# **Can you tell us about yourself?**

**Michael Croft:** My name is Michael Croft. I'm working with UNESCO. It's been 22 years with UNESCO, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization. My current position now is a UNESCO representative to Nepal, which is a very UNESCO place, a country that really reflects a lot of what UNESCO stands for and works on. I've been involved in around six country teams now in East Africa, Southeast Asia, and now South Asia.

# **Why did you join the UN Mastermind?**

**Michael Croft:** First and foremost, it was the title, the Mastermind Group. It was, it's a very intriguing title. And I had never heard of a Mastermind Group before.

# **What were the leadership challenges in your context?**

**Michael Croft:** If I look at this perspective particular to the United Nations and as a staff member of the United Nations system, we are all somewhat challenged by the 2030 Agenda and also UN reform, which follows along from the 2030 agenda to really rethink what it is that we're doing and our role.

Because in a way there was one particular way of working for the system but of course, Agenda 2030 tells us the world is not conveniently organized up into sectors and mandates, and reality is multidimensional. Problems are complex. They have many different causes. It's difficult sometimes sorting out the causes from symptoms. And so we are really at a time, I think forced to not just deal with it with a complex world, but also the realization that we have to change to be able to successfully address these challenges, that we have to take off our agency hats, start thinking a little bit more as colleagues of the United Nations system, see where we sit fits in a much bigger picture. And also think about the sort of things that we do because they think that the 2030 Agenda also challenges us, not just to do more joint programming, but it also challenged us to look again at what we're doing.

The member states through Agenda 2030 are quite clear in the request for the UN. They want the UN to be working where it really adds value in developing not so much projects, but partnerships. I think that a lot of us in a way, this is a bit jarring for someone in my case, it was, coming into 2015, having over a decade of you had experienced very comfortable in my role and in my agency. And then basically being told that's just not good enough anymore and that you have to reconfigure, you have to re-conceptualize what it is that you're doing. You take that need to really rethink the approach of one's work and also the goal of one’s work in a world, which is complex in a world where we see the emergence of multiple powers and how to say, where the United Nations system, how would you say, has suffered a little bit in terms of a loss of authority and legitimacy. We're asked to do more with less, also there's the whole issue of budgets and whatnot, and then you throw a COVID into the mix and then it can scramble your brain sometimes. So, I think that's really that's alluding back to that VUCA world.

So we were already dealing with it. We had it as a context. We were also challenged by our own organizations within the context of Agenda 2030, and UN reform to really have a second look at how we work and then COVID comes into the mix and that's a lot to handle for a leader.

# **How did the UN Mastermind help you in your leadership challenges**

**Michael Croft:** The composition of the Mastermind Group, we were six colleagues. We were three agency reps in three resident coordinators. And I think that for us we could not accept, we could not help, but be to be drawn if I can put it this way to the situation of the resident coordinator.

The resident coordinators of course have a very important role and a very challenging role, especially in the context of UN reform.

And then we had a case, one of the cases where the resident coordinator had just been deployed at the beginning of COVID and hadn't even had a chance to meet her team in person and so she was needing to be resident coordinator and provide leadership to colleagues, to whom she had not met anywhere other than on the screen. There were, I think that there were really some interesting stories shared by some of the colleagues.

What the Mastermind Group was represented for all of us was really a safe space where we could say, look, this is what I'm dealing with right now. And I'm not quite sure how to deal with this particular situation because I have a certain at a certain level objective advice and objective counsel is not easily found. Because you're a little bit alone you're dealing with things that maybe not all of your colleagues can relate to or have experience with.

Your peers who are around you in the immediate situation, for instance, on the other members of the country team all have their own challenges and agencies, agency situations, and everything to grapple with. And it's really difficult to get, to have those moments where someone who has been in your shoes more or less, but actually is still has a lot of distance in terms of not just geographical distance, but maybe someone who has never been worked in your country worked with you, can say Michael, based on what you said, this is what I think.

In a safe in a friendly, but also in a frank manner, we don't have a lot of conversations like that. As heads of agencies and I may have with other UNESCO representatives, but then that's also a little bit within the UNESCO bubble, if I can put it there. So, to get the perspectives of the other colleagues was really important.

