

Senior Leadership for Peace Seminar 2026: Preparing for the Future in Times of Rupture

Synthesis Report of Seminar Discussions

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Note on Method and Attribution

This report synthesizes the discussions held during the Senior Leadership for Peace Seminar 2026, jointly convened in Geneva by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), and the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland (FDFA). This report was drafted on the basis of session notes and transcripts with the support of artificial intelligence tools. First prepared by Dr Diego Osorio, it was then reviewed and revised by seminar organizers Dr Julia Herzog-Schmidt, Ms Annika Hilding Norberg, Ms Svenja Vollmer, and facilitator Dr Peter Batchelor, for accuracy, balance, and fidelity to the discussions as they occurred.

The synthesis is prepared in accordance with the Chatham House Rule. No statement, position, or example in this report is attributed to a named individual or identifiable participant. The report focuses exclusively on the ideas, debates, tensions, and insights that emerged collectively, and organizes them according to the seminar's official programme. Where illustrative cases or quotations are retained, they are presented without reference to the speaker's identity or institutional affiliation, in order to preserve analytical richness while fully protecting the confidentiality of the exchange. The report does not purport to represent the views of the convening organizations, the editors, or any individual participant; rather, it serves as a faithful account of the discussions, outcomes, and recommendations that emerged from the seminar proceedings.

1. Executive Summary

The Senior Leadership for Peace Seminar 2026 convened senior leaders from across the peacebuilding, diplomatic, humanitarian, security, and governance fields to examine how the practice of peace and security leadership must evolve amid accelerating uncertainty. Discussions consistently returned to a central diagnosis that the global peace and security landscape is deteriorating on multiple, mutually reinforcing fronts. Conflict has intensified for over a decade, intrastate wars are increasingly internationalized into interconnected regional clusters, and the economic and human costs of violence continue to climb even as official development assistance and traditional peacebuilding financing decline. At the same time, the rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies is compressing decision-making timeframes, expanding surveillance and disinformation capacities, and outpacing the institutions, laws, and norms meant to govern them. Participants repeatedly described this convergence of pressures not as a temporary crisis but as a structural "rupture" — a discontinuity in which inherited assumptions, institutions, and operating models no longer reliably function.

A second and closely related thread ran through nearly every session: the erosion of trust as the deepest casualty of this rupture. Discussions on international law traced a legitimacy crisis rooted less in the existence of violations than in their increasingly open, normalized character, and in long-standing double standards that have eroded confidence in the rules-based order well beyond any single recent crisis. Discussions on technology described a parallel erosion of trust in information, institutions, and digital systems themselves, while sessions on complexity and systems thinking argued that many peacebuilding and donor institutions remain organized around linear, predictable assumptions that are increasingly mismatched to the adaptive, non-linear character of contemporary conflict. Across these conversations, participants converged on the view that traditional peacebuilding architecture — built around mediation, agreement, stabilization, and reconstruction — is reaching the limits of its usefulness, and that new conceptual frameworks drawing on risk, resilience, systems thinking, and interdisciplinary practice are required to remain relevant.

The seminar's concluding sessions turned this diagnosis toward leadership itself. Participants converged on a vision of leadership defined less by command, certainty, or institutional authority, and more by navigation, adaptability, ethical reflexivity, and collective intelligence. Practitioner reflections drawn from post-conflict recovery, humanitarian operations, and diplomatic practice illustrated that effective leadership under rupture depends on judgment exercised under irreducible uncertainty rather than the ability to predict outcomes. The seminar did not produce a single blueprint for the future of peace and security leadership. It did, however, converge on a shared conviction: institutions must become learning systems rather than delivery machines, leaders must cultivate humility and self-awareness as preconditions for institutional change, and the peacebuilding field as a whole must build new alliances — with technologists, economists, climate actors, and local communities — if it is to remain a credible force for peace in an era of accelerating complexity.

2. Key Insights

Across all three days, ten cross-cutting insights recurred with sufficient consistency to be treated as the seminar's intellectual through-line:

- **Adaptive leadership over command-and-control leadership.** Leaders who learn continuously, interpret signals, and build coalitions are better suited to contemporary conflict environments than leaders who rely on prediction and control.
- **Systems thinking over linear planning.** Conflict, international law, and technology each behave as complex adaptive systems; institutions designed for predictability struggle to operate effectively within them.
- **Positive peace over crisis response.** Sustainable peace depends on the structures and conditions — institutions, equity, trust, inclusion — that prevent violence from emerging, not only on managing violence once it occurs.
- **Prevention over late-stage reaction.** Prevention is consistently the most cost-effective investment in peace and security yet remains the most chronically underfunded.
- **Risk as a common language across sectors.** Risk-based framing offers a credible bridge connecting peacebuilding to finance, development, climate adaptation, and security communities that speak different institutional languages.
- **Trust as infrastructure.** Social, institutional, and interstate trust function as foundational infrastructure for both international law and technology governance, and their erosion is the seminar's single most recurring concern.
- **Human dignity as a minimum compass.** Across legal, technological, and leadership discussions, human dignity was repeatedly proposed as the flexible but non-negotiable principle capable of anchoring legitimacy amid rapid change.
- **Technology as both accelerator and opportunity.** Emerging technologies amplify existing risks more than they create entirely new ones, while also offering significant tools for early warning, translation, and analysis when governed responsibly.
- **Local agency and accompaniment.** Genuine localization requires shared decision-making and durable institutional strengthening, not only the transfer of resources or risk to local actors.
- **Leadership as responsibility, not status.** Across every panel, leadership was redefined away from hierarchy, title, and control, and toward the deliberate, personal assumption of responsibility.

