization created to work closely with the United Nations to drive global progress and tackle urgent problems. You'll hear from both of us about what that process looks like, what progress we're making, and how we can move even faster because no question could be more important today as collective action is the key to the critical impact we need. So from We First and Goal 17 Media, let's join our guest, Ilze, welcome to Lead with We.

Ilze Melngailis:

Thank you, Simon.

Simon:

It is so good to have you, my friend, on the podcast. And I think I'll be remiss if I didn't sort of draw a distinction out of the gate between what the UN is and what the UN Foundation is so that people can sort of understand that. How would you describe it?

Ilze Melngailis:

Well, the UN Foundation is not the UN. So we are the only nonprofit in the world with the UN in its name. We were founded when Ted Turner very boldly gave the UN a billion dollar donation standing at a podium. It was apparently not a meditated decision. Surprised the world. It turns out an individual can't give money to the UN, a dollar or a billion dollars. And so the UN Foundation was founded. So we exist to support the UN and we're a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. We have offices of block from the UN as well. We operate about 23 campaigns and alliances, and we focus in global health and climate and energy and girls' and women's equality and increasingly digital equity and digital access and data.

And then more broadly, really helping to reinvigorate multilateralism and engaging young people in that process and helping the UN be more fit for purpose for the future. And then the UN, as you know, is the UN, it is the most benevolent organization on the planet. It's complex, it's huge, but it represents every country in the world, one vote, and it's where the SDGs were born and it's a place that I'm incredibly proud to be able to work with.

Simon:

And so how would you describe the connection between business and the UN Foundation? What lens do you interact?

Ilze Melngailis:

Well, I'm a little biased because I manage the Business Council for the UN, which is one of those 23 programs. However, we are very, very neutral. I'd say one of the hallmarks of UN Foundation is that

we're so trusted. We're really great conveners and brokers. And so we work with business, but we also work with civil society, we work with foundations, we work with individuals, we work with the creative community, i.e., celebrities, and then certainly governments as well. And in terms of business, the foundation believes, and again, we were founded by a business person, but I definitely believe that we can't achieve the change we're trying to achieve without working with business. So we're very passionate about including everyone, and business clearly has an important role to play.

Simon:

No, absolutely. I mean, obviously the podcast *Lead with We* is all about multi-stakeholder participatory capitalism, but also democracy. I mean, that's the way forward. We need to solve for these things together because we got into this mess together and you mentioned the SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals that were born of the United Nations itself. Here we are sort of roughly halfway point, we're all driving towards 2030 and so on and it really is this framework of 17 different goals that are the most sort of the greatest challenges for humanity and the planet in terms of course correcting our future. So what would you say, Ilze? I mean, how are we going? Are we getting there? How would you characterize the progress we're making right now?

Ilze Melngailis:

We are not making the progress that we need to make. And then because of COVID, the three Cs as the Secretary General has said, because of COVID, climate and conflict, we are further back than we were a couple of years ago. And so no SDG is on track and no country is on track. However, they have produced tremendous amount of progress and they really remain the most ambitious blueprint that the world has. And we are exactly at the halfway point. Simon, you're right.

Simon:

It's funny, I think what we work a lot with clients large and small, and I got a sense that up to just prior to COVID, there was an upswing in dialogue and momentum around the SDGs. It felt like finally it was capturing the people's imagination and then COVID obviously took over things, but there now seems to be such heightened awareness and so much engagement around business. Are you seeing that? Because I certainly feel it.

Ilze Melngailis:

Yes. But one of the things that we're concerned about is that the SDGs, they don't have the top of mind kind of paramount role in all of this anymore. They do certainly and they certainly do for us, and they do for a lot of the companies that we work with. And they do for an increasing number of companies. And I'm not really sure why I've had conversations with some very smart people and we're not quite sure why, but one of the things that seems to be happening is just this focus on ESG and a different kind of reporting and that has galvanized investors in a more concrete way, I think, than the SDGs. And so there's just a real focus on ESG. I might say it's eclipsing SDGs. What do you think? Yeah,

Simon:

