# Interview with Gabriela Ramos

## Gabriela Ramos*

**DCR: UNESCO plays a unique role as a convener of both knowledge and dialogue in today's particularly polarized world. How can these functions be enhanced to promote mutual understanding and constructive cooperation across regions and sectors?**

**Gabriela Ramos (GR):** You are right. UNESCO has a powerful mandate that is needed more than ever. I have good understanding of international organisations having spent two decades at the OECD on hard core economic issues, investment, trade, macroeconomics. Another powerful institution that sets standards. UNESCO, on the other hand, has the most humanistic mandate of the whole UN System. UNESCO was created to promote peace through education, science, and culture. After having spent five wonderful years inside UNESCO, and being candidate of Mexico for the Director General, I've seen the power of these three pillars – when they are used well. This is why I have developed a vision consisting on three "I"s, inclusion, innovation and impact, to increase its positive footprint.

Education, science, and culture are not only assets to help people fulfil their potential, but also incredible bridge-builders.

Culture, for example, connects us through shared heritage – both tangible and intangible. It's not just about World Heritage sites being listed and treat this as a competition. On the contrary, it is about recognising and celebrating what makes us human. Understanding the different dimensions that bring us together, and the importance of our social relations. Humans are not just consumers or producers, and we cannot measure our progress only through GDP metrics. We care for each other, we have hopes, ambitions and dreams. We are people. We all enjoy music, we all enjoy learning about each other. If we can connect people through these dimensions, then maybe we can reconnect with the idea of our shared humanity.

Science is also critical – though under pressure these days. There are powerful interests that sometimes reject science when it doesn't align with their worldview. But science helps us understand the world and our societies. And education, when

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deployed for peace and compassion and not just to compete in the labour market, is a powerful force.

This is a moment for a deeper reflection on what it means to be human. We have perhaps gotten it wrong if we think it's all about material well-being and about competition. It's about the full set of elements that define us – and UNESCO is the right place to foster those.

**DCR: So how is UNESCO comparatively positioned in today's rapidly evolving international landscape? Why is it the right institution to help lead these reforms or this rethinking?**

**GR:** First and foremost, we work with governments, of course. But we are also deeply grounded in communities. Civil society, local initiatives – that's where UNESCO also lives. I was impressed to see how recognisable UNESCO is, a multilateral institution that people are familiar with. I worked at the OECD, and while it's highly respected in policy circles, it's not known by wider audiences. UNESCO, on the other hand, is a household name. People remember, for instance, the symbolic concert UNESCO organised on the bridge between Bosnia and Serbia after the war – where a Serbian violinist and a Muslim pianist came together to perform. UNESCO has that emotional power.

It's also an organisation that recognises and rewards excellence – like the L'Oréal-UNESCO Prize for Women in Science, the Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize, the Youth Grant Scheme recognising youth initiatives across the globe. When UNESCO puts its stamp on something – be it artists, scientists, or journalists – it opens doors. That comes with responsibility, of course. But it's also what makes UNESCO such a powerful convener of different stakeholders. UNESCO is also universal and puts more emphasis in supporting countries from the global south to achieve their objectives.

**DCR: Which brings me to the growing mistrust toward multilateralism globally. From your perspective, what are the most urgent reforms needed to restore legitimacy and trust in global cooperation?**

**GR:** That's a big and important question. We are witnessing some unfortunate global trends: the rise of populist and dogmatic leadership, increasing polarisation, and ideologies that promote the idea that "the system doesn't work." This narrative has taken root in part because many people genuinely feel that the system hasn't delivered for them. We have to acknowledge that disappointment and that reality.

There is also the impact of disinformation and digital disruption, which further fuels polarization. But the root issue is this: many people feel left behind. Inequality, precarity, unemployment – especially among youth – are real, and so is the resulting loss of trust in institutions.

That said, it's unfair to blanket all institutions as ineffective or irrelevant. Yes, there is waste. Yes, we need better

impact metrics. But we also have powerful examples of impact. When I worked on telecom reform in Mexico, we achieved a 70 per cent decrease in prices of mobile telephony – that's real impact. We also helped the Minister for Women in Tunisia to repeal laws that forced rape victims to marry their attackers. That changed lives. We influence policy, set global standards, and drive evidence-based reform. But we need to be better at showing that impact and communicating it. For example, in our work on AI ethics, Chile's minister used our readiness assessment and realised they had significant gaps in their data privacy laws. Thanks to that process, they reformed them. This is massive, as it impacts positively the millions. But how do we communicate that success to the public? People whose data is now better protected don't always know UNESCO played a role.

