Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Online Event

"Humanitarian Innovation in Action"

Panel 1: Transformation Through Humanitarian Innovation and Private Sector Engagement

DATE

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FEATURING

Charlène Cabot
Manager, Response Innovation Lab (Uganda)

Zaid Hassan
Co-founder and CEO, 10-in-10

Amy Smith
Founding Director, MIT D-Lab

Ben Ramalingam
Executive Director, United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub

CSIS EXPERTS

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Transcript By
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Jacob Kurtzer: Thank you so much for being here again and thank you to people joining us online virtually, and particularly to our co-panelists who are joining us virtually from Uganda and soon from the United Kingdom.

I'll spare extended opening remarks because I already made mine, but we have a really distinguished panel here right now to talk about humanitarian innovation in broad strokes, but also to touch on the issues around engaging the private sector.

We're joined by Charlène Cabot, manager from the Response Innovation Lab in Uganda. Charlène is a humanitarian worker who has served at the U.N. World Food Programme in Central African Republic, Chad, Senegal, and at their HQ.

On my right, Zaid Hassan, co-founder and CEO of 10-in-10. Zaid is a strategist, facilitator, and writer, spending the last 20 years developing responses to complex social challenges and is the author of "The Social Labs Revolution: A New Approach to Solving our Most Complex Challenges."

On my left is Amy Smith, founding director of the MIT D-Lab, an innovative university-based program. Amy is also a senior lecturer at MIT and is the founder – there we go – of the International Development Design Summit, co-founder of the MIT IDEAS Global Challenge, of Rethink Relief conference, and is the originator of the Creative Capacity Building methodology. Amy was selected as a MacArthur Fellow in 2004 and named one of Time magazine's 100 Most Influential People in 2010.

And we'll be joined as well by Ben Ramalingam, a senior leader, strategist, author, specializing international humanitarian and development work. Ben leads the pilot phase of the U.K.'s Humanitarian Innovation Hub, oversees a global portfolio of strategic projects, and in 2020 Ben was named the humanitarian change maker of the decade, and has also authored two books, including "Aid on the Edge of Chaos."

So a really distinguished panel.

Let me start with you, Zaid. The humanitarian sector is, fundamentally, reactive. Crisis breaks out. System turns forward. But innovation, as a field, I think, is designed about thinking proactively about trends, capabilities, challenges.

Can you speak to the way in which your work seeks to move from that reactive to proactive model in thinking about humanitarianism and what we, as a sector, should be thinking about now?

Zaid Hassan: Yeah. Thanks.

Good morning, everyone. Good to be here. Good to see everyone.

So I think, you know, the way I would – I understand your question is there's a challenge for all of us to be strategic in response to the challenges that we are seeing and witnessing, and I think part of the problem is that, you know, we have a fairly good idea of what's coming down the pipeline, in some ways, and looking at it is kind of scary.

So the issue is, you know, how do we look down – you know, how do we look down river, if you like, and, you know, we know kind of – or how do we look up river, and we know what's kind of coming down, if you like, towards us, and how do we take a strategic view rather than just purely reactive view in terms of, you know, look, this is going to happen. When it happens we're going to do something.

And I think the climate crisis is a really key example of that, which is that, you know, we're kind of getting a fairly good inkling as to what is going to happen and what is going to happen that's going to impact the humanitarian sector profoundly, and the question is what do we do about it and what do we do about it in time rather than wait for things to hit and challenges to happen.

So I think that's – you know, and the way we work is that we're working on a response to the climate crisis that has been kind of in the making for a long time and it's, basically, a distributed response where, essentially, the whole is not subject to, if you like, you know, centralized decision-making. It's a decentralized response.

So, basically, what we're trying to do is we're trying to be strategic. We're trying to be responsive well in advance, kind of, you know, we know what's coming three or four years down the line; how do we build the capacities and the capabilities today for what's coming in four or five or 10 years, basically.

Mr. Kurtzer:: Let me go to Charlène, and thank you so much for joining us from Kampala.

Can you tell us a bit about the Response Innovation Lab, the priorities that you're working on in Kampala, and the way in which you see innovation manifesting in Uganda or East Africa, more broadly?

Charlène Cabot: Thanks, Jacob. Good morning, everyone. Pleasure to join the discussion.

So from the Response Innovation Lab side, we are a global collaboration that was launched by Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision, and Civic, and we have moved into becoming a network of field labs that focus on breaking silos to support the humanitarian innovation space in different crises.

In Uganda, specifically, we've been active for five years, supported by Save the Children, our founding and hosting entity, and we are specifically focusing on the refugee response space – Uganda hosts 1.4 million refugees – and, more specifically, we are looking at this humanitarian development nexus and how innovation can play a role in these protracted crises contexts where some of the refugees that live in Uganda have been here for 12 years. There is no chances for return in a very short term and there is a reduction on funding flows while people keep coming into the country.

So our priority, really, is to try and find ways to encourage more durable solutions, alternative to traditional ways of delivering humanitarian assistance so that communities impacted by this crisis find ways to access better services, transform livelihoods, market opportunities, and be able to move towards self-reliance, and we work across different sectors to do that because, of course, it links to, maybe, agriculture but it can also link to financial inclusion, a very critical area.

So this is very specific to Uganda. But what we are seeing in terms of trends is that there is a very rich ecosystem in Uganda and the same can be said for several other countries in East Africa. A lot of innovation coming up in Kenya and Rwanda, even in Somalia, where we have another lab, and which is often thought of – is often not – doesn't come to mind as a priority when you think about an innovative place, but very rich ecosystems of academic partners and startups that have an ambition for social impact.

And what we can do as Response Innovation Labs and other partners is find a way to bring those nontraditional actors to the table and contribute their creativity to this discussion on the solutions we can bring to the people who need them.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Charlène.

Amy, much of the discourse around innovation focuses on the system or large structural changes. How does the MIT D-Lab view this question of innovation and transformation, and why?

Amy Smith: Great. Thanks so much for the question and also for an inviting D-Lab to be here. So we're very much grateful for the opportunity.

So I – you know, when we think about transformation, I tend to think about it as, you know, in order for there to be long-term sustainable positive change, that there needs to be sort of transformation on the institutional level, on the systemic level, but also on the community level and the individual level, and those are the levels where we tend to focus more on the individual and community level.

