



Panel Session

The Power of Collective Leadership: Voices and Lessons from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Palestine and Uganda



Chaired by **Jan de Wagemaker** (Head of Humanitarian Aid, Finn Church Aid) and moderated by **Aishwarya Manjunath Shetty** (Education Specialist, Education Above All Foundation), this compelling session brought together **Rahmatullah Arman** (Founder and CEO, Teach For Afghanistan), **Munia Islam Mozumder** (CEO, Teach For Bangladesh), **Ghassan Amayra** (Board Member, Teach For Palestine), and **Kassaga James Arinaitwe** (CEO and Co-Founder, Teach For Uganda), to explore what transformative leadership truly looks like in protracted crisis contexts. In a world grappling with compounding emergencies, these four leaders showcased how education can be a vessel of hope, healing, and resilience – not through control or hierarchy, but by grounding leadership in community, trust, and collective care. The session opened with an invitation to reflect beyond buzzwords like "localisation" and centre the lived experiences of those responding on the frontlines.



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In a creative “show-and-tell,” each speaker brought an object from their country that symbolised resilience. Ghassan presented a handcrafted wooden key made from a 200-year-old olive tree destroyed in the West Bank – a symbol of Palestinian steadfastness and creative resistance. He reminded the audience that Palestinians are “more than our suffering,” and Teach For Palestine is not only expanding access to education but helping young people carry forward their culture and identity in the face of erasure. For Ghassan, leadership means building systems of care and continuity where none exist, while nurturing the next generation’s ability to hold onto identity amidst fragmentation.

Munia Islam shared a woven artwork created by a Rohingya adolescent girl, displayed in a frame made by members of the host community. This symbolised both the pain and possibility of coexistence. She explained how Teach For Bangladesh operates in fragile ecosystems, where students often lead community action without access to internet or resources. For Munia, education is inseparable from dignity, and leadership is about standing alongside communities not just in classrooms, but in courtrooms, protest grounds, and relief camps. She viewed teachers as first responders in crises – able to address everything from trauma to malnutrition – and believes education must be designed with healing at its core.

Kassaga Arinaitwe brought a traditional Ugandan shaker made of beads, seeds, and

sticks – each distinct yet bound together to create harmony. For him, this represented Uganda’s ethos of shared responsibility, especially as a country hosting 1.7 million refugees. Drawing from his own childhood – having lost his entire family to AIDS – Kassaga described how he leads with compassion as his moral compass. During the pandemic, rather than downsizing his team, he shifted operations online and decentralised decision-making to communities. His approach reinforced that in moments of collapse, leadership is not about control, but about trusting others to rise and rebuild.

Rahmatullah Arman brought a handwoven Afghan carpet, made by a woman in Kabul. He described how each thread carried stories of war, resilience, and creativity. With Afghanistan enduring over four decades of conflict, Arman reflected on the immense psychological weight of leading teams who live through repeated trauma. He spoke about the need to create emotionally safe spaces for staff – not through external facilitation, but through everyday acts of solidarity, listening, and shared grief. For him, leadership means holding space for vulnerability and recognising that healing must happen internally before impact can be made externally.

The discussion moved towards redefining leadership in the absence of functioning systems. Munia highlighted moments when, after political violence, teachers returned to damaged schools simply to offer comfort and stability – because that presence alone could



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anchor students. She stressed the importance of slow leadership – taking pause, reflecting with communities, and resisting the urgency imposed by external actors.

Ghassan spoke about building hope in tactical ways, such as restoring one classroom or reviving one olive grove. For him, rituals like ending the week with cultural meals are not symbolic – they are survival tools that ground teams in purpose and cultural continuity. He emphasised that resilience is intergenerational, and that education in Palestine must serve both as a tool for progress and as a link to heritage.

Kassaga shared how his team responded to a major funding cut by further decentralising leadership to community teams, allowing local staff to take charge. This not only ensured continuity, but also helped the organisation grow into new districts. He saw this as proof that when leaders share risk, they create room

for others to lead meaningfully. In the final segment, audience questions touched on safeguarding frameworks, hope in long-term displacement, and the emotional demands on educators in conflict zones. The panel underscored that safeguarding must be embedded in both program design and culture, especially when working with vulnerable children. They collectively agreed that hope is not blind optimism, but a deliberate act of holding on – through connection, creativity, and commitment.

Aishwarya closed the session by noting that the stories shared were not just examples of leadership in emergencies, but models for any context where systems are failing and communities are seeking dignity. What emerged clearly from the session was that in crisis, leadership is redefined: it becomes quieter, more relational, and deeply anchored in humanity.





Plenary Panel



“Our teachers went into bullet-ridden classrooms not to teach a lesson, but to remind students they are not alone. That act of presence – just showing up – was more powerful than any curriculum. Education is not a response after crisis; it is the response.”

Munia Islam Mozumder, CEO
CEO, Teach For Bangladesh

“Palestinians are more than our suffering. We are joy, music, meals, and memory. Every week, we end with food and dance – not because the struggle is over, but because rituals help us hold on. Hope is not a mood. It’s our strategy.”

Ghassan Amayra
Board Member, Teach For Palestine

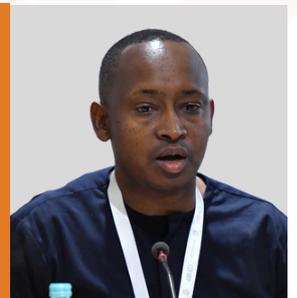


“Afghanistan has lived through over 45 years of conflict, and our people are tired. But we are still weaving hope – thread by thread. Sometimes, the most powerful thing we can do is sit with someone and feel their pain. Leadership begins with healing.”

Rahmatullah Arman
Founder and CEO, Teach For Afghanistan

“I lost my entire family to AIDS before I was 10, but I lead today because someone saw me, believed in me, and walked with me. In crisis, the real question is: do we shrink, or do we expand our hearts and hands?”

Kassaga James Arinaitwe
CEO and Co-Founder, Teach For Uganda



“What I’ve heard from all of you is that when systems collapse, human connection becomes the system. And that these are not just stories of education in emergencies – these are stories of leadership, period.”

Aishwarya Manjunath Shetty
Education Specialist, Education Above All Foundation



Critical Action Steps



Equip teachers to act as first responders addressing protection, hunger, and healing – not just learning.



Create intentional safe spaces for teams to process trauma and rebuild emotional resilience.



Use cultural rituals and local symbols to preserve identity and anchor teams in purpose.



Lead through presence, not perfection – sometimes sitting with pain is more powerful than solving it.



Practise decentralised leadership by trusting communities to lead responses in real time.



Reimagine leadership in crisis as relational, reflective, and rooted in community wisdom.