3. Strategic Takeaways

Synthesizing across all sessions, the seminar's strategic takeaways can be summarized as follows:

1. Peacebuilding should be reconceived as the governance of complex adaptive systems under uncertainty, rather than a linear sequence of mediation, agreement, stabilization, and reconstruction.
2. Trust — social, institutional, and interstate — is the primary casualty of contemporary rupture, and its deliberate, sustained reconstruction should be the central task facing peace and security leadership.
3. Institutions built for predictability should become learning systems capable of anticipation, adaptation, and iterative correction, rather than delivery machines optimized for fixed outputs.
4. Risk offers a credible, shared operating language across peacebuilding, finance, climate, security, and technology communities, and merits deliberate investment as a field-bridging framework.
5. Leadership under rupture is navigational rather than commanding: it is defined by purpose, ethical reflexivity, relational intelligence, and collective intelligence rather than control or certainty.
6. Technology governance is now inseparable from peace and security governance; peace and humanitarian actors need to become active co-designers of technology rather than passive end users.
7. Adaptive institutions — not necessarily strong or large ones — are what survive rupture; redundancy, flexibility, and the capacity to learn matter as much as institutional strength.

4. Major Themes Discussed

This section follows the seminar's official programme, summarizing the substantive content, debates, and insights generated in each major session across the three days.

Day 1 — Leadership for Peace: Strategic Context and Challenges Ahead

Opening Reflections and Emerging Challenges

The seminar opened with a working-group brainstorming session inviting participants to identify the most pressing emerging challenges and early "weak signals" shaping the future of peace and security, drawing on participants' diverse thematic and regional expertise. While the specific brainstorming outputs fed directly into later sessions, four concepts emerged repeatedly across the day's otherwise distinct conversations and came to function as an informal intellectual backbone for the seminar as a whole: trust (social, institutional, and interstate), risk (climate, conflict, governance, financial, and technological), systems (conflict systems, conflict clusters, and complex adaptive systems), and agency and resilience (local ownership, adaptation, prevention, and positive peace). These four threads recurred, in varying combinations, through every subsequent session of the seminar.

Global Peace Index 2026: Key Findings

An evidence-based session grounded the seminar's opening discussions in current data on the state of global peace and security. The presentation by the Institute of Economics and Peace highlighted that global peacefulness has declined for twelve consecutive years, with conflict levels, conflict deaths, and the number of countries involved in external conflict at their highest levels since the Second World War. The economic cost of violence was described as reaching trillions of dollars globally, representing a significant share of world GDP and an even larger share of output in conflict-affected economies.

Participants examined the changing nature of contemporary violence, including the internationalization of intrastate conflicts through external financing, proxy support, arms flows, and cross-border ethnic and criminal ties, and the emergence of interconnected "conflict clusters" spanning the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and West Africa. Particular concern was raised that these regional conflict systems could merge into a broader complex with severe global implications. This was linked to deeper geopolitical fragmentation: established powers were described as facing relative decline while middle powers increasingly pursue autonomous strategies rather than aligning fully with any single bloc, weakening the traditional architecture of multilateral conflict management.

The discussion also addressed the rapid expansion of drone warfare, autonomous systems, and compressed "kill chains" now accessible not only to states but to militias and criminal networks, alongside a marked decline in the success of negotiated peace agreements — conflicts increasingly continue indefinitely at low intensity rather than resolving. Participants used these findings to argue for a shift from "negative peace" (the absence of violence) toward "positive peace" — the attitudes, institutions, and structures, including gender equality, inclusive governance, demilitarization, and ecological sustainability, that sustain peaceful

societies over time. The session closed on a stark imbalance: global military spending continues to rise while investment in peacebuilding, prevention, and resilience remains a small fraction by comparison.

The Future of Aid, Peacebuilding, and International Cooperation

Building on the Global Peace Index findings, participants turned to the financing and architecture of peacebuilding itself. The discussion opened with evidence of significant declines in official development assistance, humanitarian aid, and peacebuilding funding among traditional donors, set against simultaneous increases in global military spending. Participants were careful to frame this as more than a funding contraction: many argued it reflects a deeper structural transition in the architecture of international cooperation, with a more diverse ecosystem of actors — local organizations, regional institutions, philanthropy, development banks, diaspora communities, and emerging powers — increasingly shaping the field.

A recurring distinction separated funding local actors from genuinely localizing peacebuilding: meaningful localization, participants argued, requires shared decision-making, representation in policy processes, and durable institutional strengthening, not merely the transfer of resources. A related theme broadened the very definition of peacebuilding, noting that ministries of agriculture, water authorities, public health systems, and educational institutions often contribute to peace without identifying as peacebuilders, and that conflict drivers are embedded in social, economic, and environmental systems extending well beyond the traditional peacebuilding community.