And I would – you know, when you ask why I think a lot of that comes back to my experiences where many of my most meaningful experiences were where I had the opportunity to use my creativity to solve a problem. And, you know, as a mechanical engineer, when I built something and it worked – I mean, how many people have made something and had it work, and how do you feel, right? It's awesome.

And, you know, and fundamentally, there are these intangible benefits of design and innovation, which are around the sense of agency that you feel by solving a problem with your own ingenuity, the joy that you feel by creating something that works, and these intangible benefits, I believe, are the – sort of the necessary foundational transformation which is needed in order to then transform the community, and then when you have that aligned with systemic and institutional transformation then, I think, you have things that stick.

I think if there's transformation at the institutional level and you're just giving people new things, I think that that doesn't change their position and where they are. It doesn't change the way they think about where they're going, and I think that that's really important.

And if you would grant me the liberty, I just have a little demonstration, which – of a technology which will be a little challenging with this, but I think I'm going to do an innovation and do that. OK . So – (laughs) – OK.

OK. So in much of sub-Saharan Africa, women spend hundreds of hours removing the kernels of corn from an ear of corn, right, and it is both tedious – whenever you talk to women they always start rubbing their thumbs – and but they're – and it's hard work. I'm not just playing at it here. Usually, I'm better at this.

But there's this technology, which is – it's a very simple technology. It's a ring of plastic with these ridges inside of it and it, fundamentally, changes the way that corn is shelled. Yeah, and I see my African colleagues saying, I want one for my mother, don't you? (Laughter.) Yes. Exactly.

And, in fact, everyone, you know, when they see it, they want one. But you can't necessarily start a plastic manufacturing site. So what we've done is we redesigned it. We have a little machine here that allows you to put the

grooves into a piece of scrap metal and then you can make your own maize sheller.

So, part of the trainings that we do, on the very first day we teach everyone how to make this maize sheller. And just imagine now that you're a 50-year-old woman who has never held a tool in her hands in her life, and then in less than an hour you use a hammer, pliers, files – what else? – (laughs) – tin snips, et cetera, in order to make this device. And then you go home, doubling the work – cleanup work. But anyway, you go home, and you are able to save, like, literally, a hundred hours of labor every year. You do not think about yourself in the same way ever again and, in fact, that's what we see is these women come back to the shop and they're making now furniture for their home. They're doing these things.

The men in the community are creating their own income-generating devices, whether it's a ground nut sheller or a cassava grater or creating things that are higher tech like solar phone chargers, et cetera. But this idea of, I can do it, and I can choose what I want to make, I think that that is, fundamentally, important to the transformation that changes the way that refugees are, right, so that they are not constantly thought of as vulnerable populations, but creative, capable populations who are active contributors.

So, yeah. So that's my extended remarks – (laughter) – on why it's so important. Yeah.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you. That's awesome.

Really, you asked me about bringing the toys and I think this is great because I think it's really – it concretizes some of the ideas that we talk about, I think, in more abstract terms, and I like this idea of agency that you talked about and individuals, you know, not just being handed tools to solve the problem, but making their own.

So I want to come back to you, Zaid, and talk about the Gigaton Challenge and, you know, if you could tell us a little bit about that but also, you know, where this concept of agency fits in in terms of, you know, not just a top-down approach to solving our biggest challenges but, you know, asking folks to get involved and solve the challenges themselves.

Mr. Hassan: Yeah. So, warnings about the climate crisis is that it's huge. It's big. It's out of our hands. We know we can't deal with it.

So, in my work in the climate space over the last, kind of, 15 years, the bulk of responses that I've seen – if you like, the bulk of energy – have gone into policy responses in the sense that, you know, if we can shift the policy landscape, if we can make policy changes, then we're good. And as we have

seen over the last couple of days, those policy changes are kind of fragile. They can happen. They can not happen.

So part of the response that we've designed with the Gigaton Challenge is what does a distributed response look like that is in the hands of people where, in the sense, we don't have to wait for a policy shift to happen, and if you look at the last kind of 30 years of the climate crisis, over the last 30 years, 50 percent of global emissions have happened since we have known that we've got a problem. Since the first kind of UNFCCC conference in Rio, we've, basically, been unable to respond.

So, the Gigaton Challenge is, essentially, a distributed response. What we do is we, essentially, mobilize, train, and finance teams on the ground. We give teams targets and they, basically, meet targets. So these targets are abatement targets, equity targets, and time targets, or temporal targets.

And the idea is that anyone can start doing it, so we've got teams in Uganda. We've got teams in Zimbabwe. We've got teams in Jordan. We've got teams in India, and, basically, all teams start at level one. So they have to abate one ton of emissions within two weeks. At level two it's 10 tons and then from level three it's 10 tons a month.

And then they also have an equity target, so they also have to provide benefits – direct benefits – to a hundred families in the bottom 20 percent income bracket. Those direct benefits are either part time employment, food security, or energy security. So they're very tangible benefits.

And the theory – if you like, the math – behind Gigaton is that if you've got enough people, enough teams, performing at a certain level, you bend the curve on the climate crisis in terms of abatement numbers but also equity numbers.

So that, in a nutshell, is what we're doing, and the idea is that if we have – you know, the numbers would say that if we have 2,000 teams around the world performing at a certain level you have, essentially, bent the curve on the climate crisis.

Mr. Kurtzer: So, I think we're joined now by Ben. So I want to give an opportunity to join the conversation.

Ben, you've been working on issues of humanitarian innovations for nearly 15 years and drafted one of the first papers highlighting the need for new thinking and engagement on the issues.

So maybe if you could pull back for us a little bit and give us the lay of the land in terms of what has changed since you started to work on this issue and what hasn't.

Ben Ramalingam: Sure. Thanks. And I – sorry about the technical issues. I hope you can hear me OK.

So, I guess, in the time that you described, Jake, and that we've been talking about, I guess, there have been an endless litany of innovations in almost every aspect of humanitarian work from food security, to water and sanitation, to health, to disaster prevention, and within humanitarian organizations you've got a lot of innovations in process – internal processes, like coordination, accountability, learning information, evidence.

But across all of that work, I think there's two messages that come through really clearly today. First, there is a mantra that innovation is essential for us to meet the shortfalls of the system. But that mantra is something of an empty one.