Equally, we need internal reform at UNESCO: more efficient financial tracking, better talent recruitment and management, improved inter-agency collaboration. With the Global Digital Compact, for instance, we coordinated closely with the ITU and UNDP. Instead of duplicating efforts, we streamlined action and demonstrated our relevance. We didn't just host conferences – we showed results. Now, those institutions are being tasked to implement the Compact. That's what reform should look like.

We also need a change in narrative, to reconnect with what people cares about. Addressing the major challenges, climate, inequalities, digital transformation, considering the specific needs of people.

**DCR: Given your experience at UNESCO and the OECD – and your lifelong dedication to development cooperation – do you see a need for more issue-based coalitions or experimental platforms?**

**GR:** By all means – absolutely. In the current context, it's an illusion to think you can broker universal, consensual agreements keeping a high level of ambition if major players are not supportive. Fully universal agreements may not be happening at the rate we need them – at least not now. I hope we can aim for that in the next stage of the Sustainable Development Goals. Because the issues themselves haven't changed. It's not about the headline – it's about the content. That's what we need to focus on.

I'm convinced that international cooperation today has to be issue-based, and it has to be driven by alliances of people who are truly committed. You cannot force global actors – governments, institutions – to do what they don't want to do. But you also can't let them stop others from achieving progress. They shouldn't be allowed to block it. And there are so many countries that do want to move forward. The problem is that the headlines are all negative, but I can tell you from experience: more governments want to continue engaging with the multilateral system than not.

There are already big-ticket items that have been defined. Take climate change, for example. The Paris Agreement is in place. Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), adaptation policies, the Loss and Damage Fund, even

financial system reforms – they're aligning with the transition away from fossil fuels. And companies are adapting, too. Many have made significant progress on carbon footprint reduction.

I'm not naïve. If major countries choose not to participate, then of course, the outcomes won't be global. But we need to keep moving forward. The same applies to gender equality. I believe many more countries want to advance that agenda than those who resist it. So, we should go ahead and do what we can. This also connects with the idea of "variable geometry" – we shouldn't be afraid of that, when the rough times comes, hoping we can universalize the outcomes when the environment is more favourable.

As long as we create traction around specific issues, that's already a win. Take, for example, the work we are doing on the ethics of AI. We now have 70 countries conducting diagnostics and building national governance frameworks. Maybe we're not yet governing the big global platforms – but UNESCO has created solid guidelines, and we're working with many of those platforms. Some of them genuinely want to engage, to better understand the rules of the game, and to help shape a transparent and stable environment.

I've worked on very delicate topics as well – like racism and discrimination. I took a firm position: I didn't want to document wrongdoings country by country as that doesn't help and can turn into a finger pointing exercise. Rather look at legal frameworks and level of commitment to address this problem. Do countries have the right laws? Do they have the institutions and the systems to enforce them? Are they investing in awareness and education? Let's measure that - effort and intention, not just quantity of harm. In the end, that approach gave birth to the Global Forum Against Racism and Discrimination – an annual gathering of many stakeholders and 80 participating countries. We also had a network of 25 incredibly committed public officials. I wish we could count 194 countries, but we move forward with those countries on board.

This also build the basis for meaningful partners to join the effort. The Ford Foundation supported us to produce a global outlook on racism and discrimination using artificial intelligence to analyse the global media coverage of the problem. The findings were powerful. Of all the cases of discrimination reported in the media, 38% were based on race, 33 per cent on gender, and 20 per cent on ethnic origin. Eighteen per cent of the cases involved physical violence. That's already a striking picture. But the most revealing point? Sixty percent of those incidents were committed by individuals – meaning they were already illegal and punishable under law. But 40 per cent were systemic, institutionalized.

That's where institutions play a key role – understanding the context, surfacing the real problems, and working with committed champions in issue-based coalitions, or what you called "adaptive coalitions." Interestingly, people don't often ask these questions. Who sets the agenda? Who steps up? Sometimes it's a journalist like you. Sometimes it's an academic, like Nicholas Stern with

climate economics or an international organisation that provide a vital service – documenting truthfully, even when the findings are uncomfortable. For me personally, addressing problems that touches directly people's live is a must. Violence against women, for example, is the ultimate reflection of a world gone wrong. It's about integrity. If your dignity isn't protected by the people who live with you – then what else do you have?

**DCR: Can UNESCO help design or host such mechanisms within the UN system? How can established institutions like UNESCO support bottom-up, adaptive coalitions without stifling their flexibility?**

**GR:** We most definitely should. I draw from my experience at the OECD, where I launched the Business for Inclusive Growth platform – 50 multinationals committed to going beyond responsible business conduct to redress inequality, to invest in communities in new ways. We did it with the ethics of AI too at UNESCO, adopting the most universal and ambitious global standard. Now we have 70 countries doing 'readiness assessments' to know where they are in the AI journey and compare to the benchmarks and learning from each other. The global forum on AI ethics wasn't mandatory – but everyone came. That's powerful.