Participants returned repeatedly to the paradox that prevention is widely recognized as more effective and less costly than crisis response yet remains chronically underfunded because political systems reward visible responses to crises rather than investments that prevent them. The session canvassed emerging financing sources — regional organizations, development finance institutions, climate finance, philanthropy, diaspora and private-sector engagement — while cautioning that these are unlikely to fully replace traditional aid flows and may carry different incentives. The discussion closed by exploring whether risk could serve as a shared analytical language linking peacebuilding to finance, development, and security communities; whether simulations and stress-testing, borrowed from military, cybersecurity, and emergency-management practice, could help demonstrate the tangible value of prevention; and how resilience, adaptation, and the preservation of human agency under stress should be treated as central goals of peacebuilding rather than secondary considerations.

Closing Reflection: Rethinking Peacebuilding in an Era of Uncertainty

Day 1 concluded with a meta-level reflection in which participants stepped back from individual sessions to interrogate the adequacy of peacebuilding itself. A central, somewhat uncomfortable observation anchored the discussion: many of the day's challenges — declining trust, rising conflict, shrinking budgets, technological disruption, weakening multilateralism — have been debated for two decades without generating transformative change. This prompted broad agreement that the field may need new questions and new disciplinary partners rather than further refinement of existing answers.

Participants discussed the potential of simulation-based and experiential learning methods to demonstrate the value of prevention and resilience to governments, donors, and businesses in terms they recognize, and explored risk as a candidate common language across peacebuilding, finance, development, and security sectors. A parallel discussion cautioned that systems-thinking vocabulary is sometimes used superficially within the field and called for greater methodological rigor in defining system boundaries, feedback loops, and sources of fragility. The session closed on the observation that evidence alone rarely changes policy, and that data-driven analysis must be paired with narrative and storytelling capable of making peacebuilding politically compelling — setting up the explicit treatment of complexity, international law, and technology that structured the seminar's second day.

Day 2 — Navigating Uncertainties and Shaping Futures

Complexity, Systems Thinking, and Adaptive Peacebuilding

One of the seminar's intellectual centerpieces examined how complexity science and systems thinking can reshape peacebuilding practice. Introduced by the United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, the session distinguished complicated systems — such as engines or computers, which behave predictably — from complex systems such as ecosystems, financial markets, and armed conflicts, which are characterized by multiple interacting actors, feedback loops, self-organization, and emergent, non-linear outcomes. Drawing on cases including Afghanistan, the Sahel and Lake Chad basin, South Sudan, and Ethiopia, participants argued that conflict is best understood as an emergent property of a broader social system rather than a discrete event tied to a single armed group or cause — for example, conflict dynamics in some contexts proved to be driven as much by social structures such as marriage systems and cattle economies as by ethnic or political divisions.

Key concepts introduced included feedback loops (positive loops that amplify escalation, such as retaliation cycles, and negative loops that dampen it, such as mediation channels) and "attractor landscapes" — powerful recurring patterns such as political polarization or militarized governance that hold the potential to pull actors toward familiar but destructive behaviours. Peacebuilding, participants suggested, can be understood as the deliberate creation of alternative attractors capable of drawing energy and resources toward more constructive pathways. This reframing supports "adaptive peacebuilding": treating interventions as testable hypotheses rather than fixed solutions, to be monitored, adjusted, and scaled only as evidence accumulates, rather than assuming predictable trajectories and stable operating environments from the outset.

The discussion identified a structural tension at the heart of the field: most donor accountability frameworks require fixed project plans, predetermined outputs, and linear theories of change that conflict directly with the realities of complex systems, creating friction between institutions expected to operate adaptively to contribute to lasting change, while reporting against rigid frameworks. Participants proposed shifting evaluation away from whether intended outputs were achieved and toward how the broader system changed — measuring risk reduction, adaptive capacity, and the direction of change — and stressed that interventions inevitably generate unintended consequences as conflict actors themselves learn and adapt, meaning that success cannot be assumed to remain stable over time. Debate emerged on whether

complexity-informed approaches could be reconciled with existing donor structures at all, and a cautionary note was raised against complexity becoming a new orthodoxy in its own right rather than an expansion of analytical possibility. The session concluded that complex systems require leaders who learn continuously, interpret signals, build coalitions, and facilitate experimentation rather than leaders who rely on control, prediction, and fixed plans.

International Law Under Pressure: Erosion, Adaptation, and Future Pathways

One of the most politically charged sessions of the seminar asked whether international law can still function as a meaningful constraint on power in an era of intensifying geopolitical competition. Participants converged on a diagnosis of a profound legitimacy crisis: rising civilian casualties, weak enforcement of legal rulings, selective application of norms, and growing public disregard for legal constraints that would previously have been politically unacceptable. Participants converged on a diagnosis of a profound legitimacy crisis: rising civilian casualties, weak enforcement of legal rulings, selective application of norms, and growing public, justified, and sometimes celebrated disregard for legal constraints that would previously have been politically unacceptable — captured in the recurring image that "the genie is out of the bottle." Many participants argued that the current legitimacy crisis is linked to perceptions of long-standing double standards in the application of international law, predating recent crises by decades. Several noted that, for some states, current developments are viewed as part of a broader pattern of unequal enforcement rather than a sudden rupture.

This reframing shifted the discussion from legal doctrine toward sociology and political legitimacy. International law was described as a fundamentally normative project lacking centralized enforcement, whose effectiveness depends on legitimacy, reputation, and collective expectations rather than coercive compliance mechanisms. Participants proposed several social and political mechanisms for sustaining norms in the absence of strong enforcement: breaking the "bystander effect" among states reluctant to act first, increasing the reputational costs of violations, shifting descriptive norms about what counts as acceptable state behaviour, and building coalitions capable of sustained, principled pressure. A case discussion illustrated that international law increasingly functions less as a shield and more as a framework that political actors invoke selectively when it aligns with pragmatic interests such as sovereignty, stability, and economic survival.

