

**ELIAS: Creating Platforms for Leading and
Innovating on the Scale of the Whole System**

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ELIAS, which stands for Emerging Leaders Innovate Across Sectors, is a global innovation and learning community that focuses on regional platforms for facilitating multi-stakeholder innovation across entire systems. Coming together around specific thematic and geographic concerns, key players across the sectors of government, business, and civil society embark on a shared sensing and innovation journey in order to deepen their understanding of their current systems and to discover and prototype new ideas and collaborative opportunities that could take the system forward on the best possible path.

ELIAS was co-created by the Presencing Institute, the MIT CoLab, and the MIT Leadership Center, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. It has more than a dozen global partner institutions in business, government, and civil society, and it has sponsored multi-sector change initiatives in both the global South and the global North.

The purpose of ELIAS is to prototype and help advance an inclusive and sustainable global market system. I call this a transformation from the current forms of economic and social systems – capitalism 1.0 and 2.0 – to a 3.0 form of capitalism and society. Capitalism 3.0 would enable us to deal with the intertwined 21st-century economic, environmental, and social challenges in a more intentional way—mainly by developing mechanisms for innovating on the scale of the system as a whole.¹

A Short History

ELIAS was launched in 2006 with a network of global partners, including BASF, BP, JAC-Anhui (China), the Industrial Federation of Paraná (Brazil), InWent (German Ministry of Development and Cooperation), the Indonesian Ministry of Trade, Nissan, Oxfam Great Britain, the UN Global Compact, UNDP, UNICEF, Unilever, the World Bank Institute, and the World Wildlife Fund. In March 2006, 27 high-potential young leaders from these organizations went on a year-long innovation and learning journey (while continuing to work in their home institutions) that included intensive training in how to use a new set of tools for innovating within established systems. These tools include co-sensing and co-creating emerging future opportunities through deep sensing journeys, strategy retreats, idea creation, and rapid-cycle prototyping of their ideas in order to explore the future by doing. Two years on, the small-scale prototype initiatives they developed have been tested by ELIAS teams around the world and have blossomed into a dynamic and rapidly growing landscape of profound innovation and change. They involve dozens of institutions and thousands of people and are continuing to inspire new initiatives and ideas:

¹ See Otto Scharmer, “Seven Acupuncture Points for Shifting Capitalism to Create a Regenerative Ecosystem Economy,” paper prepared for presentation at the Roundtable on Transforming Capitalism to Create a Regenerative Economy, MIT, June 8–9 (revised Sept. 8, 2009). <http://www.ottoscharmer.com/publications/articles.php>

- One ELIAS pilot group was called the Sunbelt team. It wanted to explore methods for bringing solar- and wind-generated power to marginalized communities. To do so, it used a decentralized, democratic model of energy generation to reduce CO₂ emissions and foster economic growth and well-being in rural communities. Today, the project has changed the strategic priorities of a global NGO and resulted in the formation of a mission-based company called “Just Energy” that is now seeking funding to begin operations in South Africa and Colombia.
- In the Philippines, one ELIAS fellow from Unilever teamed up with former colleagues working in the NGO sector to form MicroVentures, a support organization that advises and finances women micro-entrepreneurs in the Philippines by leveraging the Unilever business and its network at the community level.
- An ELIAS fellow from the Indonesian Ministry of Trade applied the U-process (see Figure 1) to establishing new government policies for sustainable sugar production in Indonesia. His idea was to involve all key stakeholders in the policymaking process. The results were stunning: for the first time ever the Ministry’s policy decisions did not result in violent protests or riots by farmers or other key stakeholders in the value chain. Now, the same approach is being applied to other commodities and to standards for sustainable production.
- The Indonesia-based ELIAS team created a very successful country version of the ELIAS project in 2008-2009. It focuses on linking key players across all systems around specific issues by using a process of shared sense-making, shared meaning-making, shared idea creation, and shared prototyping to explore the future of the country through small-scale experimentation.

Now as the Indonesian program is moving into its second cycle and year, the same countrywide application of the ELIAS approach is under way in several other countries, including China, Brazil, and Europe.

Not only did most of the prototype projects have a much bigger impact than one would expect from a small-scale learning initiative, but also the vibrant cross-sector network of the ELIAS fellow continues to inspire new ideas and initiatives. For example:

- One group of ELIAS fellows teamed up to form a new collaborative research venture at MIT, the Green Hub. With others, it is working with the Obama administration to link the green retrofitting of buildings in inner cities with the achievement of social justice by involving all of the key constituencies: the building trades, marginalized youth, the mayor’s office, and business owners.
- An ELIAS fellow from InWent (the capacity building arm of the German Ministry of Development Cooperation) helped to co-create a climate change lab. Beginning in 2010, the lab will work with emerging leaders from all sectors in South Africa, Indonesia, China, and Brazil for a period of at least three years.

