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Bringing Thought Leaders Together Through a Global Platform

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is the Founder & CEO of **Global Thinkers Forum** (GTF), an international non-profit organisation that works as an agent for positive change by connecting international thought leaders and promoting values-based leadership and cross-sector collaboration. She talks to Judith Houston, ARSP Praxis Associate Editor about GTF's work and how cross-sector collaboration is enabling the organisation to deliver its aims.

Judith Houston [JH]: What is the Global Thinkers Forum?

Elizabeth Filippouli [EF]: The Global Thinkers Forum is a global platform that brings together a diverse network of thought leaders to share their visions of the future. I founded GTF whilst at Oxford University's Saïd Business School, and it launched officially in 2012 in Amman, Jordan, under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah. We are headquartered in London and we organise a wide range of activities globally including seminars, fora, roundtable discussions, workshops, networking events, mentoring programmes and our Awards for Excellence, providing a platform for society and leaders to collaborate.

JH: What are the key aims of GTF?

EF: GTF's mission focuses on three areas: accountable leadership, women's empowerment and youth development. We position the organisation as a bridge-builder that constantly creates opportunities for joined up thinking, collaboration and new partnerships.



In doing so, we hope to drive positive change in our societies by creating a new generation of leaders, who are global thinkers and have the ability to collaborate and co-create value. But more practically, what we are looking to do is create positive change in people's lives. I personally believe that change does not happen overnight. It is the small, incremental changes that eventually add up and create transformation. At GTF we actively help people who join us by connecting them with peers, by empowering them with knowledge, by inspiring them with role models that are dynamic and pioneering change-makers.

JH: How are you using cross-sector collaboration to deliver on these aims?

EF: We believe that we need to build on collective intelligence and social capital. We do this through the events we run which provide a platform for dialogue and collaboration between public and private organisations. Participants span social, gender, ethnic and racial groups. Such diversity enables cross-cultural understanding and the opportunity to reflect on their values, from a global perspective. Coordinating people in this way enables us to achieve problem-solving through collaborative work. For example, all conversations and meetings under GTF convene representatives from different sectors, and we ask them to discuss solutions together, and ideas that enable capacity building and development. We remain a non-partisan and independent organisation that focuses on collaboration and understanding, abolishing hatred and polarisation.

JH: Can you tell us more about GTF's programmes?

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EF: We are particularly proud of our two international mentoring programmes: 'Telemachus' and 'Athena'. These programmes create conversations between young individuals from all over the world and international professionals with outstanding careers and achievements drawn from various sectors such as business, government, civil society, academia and the media. From Afghanistan to Colombia and from Canada to India, our mentors and mentees are based in over twenty countries and are creating value, knowledge and ideas for each other. The mentoring sessions take place on a one-to-one basis over a period of eight months and promote professional development, cross-cultural understanding and the notion of global thinking.

Mentees are supported and encouraged to develop new skills and expertise, which can make them not only more competitive in the international arena, but also more prone to operate under universal values and not under contextual beliefs. We have young mentees who say that their relationship with their GTF mentor changed their thinking, their attitude towards life because they learned how to embrace challenges and helped them look beyond the obvious. Many of our mentees come from either underprivileged backgrounds or live in countries that battle with severe issues i.e. war, poverty, lack of infrastructure, cultural barriers etc.

JH: What type of challenges did you face in the beginning? What challenges do you face today?

EF: We have been lucky enough to see that our work and mission have been acknowledged from our first year. Having a leader like Queen Rania al Abdullah as patron

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has been a privilege and an endorsement that gave us a tremendous recognition. On a day to day basis our challenge has been the continuous effort to fundraise in order to meet the demand for our work, events and initiatives.

JH: How has academic theory informed GTF's model?

EF: GTF was fostered in Said Business School, University of Oxford. Dr. Marc Ventresca's academic work in economic sociology and teachings on 'system building' have informed the GTF concept. More specifically, GTF's model is based on the idea that there is immense value in human networks and that careful network analysis provides tools to solve social and other challenges. Information flows through the pattern of social ties in a community. The structure of these ties distinguishes who accesses novel, timely, and quality information. Today, some of societies' biggest struggles are over identity, boundaries, long established rules and regulations.

Dr. Ventresca's teachings highlight the need to focus on a structure of social ties in order to resolve problems such as:

- > Information – how to know where and when opportunities exist;
- > Access to strategic partners and allies;
- > Control – how to protect knowledge and assets;
- > Legitimacy – how to be credible and taken seriously by key stakeholders; and
- > Collective action.

It is these challenges that triggered the thinking that informed GTF's creation.

JH: What does the future hold for GTF?

EF: Our overarching theme for 2017 is the trust gap between society and leadership. Last year we experienced two major shifts, Brexit and Donald Trump's election, both of which can be seen as the outcome of a widening confidence gap between people and our governance systems. Where is this going to lead and how can we start rebuilding trust? Trust is important for the success of public policy and an essential ingredient for business and an efficient economy. Trust is necessary for peace building and collaboration. We are therefore planning to introduce the GTF Council for Trust Building, in order to produce more

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thought leadership around this highly topical and important issue.

JH: What is the one biggest lesson relating to cross-sector collaboration that you have learnt?

EF: Leadership in the information age requires cross-boundary, inter-agency collaboration with networking as a core strategy. Networking and collaboration challenge the traditional power and role of hierarchy. Although it remains uncertain exactly how the spread of technology will change governance models, it is clear that old solutions will not work in this new era. Leaders will have to build beyond peer-to-peer alliances and invest in new cross-sectoral alliances that reflect the rise in citizen, voter and consumer power, and the changing nature of public-private partnership collaboration models.