A genuine and unresolved disagreement ran through the session: one position held that international law is clearly weakening, citing impunity and disregard for court rulings as evidence; an alternative position, drawing on current research into peace processes, suggested that international humanitarian law is instead adapting — increasingly serving as a practical entry point for negotiations and trust-building before more politically sensitive issues are addressed, meaning the system may be evolving rather than collapsing outright. Participants agreed that civil society, human rights defenders, feminist movements, and grassroots coalitions are increasingly carrying the burden of norm preservation once associated primarily with states, and that the future resilience of international law may depend as much on social movements as on governments. One influential intervention reframed the challenge in terms of resilience: since international law rests on a social contract vulnerable to changing political conditions, the task is not only to preserve

existing rules but to build greater resilience into normative systems themselves — with human dignity proposed as a foundational principle flexible enough to provide legitimacy without sacrificing durability.

New Technologies, AI, and the Future of Peace and Security

This session examined how peace and security actors can operate effectively when technological change is accelerating far faster than the governance frameworks meant to manage it. Discussion opened on a structural asymmetry: private-sector AI investment exceeded \$100 billion in the United States alone in 2024, dwarfing the comparatively tiny resources dedicated to AI for peace, conflict prevention, and digital resilience. Participants argued that AI rarely creates wholly new forms of conflict; instead it functions primarily as a conflict accelerator — compressing decision-making windows, enabling mass surveillance and precision targeting at scale, generating disinformation and propaganda, amplifying polarization through algorithmic systems, and dramatically lowering the barriers to cyber operations.

A recurring concept was the "civilianization of conflict": technologies that once required state-level resources now allow individuals or small groups to conduct influence operations, cyberattacks, and surveillance, blurring the line between civilian and combatant. Relatedly, participants noted that digital attacks on individuals — journalists, human rights defenders, peacebuilders — increasingly aim to intimidate entire communities, meaning digital security must be understood as protection of social ecosystems rather than individual protection alone. Despite this, institutions across the humanitarian, peacebuilding, and civil society sectors were described as largely unprepared, often lacking cyber risk frameworks, incident-response capacity, or AI governance mechanisms — not through negligence, but because most were designed for physical rather than digital threats.

Balancing this risk picture, participants highlighted genuine opportunities: AI-supported early-warning and violence-forecasting systems, translation tools that reduce language barriers, large-scale conflict-data analysis, and decision-support tools that augment — rather than replace — human judgment in mediation. A significant reframing argued that large technology companies should no longer be regarded as neutral vendors but as geopolitical actors whose influence over information flows, infrastructure, and communications might rival that of many states; peace and humanitarian organizations, as major technology customers, were urged to recognize and use the leverage this affords them by engaging directly in design and governance processes rather than passively consuming finished products. A simple live demonstration involving a QR code illustrated that trust in digital systems is rarely fully rational — people tend to trust familiar environments and institutions without critically evaluating risk — reinforcing the session's conclusion that trustworthy AI depends on accuracy, transparency, inclusivity, fairness, and accountability, and that AI governance is ultimately a leadership challenge requiring comfort with sustained uncertainty.

AI Governance, Trust, and Institutional Readiness

A second part of the technology session shifted from risks and opportunities toward practical governance. The discussion opened with the example of driverless cars to frame a central question: should responsibility for assessing AI safety rest with individual users, or with institutional and regulatory frameworks? Participants concluded that individual awareness matters but cannot substitute for strong governance

systems, particularly as resource-constrained organizations adopt AI tools rapidly without adequate mechanisms to assess accuracy, bias, or long-term consequences. Discussion of regulatory capacity was sobering: technology evolves faster than public-sector regulation, public institutions often lack the technical expertise and competitive salaries to retain top talent, and an accumulating "technical debt" of outdated systems and delayed governance responses threatens both security and scalability.

Participants explored "tech-neutral" regulation — focusing on harm, accountability, proportionality, and human oversight rather than chasing each new tool individually — as a potentially more adaptable approach, while acknowledging it still requires deep technical expertise. Technology companies were again framed as powerful economic and political actors whose engagement must begin from a realistic understanding of commercial incentives; participants called for genuine co-design relationships in which peacebuilding and humanitarian actors help shape tools before deployment rather than reacting afterward. A related concern was that an excessive reliance on AI-generated evidence could erode the ambiguity, patience, and political judgment that mediation often requires — highly aggregated forecasts may be technically accurate yet operationally useless for local actors who need to know where, whom, and how to engage.

Participants warned that AI-driven analytical tools risk undermining localization if the underlying data and models remain controlled by external actors, potentially recasting local communities as data sources rather than decision-makers even as AI is promoted as a tool for inclusion. Discussion of bias in AI systems moved beyond technical "debiasing" toward structural questions of who funds, designs, audits, and benefits from these systems. Participants drew governance lessons from aviation, public health, finance, and biosecurity — sectors with mature incident-reporting and safety-protocol traditions — and referenced emerging regulatory efforts including the EU AI Act and various international AI-safety and governance initiatives. The session's central conclusion was that the relevant question is not whether peacebuilders should use AI, but under what institutional conditions AI can strengthen peacebuilding without undermining trust, legitimacy, inclusion, and human judgment.