I agree. I think there's that aspirational quality to the SDGs out there, which is we know the challenges we face and here we can rally humanity and the best in ourselves to achieve that. And it's something positive that's above and beyond what we're doing already. I feel like there's a punitive side to ESG or regulatory or compliance aspect, and there's climate disclosures coming in the US ESG reports mandated yet there's also in the UK, there's eco side legislation for the five different parliamentary committees of

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the European Union are entertaining this idea right now. And I think there's that side where they feel like the squeeze from a regulatory compliance point of view. And I also think, I don't know whether you've heard this in your conversations, but the Inflation Reduction Act and so on, there's tax advantages for engaging in and around ESG commitment. So I feel like there's both a carrot and the stick side to it. What do you think?

Ilze Melngailis:

No, I think that's about right and that's what motivates people. And then when we actually interviewed companies a few years ago, I interviewed all of BCUN members about the SDGs, and these are probably among the more committed companies, but they also said that the SDGs are inspiring, they're a guidepost, but it's a bit harder to track progress against them. I mean, they were designed for governments.

Simon:

Right.

Ilze Melngailis:

And one of the things that the Business Council did that I'm very pleased with is we were among the groups that helped engage business in the creation of the SDGs. So every company said there are too many of them, it's too confusing, nobody can achieve 17 things and they're too diffused, but they really were addressed to governments. And so from a business perspective, that's one challenge. I personally don't think that it's too many because it literally encompasses everything on the planet and you can't do that at four goals.

Simon:

Yeah, I'd agree. I agree. Because firstly, it's a little bit rich for us to say, well, we created all of these problems and we need 17 different buckets to get our arms around all of them, and it's too much for us to take in. It's kind of like, and also they're connected, they're codependent, there's connectedness between them that we've got to leverage in terms of solutions as well, not just in terms of problems. Another challenge I see out there, even with specific to ESG, even if it is sort of got mindshare over the SDGs right now, is it's such a fast moving target in the sense that, what? We first started 12, 13 years ago, but most recently I've seen it go from sustainability to regeneration to carbon to biodiversity to net positive to nature positive. And it feels like it's very hard for anyone to get their arms around these fast moving kind of narrative encapsulations of what's going on, but at the same time deliver on whatever they require of a brand. Do you get any sense that it's hard for business to keep up with?

Ilze Melngailis:

Somewhat. But that's interesting. I'm just thinking of it because you have a different vantage point. In a lot of ways, you can see under the hood, so to speak, a lot more than I can. And I tend to speak with those sustainability leaders. So maybe it is hard to keep up with, I don't know, because authenticity and really delivering is so incredibly important. And so if we chase too many things, I mean, it takes a long-term commitment to deliver on things. A quote I heard that I love, it was told to me as Chelsea Clinton having said it, I don't know who came up with it, but it said, "We need the courage to be second." Meaning, there's not much limelight including by organizations like mine that you tend to put people on stages when they have a big announcement and when it's something exciting, it's newsy.

But really you need to be in the trenches and dealing with something for years at a time. And so our society and our media doesn't really reward companies for doing that. And one of the trends I'm seeing is much more of an impact focus, which then breeds or supports collaboration. So if people are focused on the impact, as you said a few minutes ago, Simon, everything is interconnected. You can't just solve for one thing, HIV, and then malaria is killing many more people. It's really systemic and people need to think that way. And we need to give companies and everyone and governments, but companies the chance to lean in and work on something for a long time. And we don't reward that right now.

Simon:

No, the media doesn't reward that. And also from a PR point of view, it's not a flashpoint that a company can point to. And actually in some of the work that we've been doing for clients, one of the challenges is they might have had that tent pole moment or event or something that they could point to in the past, but now it's a lot less sexy. What they're doing is a lot little things that together make a difference over time and it takes time. But then they're like, "How do we tell that story for our employees as well as consumers or customers?" So it doesn't play into the media landscape and so on.

Just coming back to progress, I mean, you cannot open your phone or computer every day and look at the headlines without thinking there's something challenging going on. Politics aside, there's some things up and we need to be doing something differently and yet in the last 12 months we've heard about COP 27 and certain progress being made, but certain progress not being made. And we've also had COP 15, which is the biodiversity conference, and there are issues like, would countries like the U.S. and others participate in things like emergency funds, which would take care of the global south, disadvantaged nations and so on and level the playing field? And you hear that those arguably are more culpable in some ways, and therefore on the hook for these reparations or to contribute to these funds are understandably kind of sitting on the sidelines because they don't want to be on the hook.

