

"How to unleash the potential of collaboration? - Leading collectively as a pathway to effectiveness"

Ladies and Gentlemen, I feel honoured to be at this vibrant conference in a city I always felt drawn to but never travelled to before today, in a country that always held a fascination for me – not only because it has the most stunning landscapes and great people, but because I have been deeply inspired by three people of Chilean origin:

The first is Isabelle Allende with her amazing skills to tell stories that brings out the humanity in the readers, and that remind us that life is a quest for meaning, purpose and wholeness.

The second is Humberto Maturana, who I had the honour to meet yesterday - with his groundbreaking theories on life as a **complex, interdependent and constant process of “self-making”** – of which we as humans are part – and that we need to understand better, if we want to create a **sustainable future that works for 100% of humanity and the planet as a whole.** His work has greatly inspired my thinking.

The third is the late Francesco Varela, whose book on Ethical Know-how was an eye-opener for me. Building on his work on self-organization and emergence – he advanced the idea that human nature – in its depth and origin – is actually caring, compassionate, ethical, virtuous - **and cooperative**. Because **the universe, in its essence - is cooperative. Life is collaborative**. And we, as human beings, actually know this – and we now that we have the same capacity in us. It is, as Varela says, “as if we were born already knowing how to play the violin and had to practice with great exertion in order to remove the habits that prevented us from displaying that virtuosity”. He inspired me to think about how people create future together.

I am happy to be here as part of a **global community of people who want to make a difference in the world** – for better businesses, resilient societies, and a thriving natural environment. I believe, we are on a journey into a better global future together – with hopes and accomplishments, with setbacks and doubts, and with the capacity to support each other.

Many people say the world is in trouble. And it may be so. But at the same time, it is a time of hope – it is a **time of millions of people being prepared to go the extra mile to make a difference**, for their community or for the world, a time of creative inventiveness of social entrepreneurs, changing mind-sets of powerful industry icons and a willingness of many to join the revolutionary journey towards a more sustainable world. It is almost like a 3D picture – children are better at noticing the pattern behind the pattern. Through my work in supporting many global and local collaboration initiatives in the last 20 years, I have come to see the world with different eyes. It is not the world conveyed through the daily media, where disaster and atrocities dominate the pictures. Instead, I see the world through the lens of people who are busy changing the world towards sustainability, for people-oriented governments, for better and more intelligent businesses that serve the people's and the planet's needs. And for a strong civil society.

Uncounted numbers of people align their professional contribution with the common good. They are often successful, but I also see that **initiatives with the best of intentions fail, collaboration processes fall prey to lingering mistrust, territorial fights, silo-thinking and**

a lack of meaning and purpose. The journey toward co-creating a better future is **not a road without potholes**, people can get diverted by impeding structures, get trapped into measuring questionable metrics, or become depressed by misunderstandings across departments, sectors, organizations, cultures, races, or genders.

As an old African saying says: **“If you want to travel fast, travel alone. If you want to travel far, travel together.”**

I believe the future is in our hands, every day, every moment. But we may need to travel far together. Yet, the **world has become more and more connected and interdependent** – not one country can escape the interconnected global economy, not one company can escape the dynamics of a globalized market, not one person can hide from the effects of an interconnected humanity and the changing environment. We are all in it together. As a global citizen, and even more so, as a member of the **Club of Rome**, I know that we live in times of **global challenges** that we can only **address collectively and in a collaborative way**. These challenges range

from climate change to water scarcity, from social unrest to refugee crises, from environmental degradation to failure of economic systems.

Just a few weeks ago I was at a **gathering of people who I would call game changers for sustainability in the world**. We had a heated debate - not only about the state of the world, but more so about the leverage points for the shift in thinking and acting that the world needs. Naturally, in a gathering with seasoned experts we could not agree, what would be the best way forward - until one person said: “Maybe, it is not about the one path, the one most important leverage point and the one consolidated strategy – maybe it’s is about changing the narrative about how the world works and seeing us in a vast collaborative system of co-creating a future that works for 100% of humanity and the planet as a whole. Maybe we do not need to agree on the exact pathway, but need to connect the multiplicity of approaches so that we can learn from each other, inspire each other, support each other on our journey – and **collaborate with each other.**” This changed the atmosphere of the meeting. People got excited.

So there is maybe something we need to learn – or to re-learn, as Francesco Varela would have called it - and that is how we can co-create a world we can be proud to live in – from the smallest enterprise to the largest corporation, from the voluntary social service to the creation of laws, from pre-school education to business schools. But every journey to contribute to better co-creation starts small and in humble beginnings. That is why I would like to share my journey.