We spend much less than 1 percent of humanitarian spend on research and development globally, and if you compare this to other industries, we're equivalent to quite well established, heavy, and quite conservative sectors with a small C. The closest comparator in financial terms is paper pulping. And you know, no offense to any of the really creative paper pulpers out there, but our industry is not famous for its originality or dynamism.

The second point is – and this is, really, building on the points that were already made by Amy – that if we're going to be serious about transformation of innovation, we need to change our approach to innovation, and we need to really anchor ourselves in an understanding that the most significant innovations have not been technological, necessarily. They're the ones that have been fundamentally about rethinking the relationships and the dynamics between the aid sector and those people we seek to serve.

So whether it's about giving communities cash instead of giving them goods to empower them to become agents in their recovery, while at the same time re-energizing markets and businesses to drive growth, whether it's about giving poor parents the means to treat malnutrition at home before it becomes severe; to reduce the cost of treatment, expand coverage, and reduce rates of death globally; whether we see digital technologies not as a mean to accelerate our own aid processes but as a means of empowering communities, building financial access, and paying for things securely and safely; I think genuine humanitarian innovation requires that innovation be developed into goods and services of the kind that Amy demonstrated, that can be accessed and afforded directly by vulnerable and excluded groups and giving them the motivation and the capability to use that innovation.

And there are all kinds of political barriers to that thrown up by the system and by the socioeconomic systems in which those communities live their lives, and because of those political challenges, the vast majority of humanitarian innovation investments have been shallow technological solutions that skim the surface of existing status quo or, even worse, reinforce it.

And I think the real issue that we face at the moment is, you know, we – this is the big reason why we shouldn't treat humanitarian innovation as a silver bullet that needs to be discovered and used to change the sector. We shouldn't be seeing innovation as a way of grafting, you know, new gizmos onto an otherwise unchanged operational business model because down that road silver bullets become red herrings.

I think, actually, what we need to see is humanitarian innovation as less a search for the Holy Grail and more of a Magna Carta, more of a set of principles and behaviors that guide collective action across a whole range of parties agreeing to share power and resources for the common good.

And I think – I just want to close with this quote and it's from Albert Einstein, and he said, "It's become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity," and he was talking about that militarization, but I think it's actually true of all so-called humane sectors where technology has taken root.

And at its best, humanitarian innovation is an attempt to rebalance our technology and our humanity. It's an attempt to create a new kind of common good in our sector, about not reinforcing the existing power dynamics but challenging them and upending them, and it means putting the power of innovation as close to the frontline and as close to the community as possible and see what might emerge as a result.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Ben.

There's a lot there that we can unpack, and so I might maybe, first, turn to Charlène and, you know, Ben talked about it's not the tools. It's the change of thinking and a roadmap. But we have an audience here of humanitarian practitioners and so I want to, you know, maybe turn to Charlène and then to Amy and Zaid.

And what should humanitarian actors look to innovation for, I mean, you know, either in terms of thinking or in terms of products?

Charlène, from your perspective, you know, what do you look to, quote/unquote, "innovation" for what purpose?

Ms. Cabot: Thanks, Jacob.

And I have to say that I was noting a lot of what Ben was saying really resonates with why Response Innovation Lab was launched and the mandate we're trying to bring to different emergency responses, and I think one of the critical – maybe I'll mention some – two of the critical mind shifts we have to have as humanitarians when we are thinking about innovating.

One of them would have to be to stop wanting to be the innovator ourselves, necessarily. There is maybe sometimes a tendency to think we will develop fully from zero the right solution and a sort of siloed approach of not being able and willing to see what is out there – the creativity in the community amongst other players in the ecosystem that can really make a contribution that have already been working on something relevant – or maybe looking at other country contexts.

So, one of the critical ways to think about innovating for the humanitarian space requires a bit of humility and thinking about how we can bring other expertise to the table and join forces to solve problems.

The other also really critical thing to have in mind is that we need to work on solving problems that matter and really be ready to sweat doing so. Having a small six-month innovation pilot, you know, portfolio, a shiny digital tool in your funding proposal, is not going to get you the change you need for the communities and embarking on a true innovation journey really takes dedication and the understanding that it takes a village to raise the child, right. We always hear that. But it also takes the whole ecosystem that's enabling for an innovation to flourish, and it requires a long-term investment.

And Ben mentioned a lot of very interesting trends that have improved our sector – internal-looking trends. At Response Innovation Lab, we focus on the community-facing innovations, but very often what we see is that while you work on those outward-facing innovations you have, as an organization, to change. You have to increase your risk appetite and you have to be ready to evolve so that you can really go on that journey and learn and be more creative.

Mr. Kurtzer: Maybe I can turn to you, Zaid, and what should humanitarians look to innovation or the innovation sector for?

Mr. Hassan: Yeah. So, you know, the way I think about innovation is that it's a practice. And so, you know, we heard about tools, and we heard about principles, and one analogy, if you like, or – or, not analogy; one practice we're all familiar with is cooking. So if you think about it, cooking as a practice. You have tools,

you have recipes, you have processes, and you have spaces. And, obviously, the only way to get good at cooking is to cook. You can't read a book and be, like, you know, I now know how to cook.

So, in terms of, you know, first of all, what is innovation, I would say it's a practice. The other thing I would just say is that I think that, you know, the demonstration that we just saw is really, really interesting and I think that with Gigaton, for example, a lot of people say to us, you know, well, what is the innovation and what we say is the innovation is the team, basically.

So it's a bit like, you know, it's the people who are sitting around the table, not what's happening in the middle of the table, and that's the innovation. And, again, in terms of what you were saying, it's the capacities that you engender. It's what – it's the shifts that happen, you know, to people when they go through the process of, you know, building a tool or making a tool and so on.

So, what I would kind of say is that, you know, the innovation is really the practice. It's practice and it's the teams who are doing the practice and, really, I think that what we need to look to innovation for is teams that are capable of responding to complex fast-changing situations and contexts, and if you manage to create those teams then you've got something that is responsive and can shift the situation.

So, I would say that you should look to innovation to create teams, basically. It's a bit like teams practicing innovation is what we need, really.

Mr. Kurtzer: Great. Thanks.

Amy?

Ms. Smith: Thanks. There's a – so building off of the previous comments, I think, one of – there's two frameworks that, I think, can be very useful when you're thinking about innovation.