So what do we do then? What do we do with this stalemate? Because the issues are now clear, the cost is becoming increasingly evident, not just now, but in the future, yet there's responsibility there that has to be sort of, I don't know, executed against or discharged.

Ilze Melngailis:

That is really the million-dollar question of our time. It's an issue that comes up within the UN all the time between member states. You've got member states for more developed nations working with member states from developing countries. And a lot of these arguments play out at the UN and it's incredibly important. And again, the inherent equality within the UN in terms of small nations having in many platforms a stronger a voice as big nations is incredibly important. And thinking about having this conversation with you, I've been thinking about this because I mean you have been really leaning into this concept of we as being so pivotal, Simon, but the challenge that you just laid out is predicated on us having a collective sense. And then yet CEOs and political leaders face tremendous headwinds on that front because not everybody, employees, voters have a we mentality.

Simon:

Yeah. I think that's very fair. And here's how I think about it, because we can only let this tension continue for so long before the consequences and neglect are going to play out in all our lives. It's going to cost us things far more valuable than money. Our daily experience of life will be so compromised. One thing I take heart from in terms of embracing this we mindset, because if we all sat there and said, "Hey, you should all be, you know, lead with we and we should all get out there and here we go." I think it's a

little naive because there's too much self-interest, healthy self-interest, but there's too many forces that are keeping people locked in this sort of putting themselves first mindset.

I think we show up differently in a crisis. I think as we saw with COVID, if you told people in February of 2020 that business would shut down, send their people home, re-engineer their supply chains, look after their employees and communities in unprecedented ways as trillions of dollars were wiped off stock markets and so on and so on, you would've gone, "You're crazy." But I think a crisis does often allow the best of ourselves to show up. And we're living in a state of crisis, which is actually helpful and unhelpful because it awakens us to the need to connect in new ways, but at the same time, it always desensitizes us to the crisis at the same time. So I think a crisis will help us get there because we're going to have to show up in new ways because we're all being affected.

And then I also think that no one's going to escape. I think that there are going to be those who, whether it's because they're in a developed nation or they've kind of got wealth to protect them, they may kick the can down the road in terms of the consequences really being present in their later lives. But I think you're going to see it play out in ways it's going to affect supply chains or it's going to affect your ability to hire employees and so on. So I think we will increasingly come to the viewpoint of necessity, almost against our selfish motives and probably too late in terms of the ideal result, but we will get there in the end. Or do you think I'm being naive and Pollyanna about that? What do you think?

Ilze Melngailis:

Yeah, I'm smiling because I love that I'm talking to a fellow optimist.

Simon:

I know. I keep trying to be pessimistic. God knows I try. This damn optimism, you wake up in the morning and damn, it's still there.

Ilze Melngailis:

Okay, well, life is better that way. And since we're talking a bit about the UN today, and I hope I don't lose my other train of thought, but I realized the other day that I am way more optimistic than most of my friends and people I deal with. And I realize it's because of where I work because all we're doing is working on solutions all day. Yes, I have even more of a window into the problems because I see reports coming through and the minute a famine hits or an earthquake, we're inundated with the data, but so is everyone these days. And yet where we sit, we are working on solutions and I'm immediately in touch with the UN agencies that are deploying humanitarian assistance and we're getting business together and on climate and on global health and pandemic preparedness. There's a global accord that's being negotiated right now to protect us from the next pandemics. And the main arguments within things like that, in the climate and pandemic preparedness, by the way, are what we're talking about right now.

So this is an issue for business, but it's an issue for governments. And I love your optimistic take, but we just went through a crisis. Who could concoct a bigger crisis than COVID? Although Bill Gates and others say there's more to come. And we're seeing tremendous climate impacts already. I mean, I don't know what it's going to take. It is developed nations and developing nations, but it's also haves and have-nots because the haves and developing nations are also clinging to what they have. And so one of the things I think a lot about is how much is this sort of zero-sum game type of mentality, what is motivating at least the people with power to cling to it so hard?