I grew up in the western part of the divided city of Berlin, close to the boarder. At times, when I played with friends we could here shootings from the boarder and when I asked my dad in the evening he explained to me that these were bullets shot by soldiers trying to prevent people from escaping the eastern part of Germany. I did not ask any further questions. As a child, I began to daydream – sitting under a tree and looking over the river. In my dreams, people on both sides of the Berlin wall - took each other by their hands and they all walked over the boarder peacefully and nothing dramatically happened, they laughed and danced together joyfully. That must have been 1966. 23 years later my dream came true. Probably not because I dreamt it, but because so many people must have had a similar dream, and they did what needed doing – they worked together to change the world – and they did change it! They lead

the change collectively. That human faculty of overcoming constraints in a joint effort, of daring to risk the impossible, of supporting each other to persist long enough, never left my mind. It became my underlying quest to find out what it takes to bring this to the surface.

My **professional journey** – in retrospect not surprisingly – took me into an area where crossing borders – in a metaphorical sense - became my day-to-day activity. I helped people overcome mental and institutional borders in areas where people had to work together despite different interests and a variety of perspectives, because working in silos was no longer an option – it would not lead to the desired results. These people who did not necessarily like each other found themselves sitting together in stuffy rooms discussing agreements on more responsible supply chains, plotting joint plans for regional development, or tried to find **innovating ways of doing business in a different way**. They came from industry, NGOs, Governments, producers, farmers, workers and community organisations. And they co-created future – in order to help African farmers increase income, improve the life of mining workers, create a global sustainable coffee value chain, deliver a standard that would protect maritime life, overcome the challenges

of water scarcity, or venture into a global project to restructure the textile value chain so that it would offer a decent living for all involved.

What fascinated me was that I began to see how these collaboration initiatives were **weaving new patterns of interaction between stakeholders** that – under business as usual circumstances – would not talk with each other. They began to understand each other's world. And even, if they did not agree on the content, they could acknowledge each other's position. In one of those collaboration initiatives for a global sustainable value chain, one company representative once told me: **“when the collaboration magic happens, then you suddenly know that the future is at stake. Then you do not withhold your position, but you make sure, you stay in the collaborative field. It is almost as if a responsibility for the whole kicks in. You do not want to lose the opportunity to change the world – even if it is just this tiny next step.”** I believe that this human faculty – to **collaboratively negotiate the path into the future** – is what the world needs.

Once people move into such a collaborative field they find a future path together – despite conflicts, disagreements, vested interests and huge differences in skills, perspective and

cultures. They begin to support each other to find solutions. And this is not about harmony; it is about acknowledgment of difference, and the willingness to co-create future in a constructive way. When this happens, then- despite disagreements and a fierce discourse about the way forward - **a group of people – across departments, across institutions, across countries - becomes vital and resilient and subsequently constructively co-creative.** They become more alive, more capable of solving problems, of spotting innovative solutions and of driving a better future together.

That “aliveness” is a result of constructive collaboration and it is one of the crucial elements of the human side of productivity. Collaboration – done in the right way, enhances vitality and aliveness. Both are crucial for productivity.

This was my assumption: **If we understand the magic of successful and constructive human collaboration, could it become a key to co-creating a more sustainable future? Would it increase our capability to adapt, to learn, to find solutions to problems, to innovate and to be more effective? In business, in society, in the world?**

Drawing on living systems theory and my observations about when and how collaboration works best - this is what I discovered: **the collaboration magic happens when people – consciously or unconsciously – pay attention to six different dimensions** – which are essentially life dimensions - that support each other in their effect.

First: Collaboration becomes more constructive when people connect with a future possibility they want to be part of. When this sense of co-creating future pushes through misunderstandings, conflicts or too administrative procedures - there is a palpable shift within a group of people, almost as if there is a breakthrough of an essentially generative force of life in a collective. So, that human faculty to sense and see **FUTURE POSSIBILITIES** is what we need to nurture.

Second: A process of authentic and reliable engagement is a prerequisite for trust. Trust reduces the transaction costs in a company, in the society, in the world. But trust is gained. It leads to commitment and collective action towards an agreed upon outcome. Reliable **ENGAGEMENT** with each other and with the roadmap into the future makes all the difference.

Third: When people access their faculty to create novelty the atmosphere shifts towards a collaborative field. People invent the new, they walk into the unknown, they are striving for mastery, and they are prepared to take a risk, if it leads to a better outcome. That adventurous human mind plays such an important role in making our collective endeavours successful. So we need to foster our human faculty for **INNOVATION**.