Scenario-Based Stress-Test Exemplified: The "Digital Anarchy" Working Group

As part of the seminar's scenario-planning exercise, participants explored four plausible futures for 2030–2032 generated by the interaction of two critical uncertainties. The first concerned the future strength of international law, ranging from continued erosion, selective enforcement, and normalized impunity to renewed commitment, accountability, and respect for international norms and legal frameworks. The second concerned the primary application of emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, ranging from the amplification of conflict through weaponization, surveillance, disinformation, cyber warfare, and exclusion to the promotion of peace through prevention, mediation, peacebuilding, and expanded access to education, health, and other public goods.

These uncertainties were selected not only because they reflected the seminar's core themes, but because their future direction remains genuinely uncertain. While technological advancement is expected to continue accelerating, its dominant social and political uses remain contested. Likewise, while international law is under significant pressure, it remains unclear whether current challenges will lead to renewed commitment and reform or further weakening of norms and accountability mechanisms.

Rather than predicting outcomes, participants used the four scenarios to explore how different combinations of these uncertainties could reshape governance, conflict, civic space, and social resilience. The exercise aimed to identify risks, opportunities, and actions that can be taken today to help steer toward more desirable futures while preparing for less desirable ones.

For example, one working group stress-tested the "Digital Anarchy" scenario — a future combining weak international law with technology harnessed primarily for conflict. Rather than treating this as purely hypothetical, the group observed that several current crises already display partial features of Digital Anarchy: disregard for legal norms, attacks on civilians, impunity, disinformation, and the privatization of technological power. The group's central insight was that such a future would not necessarily mean total chaos; new forms of order could likely emerge, but not necessarily democratic, inclusive, or rights-based ones — potentially organized instead by private technology firms, military actors, criminal networks, or informal coalitions of "willing" actors. The core risk identified was therefore not the absence of order, but the emergence of order without accountability.

The group examined the prospect of large technology companies becoming central providers of infrastructure, security, information, and coordination in a context where states and multilateral institutions fail to regulate technology effectively, and weighed whether civil society retains sufficient leverage to influence or pressure these actors before crisis conditions deepen. Discussion stressed that resilience under this scenario requires both digital and analog preparedness: maintaining non-digital capacities, local autonomy, critical thinking, civic education, and community-level organization in case digital systems fail or are weaponized. The group concluded that civil society coalitions capable of pressuring both governments and technology companies remain essential, and that leadership under these conditions must be capable of operating under uncertainty, building trust across sectors, and maintaining legitimacy as formal institutions weaken.

The group's strategic conclusion was that the objective should not be limited to preventing Digital Anarchy outright, but should also include preparing for its partial manifestation — strengthening social resilience, protecting civic agency, regulating critical technological resources, and building coalitions among states, civil society, and responsible private actors before governance windows close. A clear caution was raised against relying on "benevolent" private or military actors to restore order without accountability, since such authority can easily become undemocratic or exclusionary; the priority is therefore to build resilience before collapse rather than improvise governance after rupture. The group's stress test ultimately converged on one open question carried forward into the plenary: if formal international governance weakens and technology becomes a driver of conflict, the protection of human agency, accountability, and social resilience will not rest with a single actor, but with a coalition of communities, civil society, responsible states, accountable technology actors, and leaders capable of operating across fragmented systems.

Day 3 — Strengthening Leadership for Peace in Times of Rupture

Leadership for an Age of Polycrisis

A keynote reflection by the International Leadership Association opened Day 3 with a proposition grounded in interviews with more than fifty senior public leaders, including heads of state, government, and international organizations: most of today's persistent crises cannot be addressed without fundamentally improving how leadership itself is practiced. Contemporary leadership systems, the argument held, remain poorly adapted to a complex and rapidly changing world — leaders continue to think linearly, operate within short political horizons, and struggle to anticipate unintended consequences, not generally from poor intent but because leadership institutions and training systems remain rooted in outdated assumptions.

Leadership was situated within four interconnected dynamics: fragmentation (the weakening of the post-war rules-based order, economic decoupling, and growing selectivity in applying international law), solidarity (a structured political commitment requiring institutional trust, resource-sharing, and shared factual foundations, made harder to sustain precisely when most needed), rupture (a discontinuity distinguished from ordinary crisis by its irreversibility and compressed decision-making windows), and repair (not a restoration of prior systems but the construction of new equilibrium requiring legitimacy, inclusion, and coherent collective narratives). From this framework, four pillars of leadership for repair were proposed: purpose with clarity, navigational leadership (identifying direction of travel rather than fixed destinations), moral and ethical reasoning, and civic engagement that goes beyond caring about people to actively listening to and involving them.

Six capacities were identified as essential for navigational leadership in the coming decade: adaptive capacity, relational intelligence (building trust across sectors and divides), systems thinking, ethical reflexivity, collective intelligence (combining rational, emotional, cultural, and technological forms of knowledge), and the disciplined use of AI as a support tool rather than a substitute for human judgment — with effective leaders distinguished less by certainty than by openness, curiosity, comfort with paradox, and accountability. A complementary intervention extended this framework through a gender-responsive lens, drawing on a major initiative on women's meaningful participation in peace operations. Its findings indicated that individuals holding stronger gender stereotypes were measurably more likely to tolerate human rights abuses, less likely to report misconduct, and more likely to escalate security situations — reframing gender equality as a security-effectiveness issue, not only a rights issue — and that visible senior leadership commitment, more than policy alone, was the strongest predictor of institutional progress, alongside organizational cultures built on inclusion, psychological safety, and accountability.