One is this idea of that innovation – there are products and processes of innovation and that those are both really important and they – you know, and that's similar to what you're talking about, you know, the team that's doing the innovation. And so, I think it's really important to think about which of those are we looking to.

If you're looking for a technical outcome, then it's probably the product of innovation. If you're looking for capacity building, it might also be the process. So, I think being clear on the distinction between those two and, of course, both is great, right, but understanding that there are very different things that come from them.

Another framework that, I think, it'd be interesting to think about is this idea of – you know, and I use it in terms of design as opposed to innovation, but it's this the – basically, the same framework is, you know, is this designed by the crisis-affected population? Is it designed for the affected population or is it designed with?

And we often – there's a pendulum that kind of swings where we go too extremely in any one of those directions, and I think it's important to recognize that each one has value. Each one has a situation where it makes sense. You know, if you're really looking at building a relationship then maybe co-creation is the way to go where there's designing with, and then you have a different relationship between the humanitarian actors and the affected populations.

But I think having it in your mind that it's not always the – that you want all the innovation to come from the community because there are some things where, you know, the humanitarian actors have better capacity to solve the problem.

You know, if I need a new heart valve, I could design it myself but I think I want someone with a little more experience than that. And so I think we need to really think about what are we trying to achieve, what's the right paradigm of design or innovation, and then what are the outcomes both from the product and the process, and really think through that and not just saying, well, we'll see what happens, but being intentional in that approach, appreciating the two frameworks and using that to guide the way that you then choose to implement the innovation.

Mr. Kurtzer: So let's stick with the heart thing, right, because I want to sort of pivot to the second part of the panel topic here and the discussion about the private sector, and I'll stay with you here because I think – at least when I started to think about this or read up, you know, much of the conversation about innovation globally, I think, revolves around the private sector and Silicon Valley and the idea as, you know, it's the commercial that generates innovative ideas, and the lab stands out a bit because you don't extensively engage with the private sector.

So, and we'll put this to the whole panel but can you talk a little bit about what you see as the role of the private sector? Was it a conscious choice for you to engage or not engage?

Ms. Smith: Yeah. There's a couple of answers, and I'll try to keep my response brief because I could go on for much longer.

But I think that, fundamentally, the innovation practice that happens in Silicon Valley is not the right practice for the humanitarian sector, and I think that there's a lot of tools and techniques that come from that because we see that Silicon Valley was very successful.

But, you know, their – Silicon Valley allows you to take the risk, right. So you don't like your phone, you'll buy another phone or – but, you know, when you're looking at populations that are displaced, they've already undergone trauma. Should the risk get transferred to their shoulders? I don't think so.

And so I think a lot of the design methodology that the humanitarian sector is bringing in is coming from a very different type of sector. So I, personally, and our lab, we believe that we have to have an innovation process that is reflective of the needs and the risks and the ability to take risks of the target population.

The other thing is, I think, a little bit about how you define the private sector, and maybe if you want to define something as maybe the micro private sector, which is also the informal sector, you know, we very much look at integrating into sort of the local ecosystem, and I think that that was mentioned a couple of times, and we very much would want to engage with those, like, private sector actors.

But there – it's, again, an informal economy rather than the formal economy and that's – but I want to go back to this idea of design for, with, and by, that that's one approach. It's not the only approach. There are other people who engage with small and medium enterprises, others that engage with the larger companies, and I think that a multifaceted approach is going to be necessary.

But there's always – you know, the wisdom to know which is the right partner, the right approach is – well, there's no easy answer to that, but at least thinking about the fact that there are different approaches and then trying to match them with the anticipated or desired outcomes.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks.

Maybe, Zaid, I can ask you. I think you probably have the closest relationship or familiarity with the private sector.

Do you see there being any disconnect or does this idea of teams, you know, mean, you know, this is just part of the team now, and how do you see the role of the private sector, particularly for the humanitarian community, which has its own principles, ethics, neuroses, what have you?

Mr. Hassan: Yeah. So, in the work that I've been doing, I guess, over the last 20 years we build teams that are multisectoral. So these teams involve the private sector. They involve community-based organizations, NGOs, and government.

So one thing I would just say is that I think private sector participation is absolutely necessary. That's one thing. I think the question that's being posed is, you know, what is our practice, really, and what is it that we're doing in the humanitarian sector and what is the relationship of what the private sector is doing to that practice.

So I think that there are a lot of things in Silicon Valley that are useful, really interesting – again, their own neuroses, their own challenges. So I don't think there's such a thing as kind of lifting best practice, if you like, from a particular sector and then saying we should copy it.

I think what we need is reflexive practice and there are certain things, I think, the private sector does, and I'll give you a really, really simple example. I was actually in Silicon Valley last week and had a meeting with someone at Facebook and we were talking about with Gigaton we set very time-bound challenges. So, you know, teams have to complete things within three months or six months or, you know, even in some cases, two weeks.

And the person I was speaking to said, you know, that fits quite well with how we work, and I said, how come? And he said, well, Mark comes into the office. He says, you know, you need to do this in two weeks. Can we do this in two weeks? And people go, in two weeks? He says, yeah, we need to launch this in two weeks.

Now, if that is part of your iterative practice, that you're actually trying to do something quickly, testing it, seeing whether it works, retesting it, and you can teach people how to do that, in my opinion, that's an interesting practice and that's a practice that, you know, we could do a lot more of in the sense that, you know, I've worked in the humanitarian space where, you know, you say to people, OK, we want you to do this within two weeks or three months, and they go, you're kidding, right? It's, like, you mean you want us to write a proposal to do this in two weeks? And we're, like, no, we actually want you to do it in two weeks, and it is a cultural shift, basically, to say, actually, no, you don't have a two-year planning process or a six-month planning process. You've actually got to implement and deliver something within two weeks, and you see whether it works, and you test it, and you change it.

So what I would say is that, firstly, I think we need multisectoral teams. We need to bring the private sector in, and I think when you bring the private sector in what that means is that they don't own the space. They don't get to say, this is how things work. They get to negotiate how things work and they

get to say, well, this is how things work with us and how we're going to work together.

So I think what we need is negotiated spaces rather than sort of inherited spaces, and I think there is a role for the private sector. There's a lot we can borrow and there's a lot that we need to leave behind. It's like, you know, we don't – there's some things we just don't – we should not borrow from the private sector. So –

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Zaid.

