Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Event
“2022 Washington Humanitarian Forum: Closing the Gap

Closing Session and Keynote

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FEATURING
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Kimberly Flowers:

Good afternoon and welcome back, everyone, for the final session for the 2022 Washington Humanitarian Forum at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

We have had over 2,000 participants online watching today. So while it’s wonderful to have also this great group here, know that there are thousands of others participating online, which is wonderful. For those here in person, just a reminder that we have a reception afterwards for 30 minutes just behind you, so we hope you’ll stay for that.

So now for the closing session. I guess I should reintroduce myself, since we have a lot of new people joining. My name is Kimberly Flowers. I am a senior associate with the CSIS Global Food Security Program and the Humanitarian Agenda Program. Formerly I was the founding director of both of those programs, including helping launch this Humanitarian Forum three years ago. And I am so grateful to be back.

So for our last session, it is going to be guided and moderated by Hadeil Ali. Hadeil is the director of the Diversity and Leadership in International Affairs Project here at CSIS. It’s a project that’s really – she leads, you know, to lend her voice, but also it demonstrates how CSIS is working to do things differently. And she’ll be leading the conversation today with Abby Maxman.

Hadeil, over to you.

Hadeil Ali:

Thank you so much, Kimberly, for the kind introduction. Good afternoon, all. Thank you for joining us in person or virtually. Today’s conference has explored evolving challenges within the humanitarian system with a focus on closing the gap and assessing the field’s ability to respond to complex global needs. Following an overview of the state of the sector, today’s country-based and thematic panels explored the importance of overcoming humanitarian access, geopolitical and legitimacy constraints, by rethinking traditional humanitarian engagements.

Our expert panelists have reflected overwhelming agreement on the importance of incorporating new actors, new narratives, and funding or operational mechanisms in tackling these challenges and rebuilding trust in the humanitarian sector. Reflecting this consensus through its advocacy and innovative methodologies, Oxfam America has been a leader and at the forefront of the sector’s transformation as it works to fight inequality, poverty, and injustice through improved foreign aid. Oxfam America works continuously in offering emergency lifesaving support, and in advocating for global justice and equity.

We’re honored to be joined today by Oxfam America’s president and CEO Ms. Abby Maxman. Since joining Oxfam in 2017, Ms. Maxman has been at the
Abby Maxman: Thank you so much, Hadeil. It’s a real pleasure to be with you all today. And I really appreciate the warm welcome. It’s really humbling to be closing out this day, I know, with 2,000 people participating and the conversations that are really near and dear to my heart, personally and professionally, having spent the better part of three decades working across the development humanitarian nexus.

As Hadeil mentioned, I’ve lived and worked through defining moments in our sector, spanning a range of regional and global geopolitical shifts in humanitarian and development challenges. I’m also going to see if I can master the clicks. (Laughs.) Recently I was visiting Oxfam Somali country programs, where famine could be declared any day now. While there, I met a woman named Sophia, a 38-year-old divorcee, mother of eight, who lost more than 40 of her goats in successive years of drought. Isolated, and lacking safety and food for her family, she had recently been forced to flee her home, as hyena circled her weakened family and dying herd night after night.

What’s happened to Sophia is, sadly, as familiar as it is infuriating. For centuries, her ancestors raised livestock. Droughts here hard, and sometimes deadly. And mostly, though, very rare. And with the help of family and friends, manageable. Today, Sophia is living in a camp for
displaced people. Such are the frequency and severity of droughts communities like hers face that they needed to anticipate when aid will come, as much as when rains will come. Pastoralists in East Africa, like so many communities subjected to regular climate shocks, cannot live as their ancestors once did because of a climate crisis that they did nothing to cause.

Worse, we’re watching this year’s food crisis across East Africa roll into famine in slow motion. Even though we sounded the alarms when it was early enough to prevent it and we have the know-how to stop it. Communities are coming together to help one another while the most wealthy and powerful in the world show little inclination or political will to stop it and act decisively.

It is time for bold reform in the sector and beyond. There have been important moments of change in the past 25 years, and moments of saying never again after instances of famine and mass atrocities. And yet, despite some change and progress, we come up short. We’ve repeatedly committed to changing how we work. The Grand Bargain, the Charter for Change, to name just a few of the more well-known examples. But as a collective, we have failed to live up to these commitments. And the time has come to break the cycle.

