



## Plenary Panel

### Transformative Leadership for the Polycrisis – Can INGOs change their spots?

#### A Pledge for Change Plenary Event



Moderated by **Sofia Sprechmann Sineiro** (Co-Chair, Pledge for Change Steering Group), this dynamic panel brought together **Halima Begum** (CEO, Oxfam GB), **Danny Glenwright** (CEO, Save the Children Canada), **Patrick Watt** (Executive Director, Christian Aid), and **Amitabh Behar** (Executive Director, Oxfam International). Together, they reflected on the transformation of international NGOs in the context of the Pledge for Change, discussing the urgent need to move from rhetoric to action in shifting power to local actors. The session explored how INGOs can evolve towards humility, solidarity, and equity in a moment marked by tectonic shifts in global civil society.

The discussion opened with **Sofia Sprechmann Sineiro** tracing the origins of the Pledge for Change, born from the need to confront INGOs' diminishing legitimacy and relevance. She stressed the inadequacy of the humanitarian sector in living up to the

principle of “**Nothing about us without us**” and urged a move from localisation’ to locally led and globally supported responses. The pledge, signed by 13 INGOs, focuses on three pillars: **equitable partnerships, ethical storytelling, and influencing the aid ecosystem.**





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As Sofia noted, tackling global inequalities requires both local leadership and international solidarity - particularly given that the root causes of poverty and inequity often lie beyond the Global South.

Halima Begum offered a deeply personal and political reflection, expressing frustration at the lack of progress in her three decades in the sector. Despite Oxfam's commitment to equitable partnerships and its current initiatives like the Women's Rights Fund, she underscored that international structures remain so bureaucratically layered — from head offices to regional hubs — that they often drown out local voices unintentionally. Halima argued for drastically reducing INGO infrastructure and allowing national civil society, particularly feminist and grassroots organisations, to shape the agenda. "Lose the I in INGO," she said in her closing remarks — calling for INGOs to step back, redirect unrestricted funds, and let civil society lead.

Danny Glenwright focused on the second pledge: ethical storytelling. Sharing Save the Children's landmark initiative Seeing and Being Seen, Danny described how the organisation undertook a global review of its communications with 400 children across 10 countries to address bias, stereotypes, and representation. Key shifts included localised content creation, use of local freelancers, and centralising consent — even if it meant sacrificing the "perfect shot." He highlighted Canada's indigenous-led storytelling models as examples of dignity and autonomy in action.

But Danny was also candid: 25% of Save the Children's partners felt under-credited or misrepresented in communications. "We have more to do," he said, adding that real change requires slowing down, deeper inclusion, and investing in training. His team in Canada has embedded cultural humility as a core competency for all staff, recognising that transformation starts with inner work.

Patrick Watt outlined how Christian Aid, despite being a smaller INGO, has embraced the Pledge for Change by withdrawing from direct implementation, sharing overhead costs 50-50 with partners, and funding survivor- and community-led responses. Patrick advocated for a systems-thinking approach in which INGOs no longer act as hubs but see themselves as part of a broader, decentralised ecosystem. He pointed out that some reforms — such as sharing resources or changing language — are not technically complex but require leadership and will. Looking ahead, Patrick predicted that we are entering a post-ODA world, where INGOs must downsize and return to their activist roots, acting as connectors and convenors rather than doers.







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“The future,” he said, “is small, voluntary-funded organisations that support, not supplant, local movements.”

Amitabh Behar urged the room to confront a hard truth: the ground on which civil society was built has collapsed. He described this as a deeper crisis — not of multiple sectors, but of a single failed system: the unrestrained neoliberal order. INGOs, he argued, must resist being service delivery arms for donors or corporations and return to their purpose: holding power to account. He proposed five shifts: stop competing and start collaborating; integrate political economy into humanitarian analysis; build broad alliances with trade unions, climate activists, and social movements; reframe the relationship with money as stewards, not owners; and rekindle compassion and humanity as the sector’s compass. “It’s not about risk registers,” he concluded. “It’s about sisterhood, solidarity, and love.”

In the final round, each panellist shared a succinct message on what INGOs must become. Halima reiterated the call to dissolve INGOs into a stronger national civil society. Danny argued for a fourth pledge — on mindset shifts and cultural humility — backed by Save Canada’s new internal pathway of impact. Patrick called for INGOs to accept their bloated bureaucracies must end and to return to civil society’s activist, volunteer-driven roots. Amitabh asked whether the tools INGOs use are “post-colonial structures of imperialism,” and pressed for deeper self-interrogation.



During the audience Q&A, challenges were sharp. One participant asked whether INGOs were truly prepared to dissolve themselves if that is what true localisation required. Others questioned the distinction between “local implementation” and “local leadership.” Responses were honest.

Danny acknowledged the slow pace and the bind of existing contracts; Patrick affirmed the need to re-fight old battles in a world where human rights are under threat; Amitabh offered a sincere apology and urged others to continue pushing INGOs harder. Halima ended with urgency: “We won’t have a choice in two years. Let’s get ahead of the curve before the curve hits us.”

This panel did not shy away from discomfort. It leaned into it. In a moment defined by collapse and transition, the message was clear: if INGOs want to remain relevant, they must reimagine themselves — not as institutions of charity, but as enablers of justice.



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*“If the world were a country, it would be the most unequal country in the world. That’s why solidarity across borders still matters – but it must be in support of locally led solutions, not in place of them.”*

**Sofia Sprechmann Sineiro**

Co-Chair of the Pledge for Change Steering Group

*“Let’s stop competing and start collaborating. The money we manage is not ours – it belongs to the communities we serve. Until we internalise that, transformation will remain a slogan.”*

**Amitabh Behar**

Executive Director, Oxfam International



*“The future of civil society is smaller, more nimble, and rooted in solidarity – not bureaucracy. That’s not a loss. It’s a return to purpose.”*

**Patrick Watt**

Executive Director, Christian Aid

*“Only the person telling their story knows what dignity means to them. Our job is not to speak for people, but to create space for them to speak for themselves.”*

**Danny Glenwright**

CEO, Save the Children Canada



*“I believe, with courage and commitment, what hasn’t changed in thirty years can change in five – if we shift power and fund transformational, locally led work.”*

**Halima Begum**

CEO, Oxfam GB



## Critical Action Steps



Invest in national civil society by **redirecting unrestricted funds to locally led organisations.**



**Reduce INGO bureaucracy** and infrastructure to avoid overshadowing local leadership.



**Embed cultural humility and anti-racism** as core competencies across all staffing levels.



**Ensure local partners have equal decision-making power**, funding access, and accountability mechanisms.



**Shift storytelling models to centre lived experience**, consent, and local authorship.



**Reposition INGOs as connectors and amplifiers**, not implementers, in a broader ecosystem of justice.