I want to turn, maybe, to our colleagues.

Ben, how do you see the role of the private sector? Do you see there being a disconnect and, if so, you know, what can be done, from your perspective, to bridge the cultural, you know, neuroses gap between these two sectors?

Mr. Ramalingam: Thanks.

I guess there's two or three kind of aspects to this. One is the way the world is currently seeing the private sector and its role to innovation and then how we in the humanitarian sector tend to see it.

So, more broadly around the world, people are – there's a recognition that actually this image of the tech entrepreneur as the kind of driver of creativity and growth and that, you know, the private – the public sector and the not-for-profit sector should, basically, stick to the basics and keep away, that's being increasingly seen as ideological, not actually evidence-based, and that many of the big technologies of the last 50 years, including the ones that Silicon Valley entrepreneurs exploited themselves, they were actually supported by long-term patient financing from the public sector, not from the private sector.

You know, people talk about Apple a lot, that in its early stages got huge amounts of government subsidies. And you know, things like the iPhone relied a lot on the internet, GPS, touchscreen displays, voice-activated smart things just like Siri. All of those were bankrolled initially by the state.

So we're often – we're sold this idea of private enterprise driving innovation. But actually, the reality is that the public sector – the not-for-profit sector – plays a really important role in innovation and it's one that we haven't necessarily got a very sophisticated grasp on in the humanitarian sector.

We tend to either say, let the private sector in. They know how to innovate. We'll hand everything over to them. Or we hold them at arm's length because we worry that there's going to be price gouging behaviors and, you know,

humanitarian exploitation and profit making at the cost of the most vulnerable.

So, we – I don't think we've really worked out yet within the humanitarian sector is the role of the private sector in innovation a symbiotic one or a parasitic one, and different people have different assumptions in their heads when they're talking about the private sector.

And quite often we won't actually surface that. We'll go into meetings, talk about the private sector. I'll have the parasitic mindset, someone else will have the symbiotic mindset, and we'll never actually talk about what we are expecting.

So I just want to reinforce what Zaid said, that we need to – negotiation becomes really important – you know, who wins, who gains, who loses, from innovation, and we need to make sure we have that conversation up front.

And from the private sector perspective, I think they're quite frustrated, many of them, by the fact that humanitarian organizations go to them either with a desire to fix everything through innovation and, you know, bring in private sector expertise, or with massive amounts of distrust. And I think their solution to this is actually to have clearly defined problems where we can have an understanding of what capabilities we've got and look the private sector in the eye and say, you can bring your core capabilities to bear on addressing this challenge.

And that's how it's worked well in different settings, and it's been a long time since the humanitarian sector actually made anything directly itself. Obviously, it builds things and so on. But actually, making new products or making new processes is something we rely on the private sector to do.

Something as obvious as cash transfers, we needed banks to work with us in the early 2000s to develop clear, systematic processes, develop financial mechanisms, make sure they were robust, make sure they were secure, and so on.

But it was only when we were able to define the problem well enough that the private sector could actually come in and tell us how to drive down the costs and to build that system.

So I think we just need to make sure we're really careful about how we engage the private sector. Bring them in at the point when their capabilities add value but not expect them to be a silver bullet, as we said earlier. They've got value to add as long as we understand that we have to negotiate that value.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Ben.

And Charlène, maybe over to you, and then we'll open the floor for some questions from our audience here.

How do you see this relationship with the private sector manifest in your work either at the macro level, Silicon Valley, or at the very, you know, local community market level that Amy spoke about?

Ms. Cabot: So for Response Innovation Lab we do have that angle of trying to actively bring in the private sector. But it's not an ultimate goal. It's one of the players amongst many, and the choice of working with a private sector partner to solve a specific problem rather than another type of partner – maybe a community-based organization or an academic entity – will be, really, driven by the content of the solution that we're looking for and the value proposition that is brought about.

And, basically, it's really important when you work with those communities that have been affected by a crisis that you're approaching them very ethically. So it's important to make sure you have the right proof of concept in place before you start piloting, rolling out approaches, et cetera.

And the private sector is interested in working with humanitarians. They are still disconnected somewhat from our space in some ways, but there is an increasing interest in getting involved. There is an increased understanding that, in some ways, displaced persons, refugees, vulnerable communities, may be new type of customers if they just find the right services to bring about or the right products.

So there is, really, an option to dialogue and to create this, facilitate that understanding of what is needed from the user perspective and what the private sector can bring, and this is where we can play a role as humanitarian organizations because they – the partners often appreciate it when we are acting as a sort of facilitator to enter a complex space like a refugee settlement, which is very political and has its own rules, and they – without this kind of facilitation and introduction, they would be unable to access those segments.

So, for us, we work a lot with startups within the Ugandan space and we put a lot of attention on sensitization, making sure ethical principles are understood and can be kept in mind, and we also – there are some dynamics we need to keep in mind is that depending on your – how your innovation works, who your target group is, who is going to be the direct beneficiary of the innovation, who is going to be the user, there have been very many models.

Some of them can be sustained through market forces. Some of them will continue relying on aid funding or government funding, and that's, really, due to the nature of the population you're trying to support.

So, in some cases, a private sector partner can bring a very interesting tool to the humanitarian partner with whom they work, but they will – the client of that partner will be the humanitarian organization or the government. It will not be the end user that benefits from that service because they do not have the purchasing power to get that service and that's the whole reason humanitarian actors are present, to fill that gap.

So there is, definitely, a role to be played if we go about it in a strategic way and also if humanitarian stakeholders are ready to enter into a true dialogue with some of the private sector partners and not consider them just as suppliers, but create meaningful strategic relationship where you're sharing – finding shared goals and co-creating together to see that you are getting the right results.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Charlène.

So in the spirit of the team here I want to open the floor. I have an extensive list of questions, but I want to give the opportunity for our guests here.

If you have a question, I would just ask that you give us your name and affiliation and try to keep it as brief as possible.

So, are there any questions in the room? Very polite crowd. OK. So, we have one here. We'll take two. So over here and we'll come to the front.

Briana Nearlidge: Hi. My name is Briana Nearlidge. I'm a student at American University SAS.

Amy, you mentioned changing thinking earlier, and I think that's been mentioned a few times here. So, I'm just wondering and with the nexus of private sector partnership and public sector partnership and then the government as well how are these actors able to change very traditional thinking and to kind of evolve them into embracing innovation, specifically with some of the most traditional and conservative institutions in the world?