Tweaks and incremental changes are not good enough. We must look in the mirror and make big shifts to how we act as a collective. While we’ve embraced the nexus approach in the sector, there is much work to do to actualize it in practice, in particular to bridge that proverbial Desmond Tutu dichotomy between rescuing people who are drowning downstream and going upstream to check while people are falling into the river in the first place. We all play different roles in confronting powerholders and addressing root causes, and at this time when we’re witnessing the failings of the system we have worked to strengthen over time, I want to challenge us all to envision how we undertake a radical evolution of our ecosystem.

So what are concrete ways we can begin to make these radical changes? When I reflect on the past 30 years of my career, I see four critical areas that require our immediate and collective commitment. Access and protection. Leadership that centers local decision-making and action. Substantially greater focus on the impacts of climate change. And systemic shifts in how financing works.

First off, access and protection. Or, in lay terms, how we ensure people aren't getting cut off from what they need to survive. In conflicts today, we’re seeing blanket restrictions on imports, cut offs of services, bureaucratic regimes designed to limit the movement of people and commodities, sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war, and
violence directed at humanitarian workers. All to slow or stop the flow of lifesaving goods and services and gain a narrow and unlawful advantage in a conflict.

And we tell ourselves, we need to stay quiet today to deliver aid tomorrow, or to protect our frontline staff. But here’s the truth: We’re facing such extreme choices so regularly because we fail to attack them together as a humanitarian community. This is a failure of solidarity. When one of us makes a principled stand, refusing to deliver under unacceptable conditions, another is waiting in the wings to backfill. When one of us is expelled from a country or has a staff killed, others stay silent or tweet not a target in solidarity, yet naïve hope, that we won’t be next.

Powerbrokers are holding the world’s most vulnerable hostage and getting away with it. The solution isn’t easy, but it is straightforward—solidarity and coordination. It’s using our collective power to negotiate and stand on principle. We must move away from access narrowly meaning how my organization gets to vulnerable people, and instead to how vulnerable people can enjoy their rights. We must define success not just by the number of people reached, but by the depth of our commitment to our shared cause.

Second, is leadership and localization. The details are hard, but the direction is simple. We must live up to our collective commitments to local humanitarian leadership. This means real, measurable investment and change that centers on leadership and decision-making of national and local partners to encourage a more resilient, independent, and diverse civil society. Despite a lot of rhetoric, we haven’t made meaningful progress. As Juliet Parker from ALNAP mentioned earlier today and outlined in a recent report on the State of the Humanitarian System examples of how this are—of this are how, during the height of COVID-19 restrictions, we witnessed local and national NGOs delivering aid.

But this did not result in a permanent rebalancing of power. Instead, direct funding to local actors remains extremely low, fluctuating between 3.3 percent and 1.2 percent in the past three years. A meaningful power shift means channeling more direct funding to, standing in solidarity with, and enabling local leadership wherever and whenever possible. And that means listening deeply, examining power dynamics, reducing bureaucracy, resetting how we measure and define success, and applying new qualitative indicators that recognize local partners and go beyond scale and speed.

And while I’ll talk more about funding mechanisms shortly, how resources are divided and allocated or, more aptly, how they are not divided or allocated, it’s also directly tied to our sector’s failure to do localization well. Local partners are nearly always the first responders, and at the forefront of
leading the response, but running on fumes as far as funding goes. And often, forced into a limited subcontractor role. Today, as most of us know, international organizations receive the lion’s share of development and humanitarian response funding, and the latter almost half goes to the U.N. agencies.

These issues are systemic, historic, and I’ve witnessed when they are driven by ego more than the dignity of people at the center of crisis. Earlier in my career, when I was a country director, and simultaneously nursing my twins, I learned over time that some of the most important decision-making venues were in informal humanitarian beers nights, where mostly men from northern-based wealthy countries struck deals that influenced how many millions would be channeled to partners via international organizations. In such cases, local partners were informed after the fact about which NGO’s bid they might be on. This was never a way that decision-making about partnerships and resource allocations should be made, all the more when people’s lives and dignity are on the line.

And while we have, as a sector, have made progress around diversity, equity, and inclusion, we know that funding mechanisms that incentivize these behaviors and the old-school practices around them still exist. Third, and only increasing by severity each day, the humanitarian and development sectors need to better grapple with the effects of climate change. In my lifetime, extreme weather events – such as droughts, and cyclones, and floods – have increased fivefold, becoming not only more frequent but often more destructive. We know the climate crisis is creating a real and present challenge to the humanitarian system.