Practitioner Perspectives: Leadership in Times of Rupture

A practitioner panel brought together leadership experience from three distinct institutional settings — post-genocide national recovery, front line humanitarian medical operations, and peace diplomacy — united by a common question: how does leadership function when institutions are weak, uncertainty is high, and decisions carry immediate consequences for human lives?

One contribution examined leadership in a national context recovering from catastrophic societal rupture, where reconstruction deliberately prioritized national unity over immediate democratic pluralism, including the elimination of divisive ethnic identifiers and limits on potentially polarizing political mobilization — described provocatively by one as "a governance model that prioritized national cohesion over immediate political pluralism." This was paired with a hybrid justice model combining formal international tribunals with community-based mechanisms able to process a far greater caseload than conventional courts, and with a strategy of performance-based legitimacy: investment in service delivery, infrastructure, and public health as the basis for public trust, alongside institutionalized collective memory through commemoration and education as an instrument of prevention. This case generated one of the seminar's sharpest debates: can temporary centralized leadership help societies recover from rupture without becoming permanently authoritarian, particularly if benevolent leaders are succeeded by less benevolent ones?

A second contribution, drawn from frontline humanitarian medical operations across multiple conflict settings, offered a markedly different model centered on preserving human dignity rather than building political order. Examples included technical cooperation across conflict lines that unintentionally functioned as "accidental mediation"; a deliberate refusal to be absorbed into combined military, development, and humanitarian counterinsurgency strategies, which preserved access and credibility long after other actors lost both; and operating in conditions of profound moral ambiguity where access to besieged civilians required decisions that, in the speaker's own words, were "decisions where you simply know you cannot make the opposite choice." Practical leadership lessons distilled from this experience included distinguishing genuine urgency from manufactured haste, deliberately pausing — "sleeping on" — major decisions where possible, pushing decision-making authority as close as possible to those facing the reality on the ground, and protecting subordinates who take justified risks rather than punishing them after the fact, captured in the blunt formulation: "when the shit hits the fan, that's your job."

A third contribution, drew on experience in peace diplomacy, examined leadership inside government bureaucracies operating in a highly polarized environment, where polarization itself has become an organizing logic rather than merely a symptom of conflict, and where most external audiences believe they already know the solution. This account noted that existing peace architectures have substantially collapsed while credible alternatives remain weak, and that leadership inside government systems requires interpreting political mandates, adapting them to ground realities, and finding space for innovation while remaining accountable to capitals — sustained, in the speaker's account, by a single foundational value: that all human beings possess equal dignity and equal rights.

Across all three contributions, common threads emerged: leadership is inescapably contextual, with no universal model transferable across settings; institutions matter as much as individual courage, since even exceptional leaders operate within systems that enable or constrain action; effective decision-making requires balancing speed against consultation rather than resolving the tension once and for all; and across radically different settings, leadership was defined less by technical expertise than by moral judgment, responsibility, courage, and commitment to human welfare. The panel's central conclusion was that, in times of rupture, leadership is not the ability to predict the future, but the ability to act responsibly when the future is fundamentally uncertain.

Collective Leadership Reflection: Responsibility, Culture, Agency, and Values

The seminar's closing collective session turned inward, shifting from case studies and institutional experience toward leadership as a personal practice. The discussion opened with a reflection that many leadership challenges remain invisible precisely because they are embedded in deeply internalized assumptions — about gender, language, family roles, and professional expectations — that leaders no longer consciously perceive. The resulting argument was that leadership requires continuous examination of one's own mental models as a precondition for changing organizations or societies, since the barrier to better leadership is often not only external inequality or institutional constraint, but also unexamined norms about what leadership is assumed to look like.

Participants questioned whether leadership traits long associated with authority — control, certainty, toughness, hierarchy — remain fit for purpose, observing that the seminar itself had modeled an alternative: curiosity, vulnerability, humility, and comfort with unresolved uncertainty, with several participants noting that the most valuable quality of the week was that no one claimed to have all the answers. This raised an unresolved tension between authenticity and institutional expectation: participants described situations in which more relational, human-centered leadership styles were misread by colleagues accustomed to more authoritarian norms, and the discussion concluded that leadership often requires sustaining personal values despite pressure to conform. A related debate on culture and leadership cautioned against treating cultural context as either an excuse for inaction or as immutable: while leaders must exercise cultural humility, they also bear responsibility for challenging practices that undermine dignity, equality, or justice — producing the nuanced conclusion that leadership requires both cultural humility and moral courage simultaneously.

Responsibility emerged as a central and recurring theme — understood not as something assigned by an organization but as something a leader chooses to assume, making leadership less a matter of authority than of ownership. This was paired with sustained discussion of values as the foundation of durable leadership, and of personal agency: even within highly constrained institutional roles, leaders retain choices about how they interpret their mandate, what they prioritize, what they challenge, and how they exercise influence, and ethical leadership depends on recognizing and exercising that agency rather than hiding behind institutional constraint. Participants also challenged the common assumption that leadership is inherently lonely, proposing instead a model of collective leadership distributed across peer networks, communities of practice, and trusted colleagues, and questioned why authority so often becomes associated with status, ceremony, and distance from others rather than with credibility and trust earned through practice. The session, and the seminar as a whole, converged on a final, demanding idea: leadership begins with self-awareness, and is ultimately judged not by theory or intention but by the choices people make in their daily practice.