Ms. Smith: Sure. Thanks for the question, and I'll respond first and then ask other people to because I think we all will have slightly different answers to that.

The way that we work on engaging these different actors and trying to change their thinking is through these co-creation summits that we do. So we bring together humanitarian actors, members of the host community, the refugees, international NGOs, local NGOs, designers, students, and then they're all working together on specific challenges.

And in working together they build that relationship, they build that team, and they see each other in a very different light, and I think that a lot of barriers are lowered and a lot of, sorts of, veils are lowered, too, just in terms of the way people see the other actors.

And so that's our sort of highly pragmatic way of doing it. But it's not a scalable solution but I think it does – because it influences those people's spheres of influence then it does have some degree of a ripple effect. But we find that that's an extremely effective way of getting people to change their mindset about the capabilities of all the different actors in the sector.

Mr. Kurtzer: So, let's go, maybe, to Ben and then we'll come back to Zaid.

Ben, how do we go about changing thinking and, in particular, changing thinking in, you know, very traditional mindsets?

Mr. Ramalingam: It's a really good question. I guess there's a whole bunch of vicious and virtuous cycles when it comes to our thinking. If you think about innovation, generally, that there's a kind of downward spiral in humanitarian innovation.

So if you take our sector, which is challenged around legitimacy and efficiency, you could add kind of insecure management, bad press coverage, and then you bring in technology evangelists who propose to cure rare ailments with their particular brand of innovation.

So the dominant regimes within our organizations that have capital to invest almost always are going to go for innovations that enhance efficiency over legitimacy. That tradeoff is always going to go down the route of let's add economic value, and what that ends up doing is applying the existing business model bigger, faster, harder, and innovation speeds up the system and fixes the cracks.

And so, as a result, innovation ends up reinforcing the existing business model in the name of efficiency, and that's one of the cycles. But there's another story that can also be told and we've seen these two in our sector, although there are not many of them, and it's where innovation is not necessarily underpinned by a narrow notion of economic value, but of our values plural, and this is where you begin with the desire to make technology and innovation not necessarily just about generating more resources or growing your organization, but trying to be more representative, more inclusive, more fair. This leads to trust and confidence in the work that we do in innovation efforts and the kinds of processes Amy was talking about and the kinds of dynamics that Charlène was talking about.

And over time, this leads to better, fairer, more equitable outcomes, and that reinforces the use of innovation that's representative, inclusive, and fair.

So, I don't think we can say we're going to radically switch to a new way of thinking. We have to understand the kind of dynamics that we're in, the thought worlds that we're in and the cycles of thinking and work out ways in which we can break beyond them.

And I think there are many more – there are virtuous cycles out there. They're around now. But it requires us to have a much more honest and genuine dialogue about who innovation is really for and what purpose it serves. And I think, you know, the way in which we then do that we need to build evidence of how it actually adds value and in a whole range of different settings, good case studies of examples.

For example, Médecins Sans Frontières, I think, is the exemplar in our sector. They're constantly trialing things in disaster like conditions so that they're ready to go when emergency is here. And evidence doesn't mean being limited to existing research. It means being poised to act in ways that are both creative and rigorous.

It also means getting good networks between innovators, between front – and frontline staff and researchers creating coalitions of the willing who are ready to go when disasters strike, and it means working in politically savvy ways because we have to be aware that the unoriginal thinking is linked to vested interests. And if we are going to be using innovation and original thinking, we have to engage with a means of transforming power dynamics, and deep inclusion of the kinds that we seem to be pointing towards in this dialogue.

It means actually rethinking our institutions, rethinking the relationships, and it might mean, you know, having innovation tugboats rather than expecting the mother ship to change overnight, finding ways of actually creating pockets of innovation around our organizations that are of our system but not limited, not within and embedded and stuck in the system.

And this is something the private sector does pretty as well, actually. We don't – it's not something that this is independent of the sector that we are working in. Scaling innovations is always a political process. Resistance comes in many shapes and forms.

So, I think we need to walk softly and carry a big negotiated stick.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks, Ben.

Maybe I could turn to you because you've worked across these sectors. You know, so it's not just changing thinking in the humanitarian sector but in – what techniques and tools have you found that are effective to help transform the way people think about problems and partners?

Mr. Hassan: Yeah. So maybe just a couple of caveats before I answer the question.

But, you know, the only reason what we or an organization thinks matters is because it influences what we do. So, the question is what are you doing and why are you doing it and, really, you know, I had a really pivotal kind of moment in my career, like, 20 years ago.

I had a conversation with a guy I call Professor John Powell, who – and we were working on racism, basically. This is in deep Michigan. And he sat me down and he drew two curves, and he showed me one curve and he, basically, said, you know, look at this curve. This curve is, essentially, the prevalence of racist thinking and he, basically, said, you know, people, in general, are less racist than in the past and, basically, the prevalence is kind of going down. So there's less racism in the world, if you like. And I was like, yeah.

And he said, now, let's look at the indicators of how the African-American community in the U.S. is doing, and all the indicators are going the wrong way. Things are getting worse, basically. And I sat there looking at these curves and I said, so you're saying people are getting less racist in their thinking, but the situation is getting worse? And he said, yeah. And then I was, like, but that means what people think doesn't really matter, and he said, that's correct. And I was a bit like, huh. (Laughs.) So, you know, what is that about?

So, obviously, you know, then he explained structural racism to me and so on. So partly, I think, what the challenge with institutions is that what you do out in the world is a function of, obviously, what you think about the world. So, we talk about strategy as inner game, that there is an inner game, if you like, which is inside your organization, inside your team, and that determines what you do out in the world.

Now, if you don't pay attention to that inner game and you, basically say, OK, the issues are out in the community, they are out there, you've got a problem, basically.

So, in terms of kind of changing people's, quote, "thinking," what I would say is it's about changing their practice and what people do. And so it is, literally, what is it that you're doing. We're sitting in circles around tables. If you want a change in practice, well, don't do that. Do something different, basically.

So, I think it's actually almost physical. It's like rearranging things physically what you do, how you talk. So, I think that's how you do it.

The other thing I would just say – last thing I would just say is that, you know, if institutions don't change their thinking, then they will go extinct and, you know, we have to ask the question, is it our job to change those institutions if they don't want to change.