Oxfam research estimates that over the past five years, U.N. humanitarian appeals linked to extreme weather were only 54 percent funded on average, resulting in an estimated funding shortfall of up to $33 billion. And it will only get worse, as the IRC estimates that by 2030 humanitarian funding requirements for climate-related disasters could grow to $20 billion per year. We cannot wait until 2030. The humanitarian system needs to deal with this now. These crises are not unexpected events, but rather an inherent part of national realities. And we need mechanisms to ensure that the most at-risk people in countries are equipped with the finance and institutional support they need to better anticipate, prepare for, and recover from disasters caused by climate.

Which leads me to the final, urgent area of change I want to discuss today – fundamental shifts in how financing works. Right now at COP-27 in Sharm El Sheikh, Oxfam and climate negotiations have put loss and damage on the official agenda for the first time. And we must keep the pressure on the U.S. government to step up with finance and institutional support for loss and damage. This is a major climate justice issue. The funding mechanisms we
have in place today are outdated. And for far too long, there’s been a size and growth obsession in this work.

At times, bigger budgets and mega grants that value the lowest cost per beneficiary were viewed as evidence of impact, undervaluing qualitative measures on partnership and sustainable approaches beyond counts of people reached and lives saved. Or, perhaps, it’s because there is an unwillingness to fund predicted crises before they wreak havoc, which ultimately contributes to crises economies that benefit the wealthy and further exacerbate global inequality. Anticipatory and preparedness funding improves the speed and effectiveness of responses, but these mechanisms are only a small proportion of overall humanitarian assistance.

Human suffering and loss of dignity can be mitigated if donors, development agencies, national governments, and the private sector respond in a timely way to risk warnings, rather than wait for crises to spiral out of control. Even in cases where we’ve shifted approaches to focus on proactive response, the inability to shift financing practices have undermined growth. It is time for real change. We need a new global financial architecture, and we need to get creative.

Imagine donors, who already know that preventing disaster saves both lives and resources, following that logic and providing no-strings-attached funding that can be used to nip escalating crises in the bud. Imagine more funds being provided by a climate damages tax on the extraction of oil, gas, and coal. And imagine an agreement, following Denmark’s lead, to properly compensate countries who are suffering the greatest loss and damage as a result of the climate crisis.

So how do we get to these big issues, these big four areas of change? We are at an inflection point, but also a pivotal moment of opportunity. There’s still time for us to create real and lasting systems change in the humanitarian ecosystem. And I am inspired by all of you in this room and everyone online who are working every day to create real and meaningful change. A recent example of this work is the launch of the Pledge for Change last month. Convened by Degan Ali, CEO of Adeso, an NGO in East Africa, the Pledge for Change specifically targets large INGOs and has been signed onto by CARE, Save the Children, Christian Aid, Oxfam, and PLAN.

The Pledge emphasizes the role of local organizations in the global aid system through respect for the rights, needs, dignity, and priorities of local communities. And it has a focus on how to counter decades of empty promises and the sector continuing to tread water and commit to incremental change that becomes transformative and bold by 2030. Now, if we all stand together to support it, the Pledge for Change will represent a huge step forward in delivering on old promises reinvigorating existing
commitments, such as the Charter for Change and Grand Bargain, which are so important for achieving the change needed in this sector. We have a responsibility to ensure this is not just another set of empty words. And thus, we need solidarity, collaboration, and system-wide accountability for change.

The challenges before us are deep and complex. But, looking at everybody her who spent their whole day together, the 2,000 of you, I remain defiantly hopeful about the possibility for real change. We have seen reform, instituted shifts in humanitarian leadership, coordination, and accountability. We’ve put in place early warning mechanisms that enable anticipatory action. We’ve prioritized preventing sexual exploitation and abuse and harassment and have made bold commitments to decolonize our sector and deliver on longstanding promises to fund and center local leadership.

Every one of us in this room has the power to radically reshape the future of humanitarianism. Talk to your donors. Help each other understand that a different system can be a better system, and that donors have enormous power. And we need them to participate in a different way now. Talk to your staff. Challenge them to think of new ways to transfer power and leadership to local actors and partners, and to bring creative solutions to the current balance of power. Hire and integrate climate and gender experts into your humanitarian team. Talk to your leadership. Get them to sign your organization onto and recommit energy to the Pledge for Change, Charter for Change, and Grand Bargain. And talk to your local partners about the role they want to be playing within the humanitarian system, and what do they need to achieve it.