5. Points of Consensus

Despite the seminar's wide range of institutional perspectives, broad agreement emerged on the following points:

- Global peace has deteriorated for over a decade, and conflict is increasingly internationalized into interconnected regional clusters rather than confined to single states.
- Prevention is more cost-effective than crisis response, yet political and financial systems consistently reward visible reaction over preventive investment.
- Linear, predictability-based institutional models are poorly matched to the non-linear, adaptive character of contemporary conflict, technology, and international law.
- Artificial intelligence is best understood as an amplifier of existing risks and inequalities rather than a wholly new category of threat, and should augment rather than replace human judgment.
- Trust — social, institutional, and interstate — is the scarcest and most consequential resource in the current environment, underlying the legitimacy of law, technology, and leadership alike.
- Civil society, human rights defenders, and grassroots coalitions are increasingly central to defending international norms, alongside — and at times in place of — states.
- Effective leadership in conditions of rupture is navigational and adaptive rather than commanding, and depends on ethical reflexivity, relational intelligence, and collective intelligence.
- Genuine localization requires local actors to shape decisions and priorities, not merely to receive funding or absorb risk on behalf of international partners.
- Large technology companies function as geopolitical actors whose influence over information, infrastructure, and security now requires direct, strategic engagement rather than passive consumption of their products.
- Human dignity provides a workable, minimum organizing principle capable of anchoring legitimacy across legal, technological, and leadership domains even where deeper value consensus cannot be assumed.

6. Areas of Debate and Divergence

The seminar did not resolve every question it raised, and several genuine, unresolved tensions ran through the three days. These are recorded here as open questions rather than settled conclusions:

- **Stability versus democracy.** Can temporary, centralized "benevolent" leadership help societies recover from catastrophic rupture without risking permanent authoritarianism if benevolent leaders are succeeded by less benevolent ones?
- **Speed versus consultation.** When does urgency justify centralized, rapid decision-making, and when does the situation still allow — and require — broader participation and reflection?
- **Pragmatism versus principle.** Can coalitions for peace and justice be built around interests and incentives where normative consensus on universal values cannot be assumed, without eroding the principles themselves?
- **Localization versus risk transfer.** How quickly can authority, resources, and decision-making realistically be transferred to local actors without simply transferring risk while withholding power?
- **Evidence versus storytelling.** Is the more durable barrier to political support for prevention a lack of evidence, or a failure of narrative and communication — and which deserves greater investment?
- **Technology for peace versus technology for control.** Can peace and humanitarian actors meaningfully co-design technologies whose dominant commercial and military incentives point toward surveillance and control?
- **International law as norm versus international law as practice.** Is international law currently eroding, or adapting into a different, more selectively invoked but still functioning form?
- **Leadership as individual courage versus leadership as institutional design.** Does progress depend primarily on developing better individual leaders, or on redesigning the institutions, incentives, and cultures within which leaders operate?
- **Is complexity becoming a new orthodoxy?** Participants disagreed on whether complexity-informed approaches expand the field's analytical toolkit or risk becoming a new, equally rigid dogma in their own right.
- **Is the traditional aid model ending or merely under strain?** Views diverged between those who see irreversible structural decline and those who see traditional aid mechanisms as still indispensable, pending reform.

7. Implications for Peacebuilding and International Governance

The seminar's discussions carry several direct implications for the practice of peacebuilding and international governance going forward. First, peacebuilding strategies can no longer be designed at the country level alone: the rise of interconnected conflict clusters, transnational illicit economies, and cross-border technological diffusion means that effective prevention and response must operate simultaneously at local, national, regional, and international scales.

Second, positive peace indicators — institutional trust, social cohesion, gender equality, civic space, and ecological sustainability — should be treated as genuine early-warning tools for prevention, not as secondary or aspirational metrics layered on top of conflict statistics. Peacebuilding organizations and governments are better positioned to act early when they track the erosion of these structural conditions rather than waiting for violence to escalate.

Third, the future resilience of international law will depend not only on formal enforcement mechanisms but also on coalitions, reputational pressure, and the sustained engagement of civil society and social movements. This implies a practical shift in where peacebuilding organizations invest relationship-building and advocacy capacity — toward coalition formation and public legitimacy work, alongside continued engagement with formal legal and diplomatic channels.

Fourth, AI and technology governance is now a core peacebuilding competency rather than a specialized technical niche. Organizations that fail to develop internal digital literacy, AI governance frameworks, and direct relationships with technology companies risk both operational vulnerability and diminished influence over how these technologies evolve in conflict-affected contexts.

Finally, the seminar's leadership discussions imply that institutional reform and individual leadership development must proceed together. Recruitment, training, and promotion systems within multilateral, governmental, and humanitarian institutions will need to reward the navigational and relational competencies the seminar identified as essential — adaptive capacity, ethical reflexivity, and collective intelligence — rather than continuing to reward primarily hierarchical authority, technical certainty, and short-term, measurable output.