Fourth: We take humanness for granted, but often it gets side-lined and neglected. But it is people who change the world; it is people who improve a country. It is people who increase productivity. It is people who collaborate. We need to nurture our faculty to simply be human, to acknowledge each other as people with dreams, aspirations, longings, doubts, disappointments and pains. Once people can see the human being behind the task, behind the position or behind the mission – they are able to reconcile differences and find ways out of deadlocks. Accessing our **HUMANITY** in each other is crucial when we want to solve the complex challenges of our times.

Fifth: Human beings dwell in the house of language, it is the verbal exchange of ideas, doubts, concerns, suggestions, breakthrough thoughts or grievances that creates the pathway towards solutions. If perspectives get ignored they will pop up at a later stage in a much more harmful way. If opposition gets silenced, tensions increase and lead to destructive interventions. Creating structured dialogues, bringing transparency in to see different perspective, maybe be at times cumbersome, but will always eventually be rewarded and improve solutions. Enabling **COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE** to emerge is a cornerstone for creating a more sustainable future.

Sixth: People start acting much more responsibly – for the collective or for the common good, if they look beyond their limited worldview, beyond their immediate concern, beyond the company, beyond the issue, beyond their particular interest. Once people connect with the larger story of which they can become part of, something tangible shifts in the human heart. It is almost as if love touches them, the concern for the greater good. It is as if they can suddenly hear a music that plays from a place further away – and they want to become part of that orchestra that plays the music. We need to foster the human ability to connect with a larger story, to connect with **WHOLENESS. Because it is story that drives the future of humankind.**

It is purpose and meaning that gets us up in the morning and that makes us feel grateful when we lie in bed and review our day.

It is **lived human connectivity** that changes the world that creates better societies, that improves businesses, that enhances productivity. **It is that feeling of aliveness that is fostered through collaboration. With a feeling of aliveness, we become more productive in a collaborative space.** We become more vital and more resilient. And contribute to our company or our society so that it becomes more vital and more resilient. What then would this mean for our **collective ability to unleash the potential of collaboration – for better, and more productive businesses, for better and more equal societies? For a world that works for 100% of humanity and the planet as a whole?**

If you take the **Collective Leadership Compass** that I have developed as a meta-level guiding structure to design your strategy towards vitality and resilience, you can translate the six dimensions into actions that suit your context, your issue, your collaboration challenges. But pay attention to the deeper life principles that lie beneath the six dimensions.

Just as an example: Step one is to connect people around a **future that speaks to their hearts** – a company vision is a step into this direction, but it needs to be a vision that helps people to see how this vision improves life on this planet – and contributes to the common good. If the goal is too small and too short-sighted, people will not commit.

Step two is to reliably **engage internal and external stakeholders** as contributors to a joint vision. Avoid false participation and create experiences of achieving joint results – no matter how small. **Foster connections** build networks and create collective actions teams around issues of common interest.

Step three is to **acknowledge the creative urge** in every person. People who feel alive, acknowledged and empowered invent possibilities where there seem to be no. They see opportunities where others give up. They turn crises into opportunities and become entrepreneurial where others become afraid.

Step four is to create an atmosphere where people can come to work as people – and don't have to leave their dreams and hopes, their setbacks and doubts, their happiness at home. **Welcome the whole person.**

Step five is to **create space for structured dialogue** where it is needed. Not everything needs to be talked over with everybody. But the roadmap into the future must be adequately negotiated. Listen, listen and listen. Let stories be told and tell stories.

Step six is helping everybody to **connect to a larger story**. Ensure people are aware how they operate in a larger context – the entire company, a region, the society, globalized world – our universe. Make sure people know that their contribution to making this world a better place counts. Help them make a difference in the world – no matter what business you are in.

Together the six dimensions help create aliveness, vitality and resilience. They foster sustainability and drive productivity. Because they collaborate with each other.

So what has this collaborative journey into productivity and sustainability to do with Humberto Maturana, Francesco Varela and Isabelle Allende? The three people I admire have one thing in common. Albeit from very different perspectives, but all three were and are on a quest to **understand the deeper meaning of life**, they are on a quest to understand **what makes up aliveness. To the benefit of the individual and to the benefit of the whole.** And I believe many of us – if not all of us - are on the same quest.

So I would like to leave you with the words of an American revolutionary I am very fond of, the late Grace Lee Boggs who was a person thriving with aliveness until she passed away last year at the age of 100. She said: „**To be at that time on the clock of the universe when we can make that huge change from „othering“ other people to feeling that they are part of us and we are part of them – that’s a wonderful opportunity. It is a wonderful time to be alive.**“

Thank you.