These are just a few tangible actions we can and must do, starting today. Sophia and her children do not have time for us to add burdens to local leadership, navigate perverse incentives and fight over money, or simply build up the courage to act. But together, we can imagine a future that breaks the cycle of pleading for resources that are too little and come too late. And with the right cooperation, urgency, and creativity, we can radically overhaul the way the world responds to humanitarian crises.

Thank you, and let’s turn to our discussion. (Applause.)

Ms. Ali: Thank you so much, Abby, for your presentation. You highlighted the need for bold reform in the sector, the need for systemwide accountability. I read your piece in The New Humanitarian last month. You spoke about the importance of reforming the humanitarian aid financing. We look at donor organizations like USAID, under the leadership of Samantha Power, have demonstrated their commitment to localization through reforming the distribution of humanitarian awards, addressing the power dynamics you
alluded to between local and international partners, and greater considerations of local contexts. How do you see these commitments supporting the development of locally owned solutions? And how do we ensure accountability to change?

Ms. Maxman: Thanks, Hadeil. It’s great questions. And I have to say, Administrator Power’s commitments are part of that accountability. Stating measurable commitments. And that enables all of us to measure – because we all know what you measure is what will get counted and examined. And certainly, USAID, amongst all, has such enormous influence in the sector and can influence other donors in the community to live up to those actions. And we as community also can be part of that. We can set our own targets and also do the influencing to make sure we’re holding them accountable, and they’re holding us accountable.

Because the funding flow to partners is such an easy, measurable indicator. And as I said earlier, it’s shamefully low after all these years of trying. And we know that it’s possible. So USAID’s reforms, starting to implement them, breathe life into them, make sure we’re being held accountable and we’re helping our local partners access those resources and deliver. And helping USAID also in that effort.

Ms. Ali: Absolutely. You talked in your presentation about the need to decolonize the sector. When we think about global poverty and global inequities, those are symptoms of centuries of colonization and marginalization of underserved and under-resourced groups. There have been a lot of efforts to acknowledge this and also many conversations about power. When we talk about the link between localization movement and the diversity, equity, and inclusion one, in my perspective what is at the core here is power – who holds power structures, how do we move from amplifying to centering local actors and local voices? But what’s so persistent is challenges with overcoming those deep-rooted, systemic donor and programmatic issues. So, Abby, could you tell us a little bit more about Oxfam’s work to rethink the shift in power dynamics and transform the function of foreign aid away from this colonial thinking?

Ms. Maxman: Yeah, thanks, Hadeil.

Well, Oxfam’s been on a journey. Our own reckoning, our own learnings. And we have a commitment that we’ve been working on of how do we rebalance? We look internally and externally. So on the internal side, we’re a global confederation, a global network. And we look at where both – not just resources, but decision-making, resides. Global North, Global South. We’ve been on a journey to have – reach a target of 50 percent of our affiliates in our global system and global governance to be 50/50 by 2030.
And we’re on – we are continuing to look at how we partner and be part of a global network that redistributes power and decision-making?

And so we’ve been embarked on a series of reviews and governance reforms, looking at how decisions are made inside the confederation, how resources flow. We have a lot of ambitious targets. We struggle to meet them. And it’s part of the ecosystem that we’re all in. But that is central to part of our internal journey. We do a number of other things when we’re looking at power, and decision-making, and financial flow. And certainly setting targets and being honest when we’re not meeting them, and looking at how do we change? Where are the levers for change?

Externally, it is making sure we’re showing up, and walking the talk, and being honest when we’re not. Which we do. We have our failings, even about measuring commitments to things like, you know, Charter for Change, and the Grand Bargain, and how financial flows. In some contexts, we’re doing really, really well. We’re at 80 or 90 percent, in the Philippines, for example, of resources going to and through local partners. In the Ukraine response we’ve taken a partner-led approach, which has been very difficult against some of those traditional measures that we have talked about.

But there’s other contexts where we really struggle and we’re not doing what we feel we need to do in terms of financial flow. And I hear it directly from our partners. And we make an effort to make sure we’re sitting and listening to the uncomfortable feedback that partners can provide us, so that it helps us in holding ourselves accountable to do better.

