



Global Turbulence: Sources and Solutions

The objective of the meeting is to explore the macro-level global social context in which the future of higher education should be considered and the role of education in addressing the global challenges and turbulence now confronting humanity with respect to peace, stability, human security and sustainable development. The meeting will provide a forum for reflection and discussion of the global challenges, their root causes, possible remedies and solutions, and reflect on the relevance, capacities and appropriate role of higher education in addressing them.

We live in turbulent times characterized by rising levels of uncertainty, distrust, and insecurity. Rising insecurity is fueling a polarization of societies, social unrest, extremism, geopolitical instability, violence, and war. These factors are symptomatic of deeper underlying causes. The world is in the midst of a multidimensional global crisis encompassing political, economic, technological, social, cultural and environmental components. Some refer to it as a Polycrisis, some others as a Perfect Storm. Regardless of the name, its origins can be traced to significant global events since the end of the Cold War. These events have led to rapid globalization of society, accelerated pace of social and technological change, imbalances resulting from the transition from national to global, rising levels of inequality and financial instability, increasing concentration and assertion of autocratic and financial power in economy and governance – including the rapid rise of deliberate mis- and dis-information – intensification of competitive economic nationalism, decline in democracy and in the authority and effectiveness of multilateral institutions, a retreat to the Cold War mentality of competitive security, a breakdown of traditional alliances, and a scramble for global leadership to fill the vacuum.

The origins of the crisis can be traced back to the dissolution of the USSR and Warsaw Pact, founding of the EU and expansion of NATO, founding of WTO, birth of the Internet, the liberalization of global financial markets, the East Asian Financial Crisis, Dot-com boom and bust, Sub-Prime Mortgage Crisis, Global Financial Crisis, and a multiplicity of regional and local wars. Most recently the process has been further fueled by the COVID-19 Pandemic, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the renewal of the arms race, the acceleration of global warming, the threats posed by recent advances in generative AI (GenAI), the anticipation of artificial general intelligence (AGI) in the near future, and other real and potential existential threats.

The polycrisis is characterized by a weakening of democratic institutions and protection for human rights, the growing power and impact of plutocratic and oligarchic forms of government, the declining effectiveness of multilateral institutions, and loss of confidence in the media, business, technology, science and other institutions. The sense of shared vision and universal values that provided a platform for international collaboration and global leadership a decade ago is being challenged by a retreat to competitive self-interest and self-preservation that is fracturing domestic priorities and international relationships, and spurring a desperate race for new alliances.

The turbulence is expanding simultaneously in many unpredictable directions like a rapidly moving tropical storm or forest fire of global proportions multiplying in scope, speed and intensity. The storm is leaderless and seems to defy both the efforts of leaders and the collective will of humanity to control, master or direct it. Instead, each initiative to harness its power is fueling unintended and unanticipated consequences. A focus on specific individuals and events is not sufficient to explain the reasons for the turbulence. An understanding of the surface symptoms and consequences of the turbulence is not sufficient for mastering it. We also require knowledge of the root causes that spur and energize it, the social process that determines and drives its direction, and practical strategies that can alter its speed, direction, velocity and consequences, and transform it into a conscious social evolutionary movement.

Response to Global Challenges

In 2013 the World Academy of Art & Science launched a project in collaboration with the United Nations Office at Geneva to inquire into the emerging nexus of global challenges: political, economic, social, cultural and ecological. The study confirmed that all these challenges share certain common attributes. They are all global in reach, impact, complexity, and interdependent with one another. None can be successfully addressed by the unilateral initiatives of nation states, by unidimensional policy measures, or by specialized institutions at the national and international level. None can be effectively understood and explained by uni-disciplinary perspectives, piecemeal policy measures, prevailing theoretical frameworks, or predominant ways of thinking. Our inquiry concluded that fundamental changes would be required at all these levels to address the challenges effectively. It called for a new paradigm in social development based on integrated modes of thinking, a transdisciplinary approach to research and education, and a human-centered, value-based concept of global social development.

The global scope, complexity, and convergence of the multiple crises that interact and amplify one another was recognized by the UN and spurred its members to an unprecedented course of action in 2015, when 193 UN member nations unanimously

adopted Agenda 2030, a comprehensive approach to address this complex nexus of interrelated global challenges. Agenda 2030 included a commitment to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets by implementing a comprehensive set of policy measures within 15 years.