You know, so the way I look at it is that, you know, if we're working with an organization or institution that doesn't want to change, it's not really my job to change that institution unless they're, obviously, blocking my way and they're not allowing things to happen, which, obviously, does happen.

But it is, like, is it really our job to, basically, invest all of our time and energy in trying to change institutions that, fundamentally, don't want to change? Or do we move on and find younger, newer institutions that are up for doing what we think needs to happen? So –

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you, Zaid.

And Charlène, maybe from your experience, you know, working directly with communities in need, how do you see this question? How has it manifested in your practice and what approaches have you found that help change the thinking either in your own organization or among the communities that you work with?

Ms. Cabot: Thank you.

So yes, from, like, implementing perspective in the field, there – we've been experimenting, and we have had to contend with trying to change people's mind within our own organization and that requires asking a lot of questions. Keep pushing and find the people who can be your allies, the drivers of change, the ones who – the early adopters who are going to help you create that change, trust you slowly, slowly to bring about something, and when you're able to bring some kind of demonstration of what you're preaching, then that's when mindsets start changing around the table.

Then in terms of the engagement at the community level, there are two things we've been trying to do. One is that you have to be very concrete when you're proposing the introduction of something new.

You need to come with the solution to demonstrate it or the partners that can really explain it to create an early understanding of your objectives amongst the community and see if it resonates. So that's one side.

And the other side is make sure that whichever innovation design you have in mind you are going to test it against the expectations of your users in the field, and that's been – it sounds very basic, of course. We talk about this a lot with human-centered design, et cetera.

But in practice it takes things like forcing people who don't usually interact to have a conversation around a certain topic or bringing an interesting, innovative startup to a refugee settlement to understand actually the living conditions, the capabilities, the networks, the challenges in this context, and push people to take on that new information, to make sure that they are really providing – that they are incorporating these elements into their thinking.

So, there are some very practical ways we are using to encourage change in thinking by encouraging dialogue and enforcing – encouraging rather than forcing – encouraging conversations between those traditional actors and maybe the less usual suspects.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks. I know we had another question up front here. So yeah.

Emma: Good morning. My name is Emma, and I'm interning with Atlas Network, which is a think tank located in Arlington.

And my question was I know, like, the private sector has a way of, like, innovating very rapidly due to, like, competition and stuff like that and so I was kind of curious about knowing about, like, how does that translate into the humanitarian world. And so, like, the ways of innovation from the private sectors and their speed, basically, how does it translate, and do you see, like, an increase in speed or, like, a difference of innovation in the humanitarian sector when you bring in the – those private actors?

Mr. Kurtzer: Maybe we can start here with you because I think you spoke about this a little bit earlier, that pace of innovation.

I was struck before in your answer about the humanitarian sector pace versus the Facebook pace because oftentimes the humanitarian sector actually can move very quickly when a crisis strikes. But that's with the standard way of working.

So how do you take that?

Mr. Hassan: Yeah. So I don't think the private sector has a monopoly on speed. You know, it's not private to be fast. (Laughs.)

So, what I would say is that, you know, in the work that we do we work with community-based groups, we work on the ground, and people can operate at

speed and they can prototype and test and iterate at speed, and I don't think it has anything to do with competition, per se.

I think, obviously, you need incentives in terms of why you're doing it. But, you know, the way we work is we, essentially, don't work in what we would call linear cycles. So we don't work in these long linear kind of planning cycles where you're kind of doing, you know, design, implementation, and then, if you're lucky, evaluation, you know, five years later.

So, what we're doing is we're just working in very rapid cycles of design, implementation, and evaluation, and they happen in weeks or months. And I think it's just a practice. The question is, you know, how do you incentivize people to practice that, and it's culture, really, more than anything else.

So I would just say that I would – yeah, I would hesitate to say the private sector has a monopoly on speed.

Mr. Kurtzer: Amy?

Ms. Smith: Yeah. I think that I can make a generalization, which is, you know, just that. It's not true across the board. But I suspect that there's sort of an inverse relationship between the size of an organization and speed of ability to innovate.

So, you know, you'll see that sometimes it's faster for – you know, for example, the community groups that we're working with their – you know, their – part of the design process is that innovation and iteration, et cetera.

But I think the other thing that is part of that equation is the ability to scale, and so I think that the ability to innovate quickly and scale quickly is a really special place to be in and I think that is the – you know, that, to me, is what we should be striving to say, well, how could we create an innovative space which combines those things, that has the speed of innovation and the ability to scale, not by saying that it's one entity, but by bringing the best bits of different entities so that there's this sort of – this outcome, which is contributed to by multiple organizations or actors and sort of building on the strengths that each one brings in.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks.

You know, in a previous response, Ben, you talked about the vicious and virtuous cycle and the challenges around legitimacy and efficiency, and one of the things that came up in our keynote address at the start from Sarah Charles was the ambitions around localization and connecting the innovation agenda with the localization agenda and, certainly, it seems like both of these questions – legitimacy and efficiency – could be achieved

through, you know, a much more rapid achievement of some of the localization ambitions.

And so, I want to maybe turn to – well, let's stick with you, Amy, and your approach to localization. We've got about 10 minutes left. So I want to understand a little bit about how you see the global agenda and what role innovation can play in achieving a more localized humanitarian response.

Ms. Smith: OK. Sure. Thanks.

So, I think, in the way that we work we always work through local partners because of their – because for any high-touch intervention you need people who can speak the language, who understand the context, et cetera. So the localization is very critical there.

I think that Sarah referred to this in the beginning is that there's sort of these – to me, there's these different stages of participation. One is where information is transferred. So that's sort of a consultation kind of way of thinking about it.

Then the next level up is where decision-making can also happen, and then the next level up from there is leadership. And I think that there's a real need to move from, you know, I would say probably – let's say, 10 years ago it was much more of this consultative thing. Well, let's talk to the local partners and see what they say but we'll still decide what happens.

And I think, again, looking towards how can you transition from this sort of consultation mode to active decision-making on the part of the local actors to the actual leadership on that side.

And I think she also referred to this idea of letting go and not leading, and that is particularly challenging, I've found, for funders to not have specific outcomes outlaid – you know, laid out at the very beginning of a project when innovation requires that you change along the way and that it's a dynamic process.