Ms. Ali: Absolutely. And I love how you use the term “journey,” right? There’s a lot of wins that are happening, but also a lot of more work to be done. And kudos to Oxfam for being a thought leader in this journey and setting that tone for the rest of the sector as well. I wonder, what are some of the challenges or obstacles that might stand in the way of this movement that we’re seeing?

Ms. Maxman: Well, one, I talked a bit about systems. And we’re all working in an ecosystem that can sometimes feel like it’s beyond any one of our control to really change because of how finances flow, how donors work, how the system works, and what we measure and value in terms of quantitative outcomes, and speed, and scale, and other things like that. So I think there are some things in the system that, if together we came together, we could make fundamental changes.

These systems aren’t, you know, a random act. They’re manmade as well. They’re human made. And we can, together, work to influence changes. And I think that is sometimes the – you know, how do we make sure that we can
maintain our commitments, you know, while we’re transforming how we deliver impact with partners and in a partner-led way. But it’s a journey. And that’s a phrase I have to overuse, I have to admit. But it really is to honor how far we’ve come, but how far we really have to go.

Ms. Ali: Absolutely. That’s similar terminology we’re using here at CSIS with our diversity, equity, and inclusion also work within the national security space. Abby, you talked about the Pledge for Change. I wanted to ask you a little bit more about that. Could you share a little bit more with our audience some of the commitments Oxfam has made, and the unique contributions it’s going to make to this campaign?

Ms. Maxman: Well, we’re trying to do it collectively. But first of all, getting a sense of a baseline of where we are and some of the pledges around equal partnerships, around kind of ethical kind of how we do our imaging, and certainly how we use spaces like this and platforms we have to influence this sector. So the latter, this is amongst the many efforts we’re trying to do to talk about it, socialize it, connect. We do, as a community, wanted to make sure we have a baseline. And even measure what are we measuring already? Because we’re – a lot of the work over several years, and in the conversations, we’re not necessarily measuring against the same metrics. So the first year is about the commitment to having baselines and then starting to be – to show those. Where are we? And then, of course, it’s much easier to be more assertive and aggressive in making change and making progress.

One thing about Oxfam is that we have, since our kind of – since we came into being, our genesis story is we – looking at strength-based imaging in how we do our fundraising and outreach. That’s always been important to us. But we’re still going to examine very carefully how we tell the stories, lift up the voices of our partners, look at the images that might be compelling for some donors to, you know, pull the heartstrings. But they’re not necessarily showing the dignity and strength of the communities and the partners. And we’re trying to center the voices of others. And we know that’s hard. We know that’s hard in how organizations raise funds. But it’s certainly been a central priority for us, and something we’re going to deepen our commitment to over time.

Ms. Ali: Absolutely. And you mentioned throughout data, metrics, because that is what is at the core of the accountability, the systemwide accountability. I’m going to ask one last question, and we will be turning over to the audience for questions, so prepare your questions either live here in the audience or virtually. I’ll have those on the iPad as well.

My last question to you, Abby, is: Only a small number of large INGOs have pledged to this campaign so far. How do you foresee Oxfam’s role, through
its advocacy efforts, to ensure that larger international and multilateral organizations are joining this pledge for change?

Ms. Maxman: Well, I think having the conversations. I’ve had peer organizations reach out and say, you know, help us – we want to know more. Even those who were part of the dialogue early, but understandably not wanting to commit if they didn’t feel they could yet live up to it. And we know that as, Oxfam, we’re part of a global confederation. It means moving a lot of moving parts in our network along. And so making a commitment can feel hard, and scary, and uncomfortable. So I think there’s a lot we can be doing.

And, you know, it’s a little unfortunate that we need to be making another pledge, because when I think back to, you know, the World Humanitarian Summit in 2015, and all the big, bold ambitions. And I was at an Oxfam meeting when we were working on our 2030 strategy development process. And I was in Nairobi. We were with hundreds of colleagues and partners. And when talking to some, and said to some of our partners, what do you want? And they were, like, can you just commit and live up to accountabilities and pledges you’ve already made?

So it is discouraging that we have to pledge to redouble a commitment to a previous pledge. And I think one indicator will be, we’re not pledging again. We’re actually showing evidence, what are we learning? How are we doing? Where are we failing? Being honest about that, not – you know, not hiding, or, you know, shaming. But what can we do collectively to do better? Because, as I was saying, when only a few of us do it, the behaviors – and the whole ecosystem will persist the way it has been.