8. Recommendations and Priorities Moving Forward

Short-Term Priorities

- Pair Global Peace Index and Positive Peace data to build more compelling, evidence-based political and financial cases for conflict prevention and peacebuilding investment.
- Establish institutional AI governance frameworks covering privacy, accountability, procurement, and risk assessment within peacebuilding, humanitarian, and diplomatic organizations.
- Build practical AI and digital literacy among senior leaders, mediators, and field staff, sufficient to ask informed questions and engage meaningfully with technical experts.
- Strengthen reputational and coalition-based mechanisms — public positioning, strategic isolation of violators, and consistent normative defense — to reinforce compliance with international law where formal enforcement is weak.
- Adopt scenario-based stress-testing exercises, of the kind piloted in this seminar's "Digital Anarchy" working group, as a standard institutional practice for testing strategy against plausible future shocks.

Medium-Term Priorities

- Develop integrated regional peacebuilding strategies addressing interconnected conflict clusters rather than treating crises as isolated, country-specific events.
- Diversify peacebuilding finance through climate finance mechanisms, development finance institutions, philanthropy, diaspora engagement, and peace-positive investment vehicles, while protecting commitments to human rights, gender equality, and inclusion.
- Build genuine co-design relationships with technology companies, engaging them as geopolitical and commercial actors with identifiable incentives rather than as passive vendors.
- Reform donor accountability frameworks to support adaptive, iterative programming, and to measure system-level risk reduction and resilience alongside conventional project outputs.
- Invest deliberately in leadership development programmes centered on navigational, ethical, and relational competencies, including structured opportunities for cross-sector peer learning.

Long-Term Transformations

- Shift international peacebuilding from a primarily reactive model toward a preventive, systemic, and positive-peace-oriented practice, supported by sustained political and financial commitment.
- Build resilient, redundant institutions explicitly capable of learning and adapting under conditions of fragmentation, rather than optimizing solely for efficiency under stable conditions.
- Strengthen multilateral and civil-society coalitions capable of sustaining legitimacy and momentum even absent full great-power consensus.

- Embed analog and digital resilience in parallel — including civic education, critical thinking, and community-level preparedness — so that societies retain capacity to function and self-organize if digital systems fail or are weaponized.
- Cultivate institutional cultures and leadership pipelines that reward curiosity, humility, ethical courage, and collective intelligence over hierarchy, short-term certainty, and political expediency.

9. Closing Reflection

The Senior Leadership for Peace Seminar 2026 did not produce a single blueprint for the future of peace and security leadership, nor did it claim to. What it produced instead was a clarified diagnosis and a shared vocabulary: a recognition that the world has entered a period of genuine rupture, in which trust — more than any single institution, treaty, or technology — is the resource under greatest strain and most in need of deliberate rebuilding.

Across discussions of conflict data, international law, artificial intelligence, and leadership practice, a consistent message emerged. Strong institutions are not necessarily the ones that survive rupture; adaptive institutions are. Leaders who hold certainty are not necessarily the ones who navigate uncertainty well; leaders who hold purpose, humility, and the willingness to keep learning are. As the seminar's participants repeatedly returned to in its closing hours, the work of preparing for an age of rupture begins not with a new policy or a new technology, but with the harder and more personal discipline of examining one's own assumptions before attempting to change the systems around them.

Annex — Lexicon

Accompaniment: Supporting local actors without abandoning them to absorb disproportionate risk.

Adaptive Leadership: Leadership that learns, adjusts, and acts under uncertainty rather than relying on fixed plans.

Attractor Landscape: A pattern or dynamic that pulls actors toward repeated behaviours, such as polarization or militarization.

Benevolent Policy Dictate: A contested idea referring to strong top-down policy decisions justified as necessary for stability or social repair.

Civic Space: The political, legal, and social space that allows civil society, media, activists, and communities to organize and speak.

Collective Leadership: Leadership distributed across people, institutions, networks, and communities rather than held by one person alone.

Complex Adaptive System: A system made up of many interacting actors whose behaviour cannot be predicted through simple cause and effect.

Digital Anarchy: A scenario where weak international law combines with harmful or unregulated technology, producing insecurity, disinformation, and fragmented authority.

Emergence: Outcomes arising from interactions within a system and cannot be reduced to a single cause.

Erosion of Law: The growing perception that international legal principles are applied selectively rather than consistently, weakening their legitimacy, reducing trust in shared rules, and increasing the risk of instability in the international system.

Feedback Loop: A cycle where actions produce effects that reinforce or reduce the original dynamic.

Fragmentation: The weakening of shared global frameworks and the emergence of competing blocs, coalitions, narratives, and systems.

Human Dignity: A baseline principle that all people possess equal worth and must not be reduced to instruments of political, military, or economic goals.

Localization: Shifting power, resources, and decision-making closer to local actors and communities.

Navigational Leadership: Leadership focused on direction, judgment, and course correction rather than control over a fixed destination.

Negative Peace: The absence or reduction of direct violence without necessarily addressing deeper structural drivers.

Personal Agency: The capacity of individuals to act ethically and responsibly, even within institutional constraints.

Positive Peace: The attitudes, institutions, and structures that sustain peaceful societies, beyond the mere absence of violence.

Risk as Currency: The idea that risk can serve as a shared language across peacebuilding, finance, government, humanitarian, and private-sector actors.

Rupture: A break in continuity where old assumptions, institutions, or operating models no longer function as expected.

Stress-Testing: Testing current strategies against plausible future shocks or adverse scenarios.