These are powerful examples of multilateralism that delivers. In my vision for UNESCO, I want us to go deeper into education and culture. Education, because globally we've focused mainly on preparing youth for the labour market – skills for individual success. We must educate for compassion, empathy, critical thinking, living in peace – with each other and with the environment. We need to build consciousness, civic responsibility at school. Kids must graduate not just with academic skills, but with a sense of their role in shaping the world for good.

UNESCO is the global lead in education, especially basic education. The OECD does excellent work with PISA, and I'm proud that in 2019 we reformed it to include global competencies – tolerance, openness, awareness. But UNESCO also sets standards for education for peace. And we need that: education for understanding, outreach, and openness. UNESCO launched a powerful education coalition during COVID. We should transform it – to rethink what we educate for.

Then, there's culture. UNESCO identifies and recognises cultural heritage. But that's become an end in itself. Originally, it was a mean – to help us appreciate each other's cultures and promote peaceful relationships. We need to foster this view and bring culture to build bridges. UNESCO can really bring people together – through education, culture but also science—especially the ethics of emerging technologies. UNESCO is now a global leader in ethics of AI, synthetic biology, quantum computing, geoengineering. These technologies demand ethical grounding. Ethics means asking: Who wins? Who loses? Is it inclusive? Does it enhance human rights? UNESCO can and should become a moral compass. That's what the world needs right now.

**DCR: From your work with the Inclusive Policy Lab and MOST programme, have you seen effective models of peer-to-peer learning or South-South exchanges that could be scaled up?**

**GR:** Absolutely. What we've learned through the Inclusive Policy Lab and the MOST Programme is that peer-to-peer learning is not just a nice concept – it's an essential mechanism for real, grounded change. One of the most promising aspects is that these exchanges aren't top-down. They're about mutual respect, shared experiences, and practical solutions that are exchanged. But it is also the place where we foster the science policy nexus that is also being questioned nowadays in many places.

In fact, in our AI ethics work, we've seen countries use our readiness assessments to identify gaps and learn directly from others facing similar challenges. Seventy countries are engaged in that work, and they're exchanging strategies – not from a place of hierarchy, but of solidarity. South-South cooperation, in particular, is powerful because it avoids the legacy baggage that sometimes accompanies North-South models. These are governments and civil societies working together on equal footing – sharing legal frameworks, policy designs, education reforms, and even cultural preservation tools.

We've had real success hosting forums where ministers from countries like Chile, Kenya, Mozambique or Cambodia learn from each other's reforms. That's the kind of coalition-building we need more of. And yes, it's scalable – if we invest in the right platforms and trust in the power of shared learning.

The MOST programme, that aims to support countries manage social transformations, is also a place to learn. Through its Inclusive Policy Lab we bring thought leaders to share their views on contemporary issues. In the podcast, we have benefited from hearing the likes of Phumzile Mlambo-Nguka, Vilas Dhar, Nadia Calvino, among others. The Lab also fosters collaborations and there is a community of 4000 experts co-producing think pieces. We also launched the Alan Hirshman Lecture to learn from the best scholars. In fact, it was Daron Acemoglu who launched the first lecture, before he became the Nobel Prize in Economics. We are conducting research trying to overcome common places, in collaboration with Fundacion La Caixa, and our Category II Center, trying to advance a framework that includes equality and sustainability on equal footing with efficiency in economic policy decisions. We also produced a report on the distributional impact of climate policies. The best part is to serve countries like the DRC and Brazil to address youth violence, or the European Union look at the best way, with nine participating countries, to enhance analytical capacities of governments.

**DCR: Looking ahead, what is your vision for international cooperation in the next decade, and what key shifts must occur for it to remain relevant and effective?**

**GR:** In today's world, issue-based coalitions – where those who are willing,

move forward – are our best path. That's not fragmentation. That's agility and experimentalism. International cooperation must move away from traditional multilateralism. We need to be impact-driven, transparent, and emotionally intelligent. Trust is low – but we rebuild it not with slogans, but with results that people can feel in their lives. We need to tackle issues with the most committed countries and individuals to achieve a "race to the top", even if this is through "variable geometry" that at the start does not include all the member countries. We should not be afraid of this. On the contrary, it may help us to deliver and entice others to join. If 25 countries are ready to tackle racism in their legal frameworks, let's move with those 25. If 70 want to reform AI ethics, let's support them now and prove useful and agile. Most importantly, we must infuse cooperation with moral clarity. Institutions like UNESCO can – and must – serve as ethical compasses. We need to ask: Are we protecting human dignity? Are we reducing inequality? Are we elevating our shared humanity? That's the shift. From power politics to purpose and from abstract declarations to real, measurable, human-centred progress.