Simon:

It is interesting, isn't it? I wonder whether the bubble or cocoon that folks in that position are in is so all consuming, so pervasive that you... It's not that you don't care, you literally lose perspective on the cost to other people's lives. You become so insensitive to it in some ways. But at the other extreme too, I think a lot of folks aren't changing. We're not changing quickly enough because they're fearful of what's being asked of them. I think there's this really powerful tension right now between urgency, whether it's through the lens of the SDGs or whether it's ESG commitments and also the punitive side of greenwashing. And now what you're seeing, which is green hushing, where a lot of companies out there don't want to talk about what they're doing because they're not doing it all well all the time and they're almost too scared to put their hand up before they're getting slapped down again. So what's your feeling around greenwashing and green hushing?

Ilze Melngailis:

Well, and rainbow washing, which is the name that we've given to this idea of using the SDGs. It's just incredibly unfortunate. I asked that to Sally Uren once, who I also feel like is an incredible thinker in this space and has the most ambitious vision for the kind of disruption that we really need to get where we're going. So I asked her this once because we're always afraid of, we call it blue washing and just doing partnerships with the UN on the one hand and on the other hand, what we can't see in our due diligence is some of the other yucky stuff that might be happening in the background.

And so what she said was that companies are on a journey and we need to honor that. And I completely believe that, and we take that vision when we are doing due diligence when a new company wants to join BCUN or partner with the UN Foundation or UN agency. But I think that either journalist who want a great story or I don't know enough about investing to understand that piece, but investors play a major role in this as well. And I just think that we don't have a culture of giving grace to anybody these days, not to businesses either.

Simon:

That's true. It's interesting, I had the thought of this phrase the other day that I haven't really shared with anyone, "Instead of the great generation we should be the gracious generation." In just in how we show up in the world. I think the investor class is an interesting one because there's a lot of concern that ESG priorities are just business as usual, thinly veiled as something else. And you probably sit at a very interesting intersection between government and business and government with lobbying and all the things that go on that that frustrate the process or the integrity of intent behind democracies and so on. And then there's the investor class as well that if you look at the headlines, there's a lot of mixed motives out there. And then you've got business. I mean, how does the UNF, the UN Foundation, how do these bodies navigate these tension points? Because I'm sure it's not unique to climate. I'm sure you come across this sort of complexity all the time. What do you do? What's the path forward through that sort of a challenge?

Ilze Melngailis:

Well, that's one of the main things that the Business Council does is we convene business together with the UN. So we have been, I think especially useful in the realm of global health because the World Health Organization really has to be careful because it purchases health commodities and there just really needs to be a separation of church and state and they could never be seen or in reality being influenced in any way. And so they've been incredibly diligent, much to the frustration of so much of the private sector, but we really believe that dialogue is incredibly important to helping the UN develop

policies and frameworks that everyone can take action in. It doesn't help if a new policy alienates an entire industry. So dialogue is incredibly important and working collectively.

And I'd say as the Secretary General has said, the UN is open for business, meaning it is really interested in working with the private sector as a major actor in fostering the change that we want to foster. So just to get more concrete, we broke our meetings between private sector, executives and UN leaders developing policy frameworks and it's just a safe space. What we don't do is we don't take a position. So the Business Council and the foundation never takes a position, for example, for business the way other business networks might. That's not our role. All we do is bring them together so that they can hear each other. So around the pandemic accord, there's going to be a lot of discussion with especially pharma companies and global health agencies.

Simon:

All right. Well, just because it hasn't been complicated enough, I want to layer in two more things, which is what I'm seeing recently in a lot of companies driven by ESG expectations or new regulations and compliance coming down the pike is this flight to data where more and more companies are getting more and more impenetrable in terms of the data they're collecting. It's like a shield, at least I can point you to this sort of table of data that it's very difficult except for a few people to understand. At the same time, on top of that, now you've got AI and ChatGPT version four and version five, and all of these good things coming along, which will then further muddy what is knowledge, what is truth, what is known to be true. So whether it's the complexity of data or the potential confusion created by AI, what effect do you think that's going to have on our ability to solve for these issues collectively given the timelines we face? No pressure on that question whatsoever.