- A subgroup of the ELIAS project is launching an initiative to form a new (MIT-based) Leadership School for Green, Global Transformation (“g.school”). It will use the ELIAS network of institutions and initiatives to reinvent the way that leaders are currently being trained in business schools, public policy schools, and urban studies departments. Its new “action learning curriculum” will put young people into the driver’s seat of change and move the locus of learning from the classroom into the real world.
- Three of the WWF’s emerging leaders built on their ELIAS experiences to spark a multi-stakeholder project in the Southeast Asia/Pacific region. Their “Coral Triangle” involves hundreds of stakeholders in six countries in linking sustainable fishing practices with revenue-sharing and economic opportunities. The Coral Triangle project has raised more than \$100 million and is on its way to establishing collaborative innovation infrastructures that could help to improve ecosystem management in one of the largest biodiversity reserves on the planet.
- Another off-shoot of the ELIAS innovation ecology is the African Public Health Initiative. This program combines hands-on systems innovation with focused leadership capacity building for emerging leaders inside the existing Namibian health system, including civil servants in the Ministry of Health and other government officials.

Why ELIAS?

Leaders in institutions around the world face unprecedented economic, social, ecological, and political challenges. These challenges will only multiply in the next decades, and leaders must confront them. They can respond in conventional reactive ways, or they can create opportunities for innovation by rethinking how governments operate, redesigning business models and social change protocols, and working more collaboratively across sectors.

ELIAS provides a platform for leaders to discover and test new ways of operating and to put their ideas to work. The support they receive includes:

- a learning and innovation methodology that allows them to break patterns of the past and explore the best future possibilities;
- an infrastructure that provides these leaders with experiences outside the environments they are familiar with;
- a community of peers from other sectors with similar goals.

Successful organizations in this century will need to purposefully connect to communities, NGOs, and governments to co-create more transparent and generative economic, social, and ecological processes and relationships. But for that to happen, leaders and institutions must reach out to other stakeholders to create new fabrics that weave together business, government, and civil society.

Cross-sector engagement demands new skills, networks, and fields of practice, which ELIAS provides.

The “Presencing” Approach

ELIAS uses a methodology for innovating and learning called “presencing.” Presencing is a blend of the words *presence* and *sensing* and means *to sense and actualize your highest future possibility*.²

To date, the major approaches to organizational learning and change have been based on the same underlying model: learning from the experiences of the past. But leaders increasingly face challenges that the old tools don’t work on. Leaders need a new core capability: the ability to let go of the past and lead by tuning in to the possibilities of the future. That capacity I call *presencing*.

The research that led to the development of the presencing approach included 150 interviews with thought leaders and practitioners and dozens of workshops across industries, sectors, and cultures. Our goal was to find out what it takes to shift the actions of a leader and a company from learning from the past to leading and learning from the emerging future. We learned that it takes a journey—a journey that evolves in stages, from stopping, sensing, presencing to crystallizing, prototyping, and performing (Fig. 1).