It’s up to all of us to come together. And I hope we can be – use today to further launch, explore, talk about it, if your organization hasn’t connected with it. I don’t think you’ll find things that are really shocking about the pledge, but what can we do to really hold ourselves accountable as a community to make real change. But measuring our changes and our commitments as part of that process.

Ms. Ali: And that solidarity work between peer organizations is crucial, like you said.

We’ll move it over to our audience. If you do have a question if you want to raise your hand, and someone will be able to hand you a mic. If you can please share your name and affiliation, and a brief question.

Q: OK. Hi. My name is Abraham Leno and I’m with Eastern Congo Initiative. I’m the director – executive director.

Thank you for your thoughts and sharing how Oxfam is pushing this agenda. I speak as an African and I also speak, you know, as someone who is involved
with an international organization. And I just want to know how do you view the transition? Because sometimes localization in some description has almost taken a political, you know, definition. So I’m careful that localization may – or have been careful that it is not necessarily nationalization. And how are we balancing that act to make sure, recognizing that there is growth. It has to be a path. To bring the organizations that we want to see at the level that we want to see them, that that is being done sensibly? OK, thank you.

Ms. Maxman: Should I –

Ms. Ali: Yes, and then we’ll answer another question.

Ms. Maxman: No, it’s – I appreciate the question. And even the term “localization,” we know is – you know, inside our organization we tend to talk about local leadership, local humanitarian leadership. But we know that the more mainstream term is “localization.” And again, how do we unpack what it means? What does shifting, and sharing, and redistributing power look like?

And I think it’s important that we look in the world today at an ecosystem where we all matter. Global North, Global South, local, national, international. We all have a platform, we all can support each other in different ways. So I believe a way of depoliticizing is getting out of the binary either/or, but how? What is our role, relevance and impact, as an international – in Oxfam's case – as an international INGO with a confederation of affiliates from the Global North and the Global South? How do we be part of a global movement to make real, positive social change? And how are we working local to global and global to local to create impact?

So there is more nuance. It’s a bit of the art as well as the science of how we deliver. And I hope that these conversations and getting serious about what we’re measuring, debating when there’s these differences of understanding, or the politicizations, or the binary national/or is part of what we can be doing together.

Ms. Ali: Thank you.

Q: As you lead this then it’s very important for that advocacy aspect to also make sure that the politicians don’t grab this and push it in the wrong direction. So that would be my point.


Ms. Maxman: Thanks.

Q: My name is Zenat. I’m from Giapago.

I just wanted to know, this localization discussion is always kind of just transferring funds to the local organization, but it goes beyond that. At the same time that we will talk sometimes, Global South and Global North, but Global South is not homogeneous. We have to remember that even within a country there is small, grassroots voices and there is a big NGO like BRAC. I’m from Bangladesh, so I can talk about BRAC. This is also local voice. So we need to make sure we also maintain that balance and how Oxfam or these kind of player can play a role so that grassroots voice is also included; we just don’t channelize fund to an organization, big fish. Yeah. Thank you.

Ms. Ali: Great question.

Ms. Maxman: It is a good question. And while sort of a – first of all, I agree – (laughs) – that that is a challenge we all face, because no one – even international NGOs are not homogeneous. Similarly, local or national organizations are not. And it is this ecosystem. When we look at the health and vibrancy and dynamism of civil society, locally legitimate, relevant activist organizations, and what are perhaps, an international NGO like Oxfam, how are we actually supporting and empowering and protecting and, at times, local voices, when we need to. And so I agree that the distinction, you know, of a label of international versus national can be misleading.

And when we talk about USAID’s commitment and new vision for global development, and some of how it’s going to quantify and measure its targets of who counts in terms of those new funding targets of 25-30 percent, we want to make sure that they are those locally based organizations, not the international organizations who have localized. And we think that’s a really important part of USAID’s commitment to making a real change in the sector.

Ms. Ali: I think I’ll take one last question over here.

Q: Hi. Thank you. I’m Arbora with Girls Gotta Run. We invest in girls in Ethiopia.

So push a little more on the local partner question, can you talk a little bit about the importance and the practical challenges with finding women-led local partners? You’re the first one to mention gender, I think, today, although we had many women on the panel. Thank you.