Agenda 2030 is a conscious initiative of the world community to conceive, plan and execute a comprehensive program to address the entire spectrum of major challenges to peace, human security and sustainable progress for all human beings on earth. Never before has an effort of this magnitude been attempted. After an impressive beginning, Agenda 2030 has met with increasing resistance and obstacles to realization. In retrospect, we perceive that even at its inception, the world community lacked some of the essential requirements for such a stupendous collective endeavor of humanity: a comprehensive, integrated theoretical framework for understanding the process of global social evolution; a knowledge of how to consciously guide, manage and lead a coordinated global social process; means to develop the leadership expertise and supporting public endorsement needed for this stupendous endeavor; the capacity to direct and manage global social forces for the security and wellbeing of all; as well as the full array of institutional capabilities, essential policy measures, skilled expertise, program initiatives, and financial support required to respond effectively to the challenges we face. By 2024, only 17% of the SDG targets were on schedule, with nearly half showing only minimal or moderate progress, and over one-third stalled or regressing.

Agenda 2030 is a recipe for global peace and human security for all. There can be no sustainable human security without peace and no lasting peace without human security. Defense spending is rising, while investment in the SDGs falls further and further behind the targets set forth in Agenda 2030. At a time of unprecedented opportunities for global progress, the collective quest for human security of all is in retreat. Those with the greatest power to lead and support global security are turning inward in a desperate pursuit of self-interest and self-assertion.

Neither the crises nor the obstacles they generate can be fully understood without recognizing their interdependence and the root causes related to them both. Effectively addressing the rising levels of insecurity and instability and restoring forward momentum on peace, human security and sustainable development as envisioned in Agenda 2030 will require knowledge, values-based leadership, and action at a still deeper level of causality related to the principles and processes governing global social evolution. It will require a level of consent and coordination never before achieved by the human community. It will require a systematic, coordinated effort of humanity to consciously transform our social values, institutions, policies, and activities in a manner conducive to support the welfare, well-being and sustainable development of all humanity and life on our planet.

The Role of Higher Education in Addressing the Global Challenges

Over the past 80 years, remarkable advances in science and technology have opened up unprecedented opportunities for our collective progress accompanied by unprecedented threats to our collective survival. During this period, global society has followed a haphazard, zigzagged course of development. Today the scope of the challenges and existential threats we face are far greater in intensity and urgency than ever before. So too are the opportunities, capacities and potential benefits for all humanity, provided we chart the right course and persist in achieving it.

The world today needs leadership in thought that leads to effective action. Education has a central role to play in the formulation of those thoughts and preparing global society to accept, embrace and act on them. The intellectual challenge before us is to fully understand the circumstances and factors that have brought us to the present situation, the root causes and deeper processes governing global social evolution, the opportunities and catalytic strategies for effective action. The leadership needed is the willingness and ability to reach out and project a unifying vision and strategy with all those of like-minded values, understanding and willingness for action, to set a common course leading ultimately to peace and human security for all.

The challenge before the intellectual leadership of humanity today is to conceive and execute a plan for conscious social transformation that addresses the root causes of the polycrisis and its manifest turbulence. The plan will need to redirect the energies, organizational capacities, technologies and policies of global society from opposition and conflict to collective action for the common good. It must also include measures to dramatically reduce social tensions, conflict and global military spending; strategies to effectively mobilize advanced technologies and redirect private sector investment into projects that enhance all dimensions of human security and sustainable development; policy-measures to reverse harmful trade wars, stimulate job creation, enhance job security, and reduce economic inequality; applications that harness the power of AI-based technologies to enhance digital connectivity, communications, finance, health, education and vocational training; and the inspired leadership and communication skills required to build a global consensus through a broad network of networks to link together and coordinate the efforts of governments, agencies, and institutions of all types to work for the realization of a common vision of peace and human security for all.

The challenges confronting humanity today are urgent, extremely serious, and multiplying almost daily with the rapid contagion of insecurity and discontent. Urgent action is needed on a global scale. Conventional institutions cannot be solely depended upon to rise to the occasion. Direct measures are also required to reach out to the global general public,

project viable solutions, and catalytic initiatives that can release and mobilize the energies of global society to endorse and implement them.

Such a transformative global social movement is needed to project solutions that effectively address the fundamental needs of people everywhere for peace and human security. Irrespective of the magnitude of the challenges and the time required to address them, the endeavor must begin with measures to reduce the sense of insecurity, instability and turbulence that still continues to grow. We need first to formulate and project a vision of peace, human security and wellbeing that all can respond to positively and to rally around that vision all the progressive forces of humanity for a common endeavor.

Higher education has a central role to play in guiding humanity through these challenging times. This event is intended to explore this global context in order to highlight the opportunities and necessity of significant advances in higher education to fill the leadership void and generate positive momentum for global social evolution.