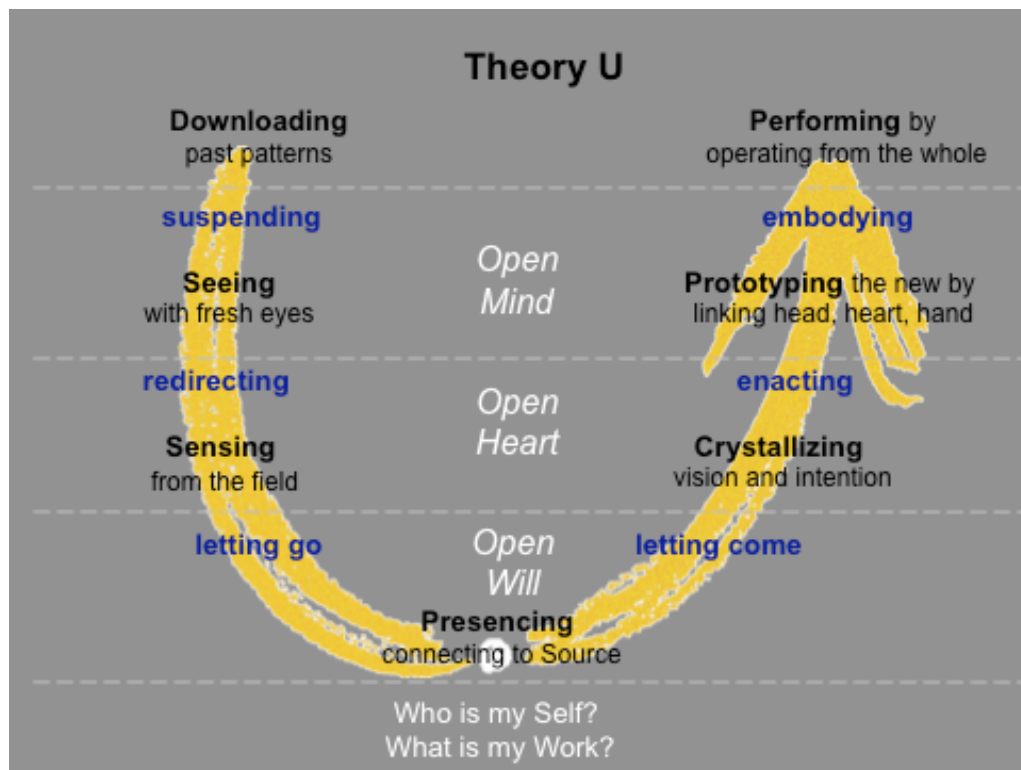


Figure 1: Theory U: One Process, Six Leadership Capacities (Source: Scharmer 2009)

² See C. Otto Scharmer, (2009), *Theory U: Leading from the Future As It Emerges. The Social Technology of Presencing* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler); and P. Senge, C. O. Scharmer, J. Jaworski, and B. S. Flowers, (2004), *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (Cambridge, MA: SoL Press).

The essence of this journey is to deepen the quality of attention, presence, and action that leaders bring to the world. For more than ten years we have tested this model in institutions of business, government, and civil society in many cultures. And what I found is that all human beings share a deep source of human creativity and renewal. To make this deep source of leading and learning accessible to people within and across organizations is the purpose of the presencing methodology.

ELIAS provides this learning process by guiding leaders through several fields and contexts of learning:

- **Initial conversations** clarify each person's current leadership challenge and personal leadership story.
- Immersion in peer-shadowing experiences and "**deep-dive learning journeys**" offer new perspectives on and experiences in the larger system.
- **Deep listening and dialogue tools** help participants operate more powerfully and effectively as part of rapidly changing systems of value creation.
- **Systems-thinking** tools help participants to understand the root issues and leverage points of the larger system.
- **Deep reflection practices** help participants connect to their deeper sources of self-knowledge and knowing.
- Participants experience the process of innovation from concept creation to **fast-cycle prototyping**; teams use their ideas to create prototypes, then test, refine, and improve them repeatedly in various contexts in order to "explore the future by doing."
- Participants learn how to **leverage their institutional and personal networks** in order to move their systems toward more effective ways of operating.
- Regular interactions among participants and institutional stakeholders help **embed a culture of innovation in their institutions.**

How Does It Work?

ELIAS operates on three levels:

Level I: A Global Network of Focused Cross-Sector Innovation Platforms

Each ELIAS platform focuses on a specific geographic area or theme. In Indonesia that platform has a primary geographic focus and three subthemes. In the Coral Triangle project and the Climate Lab the focus is on both geography and issue areas (tuna ecosystem management and climate change). The ELIAS infrastructure links the projects in order to maximize their impact.

Level II: Cross-Sector Prototypes as a Context for Profound Institutional Innovation

While level I focuses on cross-sector innovation, often the participating organizations need help to leverage the insights from the prototyping work and to continue on their

institutional transformation journey. The second level therefore applies the same principles and practices to individual organizations by building leadership capacity and redefining strategy.

For example, in Namibia we were asked to work with the team at the top of the Ministry of Health and Social Services. We divided this group into a smaller executive team and a larger team of national and regional directors. Several of the key players received coaching on how to meet the specific challenges of change.

Level III: ELIAS Alumni Network

The global network of ELIAS fellows continues to build and implement prototypes, as well as to create space for innovation within and between their institutions based on their greater capacity to sense the needs and aspirations of their communities. As one of the corporate ELIAS fellows put it at the end of the ELIAS journey: “I am no longer working *for* Unilever. I am working *from* Unilever.” The difference between *working for* and *working from* is his state of awareness: working “for” means that the awareness ends where the boundaries of the company end. Working “from” means that the awareness transcends the boundaries of the company and the business; it includes the awareness and body of experience he now shares with all of the other ELIAS fellows. That higher awareness allows him to implement different types of innovations that benefit both his company and society as a whole.

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