Ms. Maxman: Thank you for that. At Oxfam, we try to measure not just number of partners we work with – you know, several thousand around the world – but how many women’s rights organizations we are partnering with. Because we know in those statistics I gave, and it’s probably at the root of your question,
you know, the 1 to 3 percent is actually big compared to how many – how much money goes to women-led women’s rights organizations. So we know that that data is real. That they’re at the bottom, if you will, of how resources flow.

So for – in our case, we’re trying to be much more intentional about targets, about number of women’s rights organizations. Just earlier this week, I was on a meeting with my fellow executive directors inside our Oxfam confederation, looking at examining our data from the last year around how many partners, but with a focus on gender and women’s rights organizations, and what – where we weren’t meeting our targets, and why. And so having those hard conversations, looking at the data. And a report we recently did looking in Africa – sorry I can’t remember the name of the report – we solicited the input of women-led gender organizations, and their feedback of Oxfam and CARE about how we show up as a partner.

So it’s really humbling and really hard to have those conversations, and to hear the feedback. But – and I can share a link. But that’s the kind of work that we really need to do to get serious and make real progress.

Ms. Ali:

Mmm hmm. Yeah. Thank you so much, Abby. Unfortunately, we don’t have time for more questions, but thank you all for your questions. It’s really refreshing to see all the work that Oxfam America has been doing. It’s also refreshing to see the work and the critical assessment that the sector as a whole has been making. And part of that is the language that we’re using. Abby, I want to thank you so much for joining us today for this thought-provoking discussion. And more importantly, thank you for your leadership and dedication at Oxfam to advancing reforms and equity within the humanitarian sector. Please join me in thanking and giving a huge round of applause to Ms. Abby Maxman. (Applause.)

(Break.)

Ms. Ali:

At the start of today’s conference, Juliet Parker and Sarah Charles helped us understand just how critical the gap between global humanitarian needs and what appropriate and effective humanitarian response capacities are. Throughout the day, the practical reality of what the gap means came into view as our expert panelists unpacked the way in which COVID-19, growing global insecurity, a crisis of confidence, and an intensifying climate crisis have pushed vulnerable communities and humanitarian organizations to their limits.

However, the insights from today’s panelists were also encouraging, as it demonstrated the way these extreme challenges have motivated new thinking and the development of new approaches. At the local, organizational, and governmental levels shared recognition of geopolitical
disfunction and insufficient humanitarian capacities have inspired new movements to reform the roots, function, and model of traditional humanitarian action.

The rightful integration of discussions on the legacy of racism and colonialism into these initiatives have helped support the growing push for localized ownership, empowering communities, and self-determination in building more resilient livelihoods. We heard Marie-Rose in the Haiti session say, “We need to listen to community leaders.” Whether ensuring female education through community-based schools in Afghanistan, investing in local innovations to address climate challenges in the DRC, or overcoming humanitarian access challenges in Syria through strengthened multilateral coordination, today’s discussions demonstrate the potential of new approaches to support the humanitarian sector in closing the gap.

As we close the conference today, I would like to thank all of our panelists, moderators, and participants whose reflection and engagement helped move the needle further in the exploration and development of solutions to the numerous challenges faced. The Humanitarian Agenda team would like to offer a special thank-you to all the CSIS staff who supported today’s event, and to USAID’s Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance for their support, which made today’s event possible. I would like to personally thank Sierra, Hareem, and Jude for tremendous support ahead of today’s event, as well as Jake Kurtzer and Marti Flacks for inviting me and ensuring that diversity, equity, and inclusion is central to our scholarly work at CSIS.

Special thanks to all those who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make today’s event happen, and make it a success, including our conferencing, streaming, and broadcasting teams. Today’s series of informative dialogues reveal an encouraging consensus among thought leaders of the need to rethink humanitarianism and to create a more effective and equitable humanitarian system through the incorporation of new actors, voices, and funding mechanisms. The complexity of these challenges is far greater than just one day can solve, however as a learning and convening space at CSIS we believe in the power of continued dialogue and reflection to unlock a way forward today.

We hope that you will continue your engagement with these critical topics discussed today in exploring ways we can work together to improve U.S. foreign aid, global humanitarian policy, and advancing global justice and equity. Again, thank you for all of you being here at CSIS, and those of you who have joined us throughout the day virtually. We invite you to join us right outside this room in the second floor atrium for a reception to celebrate today. Thank you all.