Ilze Melngailis:

Yeah, this is where I think I'm going to speak on behalf of myself a bit because that's just such a big heady question. That really scares me, I have to say. It really scares me. And the UN is doing a lot. So another big global instrument that's being developed is called the Global Digital Compact, which is called for by this current Secretary General. It is part of his Our Common Agenda vision, and it's tremendously important. The Secretary General talks a lot about the dark side of technology and then also the tremendous potential that it holds.

The UN is, for example, doing incredible initiatives like one called Giga that I love out of UNICEF that is really basically trying to make sure every school on the planet is wired and that kids everywhere have digital access. And then I sat in on a really fascinating meeting the other day between a giant social media company and about 40 UN executives, not sort of practitioner technical level, having conversations about how various protections are built in. And again, this kind of dialogue is the only way that we're going to get there. The UN questions were very probing and helping hold the company accountable and raising the bar. And at the same time, the company was educating these many, many, many UN practitioners about the challenges that that we have in the social media realm and so on. But the whole AI thing is just terrifying and because of the polarization that we already have and the inability that people have to discern what is true even now, that makes me feel scared and pessimistic in a way that I don't like to feel.

Simon:

Yeah, I think you're right. It's very hard to solve for reality when you cannot really agree what reality is. Everyone's living a different version of reality, not only because algorithms and social media tend to kind of reinforce the opinions that you've demonstrated through what you've posted or what you've clicked

on and so on. So you get more and more set in your ways and so do others, and therefore you get further away from each other. But when you introduce AI and you can have just indistinguishable versions of reality from reality playing out in just infinite ways and generated so quickly, it's going to be very, very interesting to see what happens.

And I think this all points back to this issue of authenticity and transparency, whether you look at environmental, social and governance requirements, and you've got to be transparent about the damage your supply chain is doing or how you're treating your employees or suppliers and so on, or whether it's transparency and authenticity in terms of the claims you're making in public through your marketing, and you say one thing and do another. What's your thoughts on how business and the UN Foundation, how we can align on what is the necessary transparency that's needed? Unless we can see what's really going on, it's very hard to vote with your dollar every day as to what company you want to support or where you want to work or what company you want to invest in. It feels like it's critical, no?

Ilze Melngailis:

I totally agree. I want to hear what you say to that because as I said earlier, you get to look under the hood much more than I can. So I completely agree with you, and I would love to ask you how you think we can get there.

Simon:

Yeah. I mean, I think companies are struggling. They're struggling to keep up. I mean, they've got economic headwinds, they've got this expectation to look after the whole employee now and deal with hybrid work and remote work. They've got a lot of churn across leadership right now, there's a lot of what they call fiscal austerity because of signaling to the market with the big tech layoffs and so on that we all need to pull our heads in, and consumers are tightening their wallets. So they're dealing with all of that at the same time they're being expected to be authentic or transparent. So I think that's not an out, that's not excuse, I just think it's difficult.

Unless a company is willing to not only be demonstrative in public, but they have to be defensible in public about what they're doing, they're not going to survive, and there'll be those who play at it. But I think what I've noticed over the last few years is there not only media activism or consumer activism, but there's now employee activism and investor activism. So if you say one thing and do another, you are going to be exposed from inside your own walls, and that gives me some sort of sense of confidence.

Ilze Melngailis:

Right. Yeah, I agree. I agree. I have a headache question to throw back at you.

Simon:

Please.

Ilze Melngailis:

So I think we tend, you and then I, through the Business Council and the UN Foundation get to work with a lot of the "best companies" out there, and the ones whose leadership is really enlightened and gets it and is really on this journey authentically and is trying really, really hard. And then we have this tremendous social media power. Somebody said the other day that many companies now have, or some companies I guess have a higher net worth than the GDP of many nations. And then companies or many, many companies are basically located in every country of the world. So the role of business is so huge,



and the Edelman Trust Barometer again, came up with, I think for the 30 year in a row that business is the most trusted institution in the world, and there are tremendous expectations on business leaders.