In terms of, let's say we also went down a particular personal learning journey. I, if I could say it like that, because we didn't just talk about, let's say professional challenges but the course also forced us to look at in a way, what we bring to the table as leaders, everyone is different. Everyone has areas which they feel very comfortable with and in areas which they're less comfortable with. So for me, ironically, a little sharing here, although I spent most of my career in post-conflict or conflict countries, I'm conflict averse. When it comes to my professional work, I don't enjoy conflict. You can put me in a conflict setting and I'm fine, but this was something that was always puzzling me because I was always wondering why is it that I can feel uncomfortable in a meeting room with colleagues from other agencies discussing some, let's say some particular tricky political issues. When you can put me in a situation where my physical security maybe somewhat under sort of a physical duress or physical stress and there, I'm okay. And there I can, there, I can function quite well. And so for me, that was a thing that kept coming back because I started to note a little bit, and I think we all did that. We started to see a little bit of commonality and the challenges that were facing, that related back to something personally that we needed to work on.

And so each of us took away from the Mastermind Group and the area where I think, which if I can call it, I don't want to necessarily call it weakness, but something where we had to work on more, but also them and for me it was conflict avoidance. And so now I have a few practical exercises or things that I do that get me through these conversations and allow me to be effective in a situation of conflict.

But then also too, we also had a better understanding of our strengths where things were very clear for us or where we were able to, after a colleague had presented a particular situation where for some of us, it was like, oh, here it is, this is how I see. This for me is something that I've dealt with before. The answer is just right there in front of me. So for instance, some of the other colleagues didn't have any particular issue with conflict avoidance. And so they were able to counsel me in a way maybe sometimes not take things so personally sometimes it's just work which is, sounds very logical but people are not human beings are not rational. And these are some things that we have to work through. So it was a mix of, I would say, different professional techniques that we learned. But also, it was also as a very much a personal learning journey as well.

# **What is your favorite part of the programme?**

**Michael Croft:** It's little bit difficult to identify the favorite part of the program. I think the favorite time of the class, if I could put it this way of the session was when we broke up into two. And then, we would work through something together.

It was very open and it was, for me, at least half of the time I would be talking to resident coordinators. It was very enlightening to see things from their perspective because I talked to, you know, what reform asks of the agencies, funds and programs and how to look past our own agency hat and to the wider system. And then now you have a new generation of resident coordinators who have to take this forward. And I, and it was really interesting for me to hear where they were having the challenges with their country team.

Because what that then allowed me was to take that experience, to go back to my country team and say, okay, this is how I can make life easier for the resident coordinator with a view to what the other resident coordinators were saying, in terms of, where they were opening up and saying, when it comes to providing leadership to the country team, this is an issue for us. This is where the struggle is. And so that enabled, as I said, that enabled me to take that experience of that sharing back into the country team and then work with like-minded colleagues too, to say, okay we can maybe anticipate that the rest of the coordinators having some issues with this.

So let's make life a little bit easier for him or for her. And, arrange yourselves accordingly or do this more don't do, or do this a little bit less. So that was something very practical, I think in terms of work and that's something I continue to apply every day.

# **Who do you think would benefit from the UN Mastermind?**

**Michael Croft:** I was going to say the resident coordinators needed the most because they're the most lonely people I think within the system. The people above them don't have a lot of time for them because they're very busy, they're expected it's your resident, you manage, and we'll see you in New York in November, but the day-to-day, that's your issue.

And then above, below them, of course or first among equals let's put it this way. The agencies' funds and programs being the agencies, funds and programs in some countries that gels, the UNCT gels really well, and some, in some cases that the dynamics are a bit different. It's different in every.

