



Day 2 - Opening & Keynote Summary

Welcome: Mat Tinkler, CEO, Save the Children Australia



On Day 2 of the Humanitarian Leadership Conference 2025, discussions deepened around local leadership, shifting power, and the urgent need for more inclusive and accountable humanitarian systems. **Mat Tinkler**'s opening address highlighted the importance of leadership and solidarity in the face of the unprecedented challenges currently confronting the humanitarian sector. He began by acknowledging the **traditional landowners** of the region where he is from, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and emphasising the need for a humanitarian approach that respects the rights of First Nations people around the world.

Tinkler shared two powerful leadership stories from his personal experiences, one involving Joan from the **Rella Women's Foundation**, a Ugandan leader of a GLBTIQ rights organisation working in a hostile environment, and the other with Omar, a Syrian man contemplating the monumental task of relocating his family back to Syria to help rebuild the country. These stories of extraordinary courage and dedication reminded him of the **inspirational leadership** that often goes unnoticed.

Reflecting on Save the Children's own origins, Tinkler recounted the story of Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of Save the Children. In 1919, Jebb, operating behind enemy lines during World War I, documented the suffering of children affected by the Allied blockade and campaigned for their rights despite facing severe opposition.

He emphasised that her work laid the foundation for the global child rights movement, culminating in the Convention on the Rights of the Child - the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history.

Drawing inspiration from Jebb's example, Tinkler posed a challenge to the audience, asking, "What would Eglantyne Jebb do in this moment?". He urged the attendees to apply her **courage and vision** in their own work and leadership, especially as the world faces crises similar to those of 1919.

Tinkler stressed the importance of connecting beyond the formal agenda of conferences, emphasising the value of the informal exchanges that happen in between sessions, where true solidarity and ideas for action are born.



Day 2 - Opening and Keynote

Keynote Presentation - Hibak Kalfan, Executive Director, NEAR



Hibak Kalfan's keynote at the Humanitarian Leadership Conference focused on the urgent need for a **paradigm shift in humanitarian aid systems**, emphasising solidarity, local leadership, and economic justice. Kalfan began by sharing a personal reflection on the **diversity present at the conference**, contrasting it with her past experiences in other spaces that lacked such inclusive leadership. She acknowledged the discomforting realisation that the sector's current system fails to truly serve those in need, highlighting the stark contrast between the sector's goals and the harsh realities faced by vulnerable communities.

Hibak Kalfan reflected on the global interconnectedness of crises, citing examples such as the genocide in Gaza and the suffering in Sudan, which are often ignored by international communities.

She stressed the **mental and physical burnout many in the humanitarian sector face** due to ongoing crises, funding cuts, and the shifting focus from humanitarian aid to militarisation. She posed the critical question of who the current system protects and who it abandons, and the need for deeper reflection on the role of the international community in these crises.

A major part of Kalfan's speech centered on **local leadership**, particularly in response to the ongoing humanitarian crises in places like Gaza, Myanmar, and Sudan. She emphasised that local organisations and leaders, not

international NGOs, have been at the forefront of crisis response. The future of humanitarian aid, according to Kalfan, lies in local ecosystems that can respond effectively to shocks without reliance on external organisations. She introduced the concept of **localisation labs**, a network spanning 14 countries in the global south, to foster localised solutions and build stronger, self-sustaining systems.

Kalfan concluded by urging the sector to rethink solidarity, advocating for structural changes that **empower local actors and prioritise economic justice**. She shared the story of NEAR's own transformation, from struggling with limited resources to securing a multi-year grant that revitalised their network, demonstrating the power of solidarity and local-led change.