So where I'm going with this is this is great if the good companies do this and if we just have a UN that is so unbelievably benevolent, but what scares me is it's a fight because there are a lot of businesses and industries that, at least in the past, were not scrutinized in the way that you've talked about, and they've wreaked a tremendous amount of havoc and created the lack of trust that people had in businesses so far. So how do we keep the balance on the good and manage the ability of the interests that are against what we're trying to achieve? How do we keep that weaker than the good side? You know what I'm trying to say? Scary.

Simon:

Yeah, exactly. I think there are so many forces working against us, there's three I'd call out. One is legacy industries or companies that don't want things to change. And they are very well organized and very well resourced, and they'll work against this change. Then I think there are a large number of people around the world who want their day in the sun. They want their seat at the banquet table of capitalism. They want their toys and their cars and their flat springs and God knows what, because often those countries or individuals have been part of the process that made it possible for the lucky few to enjoy it, and they want to enjoy that. And then the third thing I'd say is the very sad and growing majority on the planet for whom the luxury of improving the future is just simply not a choice. They're trying to put food on the table, they're trying to heat themselves. They're trying to have light at night. They're trying to not have to pour water every day or drink water so they can actually go and get an education.

So I think all of those are working against us, and it's going to have to come down to who we choose to be, I believe, as leaders through the corporate lens or the political lens and so on. When push comes to shove, are we going to tap into what I believe is innate with us? That we are connected to each other, that we are empathetic, caring human beings, or whether we're going to let the vast majority of people suffer, especially the global south. I was giving a speech not long ago, and at the end somebody said, "Do you think we'll get there in time?" And I thought about it for a second, and I said, "For who?" Because I think there will be those who have fortified themselves against a lot of these challenges in ways they'll be immunized against it and they won't really pay attention.

So I think we are going to come to some threshold at which we're going to have to choose the future we want, who we are and how we're going to show up in the world and how responsible we feel for the wellbeing of others. Because if we think that our lives can be so well insulated and protected, and it doesn't matter that everybody else can go to hell in a hand basket, I think that's just so wrong and so naive and social sighted and so misplaced, and hopefully we won't learn that too late.

Ilze Melngailis:

Yeah, I hope so too.

Simon:

What about in the same way that there's the sort of polarization between the global north and south in terms of opportunity and economic access and so on, what about the climate skeptical out there? Because sometimes I still to this day, when I get to connect with a lot of people at some event or a conference, half the room still don't believe that human beings are complicit in the climate crisis and they feel no onus or responsibility to change what they're doing and so on. What do you say in terms of the forums that you are in when you've got this sort of, it's not even political, it's just different points of

view. I think some people see it very much as an expression of their identity, "Don't tell me what to think and I think X." And someone else says, "I think Y." And they're very, very far apart. What do you do in that circumstance?

Ilze Melngailis:

I think about that all the time, but I never get the chance because I am in this little UN bubble, New York City bubble, and I think I should get in the car and drive around the country a little bit more here in the United States. Maybe I'll come visit you and I'll just-

Simon:

Well, I'm in LA as you know, so you'll probably get the same thing. But honestly, I go to these events and folks really want to... And it's not uninformed. And as much as they say that the energy alternatives out there had their own problems, whether it's lithium or whether it's mini reactors or whatever it might be, different alternatives out there. So it's a bit tough because half the time, unless they've got a perfect solution that works for everyone all the time immediately, then they consider there's no alternative, which makes it hard. But I just wonder whether you see a lot of that in the UN Foundation forum and so on where there's just wide differences of opinion?

Ilze Melngailis:

Not really, but one of the things that I love that we do, we have this really wonderful program called The Better World Campaign, which works on engaging U.S. political leadership and dialogue and connects them with the UN. And so that team takes members of Congress on learning trips to various developing countries, and they go to challenging places, South Sudan, DRC. Those are some recent places where they've taken members of Congress. That's one thing that can be done is just to really open people's eyes because ultimately somewhere, unless people are psychopaths, like some political leaders, unfortunately, there's a heart in there and people are touched and it opens up their eyes. I mean, some of what you're saying is that we are able to live in this. I referred to the political bubble, but there's this just the comfort that we live in. And so it's easy to become complacent.