But even, I think in the best UNCT it's not easy. And I think that the resident coordinator, that job is a lonely job. And I think that, so it's good for resident coordinators to have an area where they can unpack with their peers. But I also, because of what I just said, I think that it's good to have a mix of resident coordinators and representatives because the perspective, because the resident coordinators like. Look, you, you represent a UNCT member, I'm trying to provide leadership. I'm trying to empower you. I've been empowered to empower you. How do you want me to empower you? How can I make your job easier? What are you looking for from me? And they can say that in a very open way, in this, Mastermind Group that can be a bit fragile or they can be a bit open because of course it's difficult for a resident coordinator to expose themselves in the day-to-day work. So I think that they benefit also from that [UN Mastermind] because they were quite curious.

It's Michael, what are you looking for? Like in your particular circumstance, what is it that you want from them? And what are you looking for in terms of the RCs? And then for us, we get from an agency, had you get a much better appreciation of the challenges and the work of the resident coordinator.

I think we're all very familiar with the work of the resident coordinator. Okay. But it's a very, that's a very interesting exchange, for both parties, because as a UNCT member, you come away with ideas about how to responses, how you can play how better to play a positive role and empowering role as a UNCT member based on what the resident coordinator is, and having a better energy, understanding what the resident coordinator is basic needs are.

And I think for the resident coordinators that insight into, the agencies funds and programs, which are which they have to have a keen appreciation for it and they need to know they need to know how to manage. So how to lower the perceived costs, if there are there in terms of collaboration.

So what is it that the agency funds and programs are afraid of? What are they concerned about? What you are, and not necessarily from the resident coordinator. But what did they, what are they fearful about in general, so to speak or in this particular country context? And so I think it allows it's empathy.

I guess that's what I'm looking for. It builds empathy between the resident coordinator and the UN country team colleagues, at least in the particular makeup for us, where we had three RCs, three agency reps. I think that was the kid case. There was really a lot of empathy for.

When you have a UN country team meeting. And you have 13, 14, 16 agencies coordinate or whatnot. There's a lot of interests represented in that. And also that our job as representatives is to represent our organizations. We all have a particular perspective and interest to represent.

But I think what the mastermind group helped with it's that it doesn't mean that make those interests or goals go away. But I think that it lessens the posturing. And also it again gets us, allows us to step back and again, refocus on what are we collectively trying to do here, because I think that gone are the days which, an agency could think that, oh as long as UNESCO's doing fine, that's I'm happy.

UNESCO's doing fine. My program DePaul is doing fine. Got lots of resources coming in. Life is great. Not if not, if the entire family, not, if that's not the case for the entire family there's no, there's, it's a hollow victory. If UNESCO succeeds or another agency to succeed in the collective team fails it.

The masterminds reinforced in a way brought us back to where we start, where we started our careers. We're, in terms of the principles, in terms of what attracted us to the United Nations in the first place, because I think that maybe the initial attraction when you go to any agencies, actually that you're joining the UN it's not that you're joining UNICEF. It's not that you're joining UNESCO or UNHCR or so I think. It's I'm going to be now part of the United Nations, I'm joining UNESCO, but I'm going to be part of the, which is part of the United Nations.

And then, over time that gets diluted a little bit, and it's easy to forget about that. And now that you're. You have a very set in, or well-established agency perspective, but it's nice to take, be able to take a step back at this back end, especially at this level, and then re-engage and say, okay, we all recognize that none of this works, unless all of it works.

So let's get over ourselves and come up with common solutions. And that was another thing because we also talked a lot about principles and values in the group. And it was nice. It was nice to be reminded that everybody has their story, but everybody was attracted to the United Nations.

All in a way we all joined it very different ways but that feeling that we had and that desire and that feeling that we had in our heart and the reason why, why we're also so proud to be associated with United nations despite everything is that was rekindled a little bit.

And it was also, and it was also a reminder, not always to see people in terms of, also look at people like, oh, there's the WFP reps. And there's this, also to try to also look into colleagues as colleagues within the system, just as much as that their colleague from UNESCO, there should be really no difference between the two.

I shouldn't be looking at somebody from WHO as a colleague, more removed than the UNESCO colleague. It just hopes that they're working for a different agency, but there's still a colleague of the United Nation system. And there's still, that means that They should still be my partner and I need to respect them and listen to them. And also, in what to help them, that should be my first desire. How can I help you? How can I help you? And it would be nice if we can have a little bit more of that in the system, then that will help.