And, you know, and in our case where we're creating technologies they'll say, well, what will people make, and my answer is, I have no idea. And if I do know then I'm not doing my job right, you know. If people are making what they identified as their priorities, I don't know what those are and that's not a reassuring answer for the funders.

But I think there has to be this transition to recognizing that if you have a goal of innovation you have to change your metrics of success and your requirements for, you know, giving people the opportunity to do that.

And so, I think there really needs to be a transformation at that level to embrace uncertainty and recognize that it is where the creativity happens.

Mr. Kurtzer: I want to – we've got about seven- or eight-minutes left. So, let's go to some parting thoughts and key takeaways, and maybe I can start with you, Charlène.

You know, from your perspective in Kampala working in this great lab, what does the future look like for you of humanitarian innovation and how do you see us achieving this vision?

Ms. Cabot: Thanks. It's a really tough question. (Laughs.)

But I liked what Amy left us with because that's something we really face as the Response Innovation Lab and that for humanitarian innovation to become increasingly effective and more impactful, moving forward, hopefully, we can have a shift from trying to be more focused – a shift from being solution focused to being more problem focused.

And at Response Innovation Lab we often say your – need to fall in love with the problem, and if you do then that's where an interesting innovation journey starts; whereas if you're too focused on the solution, which you shouldn't necessarily know before you get onto the journey, then there are risks of finding fake problems just to try and fit innovations that are attractive or that you believe will attract funding into your portfolio. So, yes, for the future of humanitarian innovation I hope we can be increasingly problem focused.

And maybe also to just remark on some of the things that were shared before around speed and scale, those are important dimensions to have in mind. I would say that, in some cases, speed is not positive – (audio break) – context, which is of a protracted crisis. What's much more important is to be ready to fail and learn rather than go very fast, and to think early on, on the scaling potential, and that's usually not a fast journey.

Thank you.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thank you so much, Charlène.

Maybe over to you, Ben.

You know, how do you see the future? What are some of the gaps in the landscape now and where do you think – what do you think we need to be doing now to get to a – you know, a more effective and efficient humanitarian future?

Mr. Ramalingam: Thanks, Jake, and thanks for the great conversation as well.

I guess from my point of view, the – we have a mission mentality in the humanitarian space about responding to each crisis as best we can. But I think because of that crisis-driven response mentality that we have we don't actually look at the bigger picture.

We focus on micro missions, and we quite often set to the side the kind of macro mission, and when we do look at the macro mission there are kind of big numbers, like 290 million people in need of humanitarian aid this year or 900 million people who are hungry, and it is not an especially action-oriented way of thinking about the future.

And I think one of the antidotes to that and one of – and I think – and also, that's combined with a kind of "pilotitis" approach to humanitarian innovation where we fix on very small-scale interventions that are creative and novel and interesting but, potentially, aren't going to necessarily challenge anyone too much.

But history shows this and the world around us shows that big missions can galvanize innovation. We see them more in the development sector. We've seen them in the private sector. The public sector, generally, is trying to do more work on mission-oriented innovation. And in the humanitarian sector we just haven't really done that.

We haven't really embraced the idea of saying, you know, what are the inspiration or goals that we can use to crowd in private knowledge and expertise, public sector resources, humanitarian knowledge, and local actor experiences.

And I think a more mission-oriented approach that actually identifies the few priority areas we really want to see change happening, where resources are flatlining or reducing and needs are growing, I think that's got to be the key for the future. It's part of what we're trying to do in the U.K. Humanitarian Innovation Hub. And I know there are a number of areas like vaccine delivery, like rethinking global humanitarian surgery. Some of them are technology oriented like the use of – (audio break) – AI or satellite. Some of them are more problem oriented.

But we are trying to take exactly that approach that Charlène was talking about to be problem oriented but also to be quite expansive in our view and say, you know, the humanitarians do not have a monopoly on this way of working. We need to draw in as much as possible and then try and convene, and when we convene the right actors, the money isn't actually the biggest barrier. It's the mindsets.

Mr. Kurtzer: Thanks so much, Ben.

Zaid, over to you. Where do you see us going and what should we in the room be thinking about to get there?

Mr. Hassan: So I think, you know, we're in the middle of what you could think of as a poly crisis. It's, like, it's not one crisis. It's multiple. And, you know, we're not going to have one novel virus circulating. We're going to have 10 and it's going to be a hundred and twenty degrees outside.

So, I think the – (laughs) – I think what's going to happen is that either the sector is going to become irrelevant because it's unable to respond to the poly crisis, to these multiple things happening, or the sector will become increasingly relevant through changing its practices to adapt to what is happening out in the world.

So what I would say is that, you know, we have to proactively adapt our practices in how we work to the context that we're in, which is that we are in a crisis that is going to accelerate – we know it's going to accelerate – in our lifetimes, and we will either respond to it or not.

Mr. Kurtzer: And, Amy, final thoughts? Where do you think we're going?

I mean, you're going to South Sudan tonight. So, thank you very much for joining us. But where do you see the sector going and, you know, what parting thoughts would you have for these practitioners who want to help us get there?

Ms. Smith: Sure.

And I think my vision is not the global overarching one but for, you know, what I would see, like, our organization, hopefully, being able to create, which would then, hopefully, provide some utility to the sector, which would be these local innovation ecosystems where members of the affected population are, you know, they're able to contribute creatively and there are better relationships formed between the humanitarian organizations that are working together with the affected populations, and that there would be very much a change in mindset in terms of who should be and who can be creating solutions to the challenges, who is identifying those challenges, whose ideas have priority, et cetera.

So, I think that there's a lot of these questions and I believe that by creating these ecosystems that can thrive then that will lead to sort of a stronger position, I guess, for the affected population to be able to collaborate from. And so, I think that's not – it's the basis, I hope, of a sector wide change.

Mr. Kurtzer: So, on behalf of the Humanitarian Agenda, I want to extend a very special thanks to Amy Smith, Zaid Hassan, Ben Ramalingam, and Charlène Cabot for joining us.

We're going to take a short break. We'll be back in this room and the Zoom link at 11:15 for our next discussion on engaging women's leadership. Really excited for this conversation. It's about changing organizational structures, changing thinking, and moderated by my friend and colleague, Caitlin Welsh.

So, we'll take a short break and be back here at 11:15, and thank you so much to our panelists. (Applause.)

(END)