Simon:

Yeah. Well, actually I want to ask you a sort of related but different question, which is, it's one thing for us in our generation to come to terms with the cost of the way that we are showing up in the world. It's another to think about younger demographics out there. The younger generation, like my daughters, they're 24 and 21, and I think about their future and I worry. What are you doing? What does someone like the UN Foundation do for younger generations? I know you have a future agenda out there, but what do you do to shore up their confidence or their opportunities in the future and how do you do it at scale?

Ilze Melngailis:

Well, one of the things that our youth team is doing is electing youth ambassadors for various topics, whether it's jobs and upskilling or global health or gender equality or climate. So there are youth ambassadors for all of these issues. And talking to young people is probably the best thing that can be done. And it's a very not top-down approach. I mean, there's no mandate that's being given to them. This is just engaging, really forward-thinking young people who have big ambitions for the future in terms of creating change, and then just empowering them and giving them an even bigger voice and platform. So that's another thing that gives me hope. And then there's some lovely work being done on

intergenerational platforms because one thing that happens is young people are young and they haven't experienced much and so they think that, "Oh, okay, we can just do X, Y, Z and it'll produce A, B, C." And then you need some older people in the room to say, "Okay, we've tried. That didn't work, or this happens." And so the intergenerational conversation is really important.

Simon:

We touched on why you feel optimistic before and how I feel optimistic. And I don't think pessimism is a luxury that any of us can afford these days. I think optimism is a self-fulfilling prophecy in the sense that you say, "Hey, we can get this done and together we have a small win, and that inspires another win and another win and so on. And that builds momentum." And I think without that, it's very, very hard to solve for the issues we face. But privately, what makes you optimistic when you wake up each day and you are intersectional, big business and what the UN Foundation can do, and you've got a lens on the government's role in all of this, what's the tone inside the organization and what is the cause for optimism? And is there anything you might share that we can all take away and go, "Oh, okay, that's something we can all lean into at a time when it's so important to stay engaged and then to feel inspired and to keep moving forward."

Ilze Melngailis:

Yeah, it's a very unsexy term. Ready? Multilateralism.

Simon:

Multilateralism. I did not expect that. Okay, that's a \$20 word right there. What the earth does that mean? Come on, what is that?

Ilze Melngailis:

So I mean, it's really what the UN is. It's a bit of what your book is about in some ways. It's about collective action and it's about everyone having a seat at the table and everyone having a voice and power being equally distributed and collective problem solving. And as we were saying earlier, ideally, it's being led by various forces for good like the UN, which is the ultimate multilateral organization. But the Secretary General realizes that it really needs to be reinvented. The world is different than it was in the 1940s when the UN was created. The world is much more fragmented. We have so much more access to information, so much more ability to travel, whether it's humans or viruses or whatever.

And so in this interconnected world, we need a much different way of working together, and it's very threatened right now, the kind of collaboration that we need. And so that's one of the things that the foundation is working on. And so you asked what gives me hope, what gives me hope is the ability to rally really visionary, benevolent leaders and supporting them to prevail over all the other stuff, whether it's what the world throws at us or the kind of the more difficult aspects of human nature that we have to fight with.

Simon:

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I think our ability to work together is what is going to win the day. And I don't think it's naive to think that we're going to show up differently individually and collectively. And I think that we're going to be absolutely amazed at what we can achieve when we all lean in together to new priorities. Because the ingenuity of business and the innovation and the resources and how quickly it can move when it wants to is absolutely astonishing.

So Ilze, I want to say thank you for your leadership. For so long now in terms of the intersection of business and nonprofits and government and for taking head on all of that complexity because it is very, very difficult. But I think the solution lies at the heart of that collaboration. So thank you for the time and thank you for the insights today. And I deeply, deeply believe there's nothing we can't achieve if we do it together.

Ilze Melngailis:

Yeah. Well, you've called it collective purpose, and so what do they say? From your mouth to God's ears. I hope that's what prevails, but we'll keep working on it. So thank you, Simon. This was really great.

Simon:

Thanks, Ilze.

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