



ACFID National Conference

2025 Conference Wrap Up



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Images included in this document were taken at ACFID National Conference 2025, unless otherwise stated.

Acknowledgements



ACFID would like to acknowledge and thank the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples who are the traditional custodians of the lands on which the 2025 ACFID Conference was held.

We express special thanks to Aunty Mary Atkinson who delivered the Welcome to Country.

Background: Canberra ACT, image by Daniel Morton

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Australian Government
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Message from the ACFID Conference Organisers

The Australian Council for International Development was proud to welcome delegates to Canberra for the ACFID National Conference 2025. This year's theme, **Driving Transformation in Development and Humanitarian Action**, reflected the urgent need to respond to a year marked by political and economic upheaval, growing inequality, social division, and the escalating impacts of climate change.

A clear and compelling message emerged: we must stand together to reshape global systems for the better. As the rules-based order faces erosion, our sector must prepare for a fundamentally changed world.

While this challenge underscored the program, the conference was alive with hope, solidarity, and a shared commitment to building a better future. Delegates celebrated the achievements of ACFID members, who have already implemented real systems change, with a strong emphasis on locally-led action.

This year also marked ACFID's 60th Anniversary, offering a moment to reflect on six decades of progress in the Australian NGO sector. A highlight was the special celebration at Government House, graciously hosted by Her Excellency the Honourable Sam Mostyn AC, whose former role as ACFID President made the occasion especially meaningful.

ACFID extends heartfelt thanks to our speakers, sponsors, delegates, and event staff for making this milestone conference a success. We look forward to continuing our partnerships and driving transformative change in 2026.

Conference Organisers



Emily
Moreton



Anne
Fitzpatrick



Win Mrat
Wai



Chris
Portillo



Shweta
Tank



Naomi
Brooks



Tamara
Manson

Annual General Meeting



ACFID held its 2025 Annual General Meeting on 5 November 2025 at QT Hotel Canberra.

The Council voted to grant 13 new organisations Full Membership Status. ACFID is delighted to welcome the following organisations to the membership:

- Asia Justice and Rights
- Australian and New Zealand Intensive Care Society
- Australian Centre for the Prevention of Cervical Cancer
- Cambodia Rural Students Foundation
- CFC ANCOP
- CINI Australia
- Conciliation Resources
- Fairaction International
- Orthopaedic Outreach Fund
- Rotary Australia World Community Service Limited (RAWCS)
- ShelterBox Australia
- Sisters of the Good Samaritan Foundation (Good Sams)
- The Hunger Project Australia



The Council also unanimously elected Virginia Haussegger AM as the new ACFID President, as we bid farewell to Susan Pascoe AM. Our sincerest gratitude to Susan for her many years of leadership and a very warm welcome to Virginia.

Satellite Session: Transforming Child Sponsorship: Opportunities, Challenges and Future Thinking

BAPTIST
WORLD
AID

Transform Aid
INTERNATIONAL
for children & young people



International
Development
AUSTRALIA

ChildFund
Australia

PLAN
INTERNATIONAL
Until we are all equal

Speakers: Rev. Melissa Lipsett, Sophie Jenkins, Corinne Habel, Conor Costello, Therese Osland, Rebekah Cochrane

This session explored how NGOs are reimagining child sponsorship models to move beyond traditional fundraising approaches toward strategies that empower communities and build trust with supporters. Speakers reflected on the historical role of sponsorship in shaping public engagement and funding, while emphasizing the need for innovation and integrity in evolving practices.

Key themes included the importance of holistic lifecycle design, transparency, and the recognition that transformational change is a long-term process. Melissa reminded participants that “when we know better, we do better,” underscoring the sector’s responsibility to adapt as understanding grows. Therese stressed the need to view sponsorship reform through a holistic lens, while Rebecca highlighted that “honesty builds trust—internally and externally,” acknowledging that the search for a perfect solution is unrealistic. Corinne reinforced that “transformational change is a marathon, not a sprint,” framing reform as an ongoing journey rather than a quick fix.

The discussion unpacked operational trade-offs between sponsorship reform and financial sustainability, explored emerging models and case studies, and celebrated the sector’s capacity to innovate while honouring the legacy of global solidarity. Participants shared candid insights into lessons learned, challenges faced, and opportunities for future thinking, creating a collaborative space for organisations to reflect on their own journeys toward sponsorship transformation.



Global Development Leaders Dialogue Co-hosted by ACFID and AIDN

Speakers: Melissa Conley Tyler, Nina Lorenzini, Michaela Sargent, Charles North, Upenyu Mawande

This dialogue explored what it takes to build effective, enduring partnerships between NGOs and philanthropic organisations. Bringing together leaders from both sectors, the session examined the strategies, structures, and mindsets that underpin successful collaboration, drawing on real-world examples to identify what works—and what doesn't—when building trusted relationships.

A central theme was the importance of trust and openness as the foundation for partnership. As Nina Lorenzini noted, “partnerships endure when you start with trust and openness, not compliance.” This sentiment was echoed by Charles North, who emphasised the shared responsibility for systemic change: “We believe in partnerships because no single actor can change systems on their own.”

Participants reflected on practical steps to strengthen collaboration, including aligning values, fostering transparency, and creating flexible structures that allow partnerships to adapt over time. The discussion highlighted that enduring partnerships are not transactional; they require mutual respect, shared learning, and a commitment to long-term impact.

The session provided a space for NGO and philanthropic leaders to share experiences, challenges, and lessons learned, building a collective understanding of how to work better together in pursuit of transformative change.



Pre-Conference Networking Drinks

Sponsored by StoneX

Generously sponsored by StoneX, delegates closed the evening with networking and drinks, surrounded by the Canberra landscape.

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60TH Anniversary Reception

On 5 November 2025, ACFID marked a historic milestone with a special evening at Government House, hosted by Her Excellency the Honourable Ms Sam Mostyn AC, Governor-General of Australia. The reception celebrated ACFID's 60-year legacy in international development and humanitarian action, while looking ahead to a future of global collaboration.

The evening commenced with introductory remarks from ACFID President Susan Pascoe AM, followed by a warm welcome from the Governor-General. Senator the Hon. Penny Wong delivered an address reflecting on Australia's role in advancing global development and humanitarian priorities. She emphasised the values underpinning this work, stating:

Your work is grounded in values that Australians cherish. A fair go. Equality. Compassion. And tonight we celebrate sixty years of ACFID. An occasion to reflect on our shared partnership, our shared achievements, our shared purpose - and, I hope, our shared future.



Read Senator Wong's
full speech here

A highlight of the evening was the **ACFID Awards Ceremony**, recognising outstanding contributions to human rights, development, and media excellence:

- **Sir Ronald Wilson Human Rights Award:** *David Manne*, human rights lawyer and Executive Director of Refugee Legal, for his tireless advocacy for asylum seekers and refugees, including landmark legal efforts and humanitarian responses for Afghan staff following the Taliban's return to power.
- **Outstanding Contribution to the Sector Award:** *Professor Helen Evans AO*, for her lifelong commitment to global health equity and leadership roles with Gavi, the Global Fund, and numerous Australian organisations.
- **ACFID Media Award:** *Dominic Giannini* of AAP, for impactful reporting that amplifies Pacific voices and advances understanding of climate justice and humanitarian issues.

The reception also marked a leadership transition, thanking outgoing Chair Susan Pascoe AM and welcoming Virginia Haussegger AM as ACFID's new Chair. This milestone capped a week of celebration, advocacy, and dialogue, reaffirming the sector's commitment to peace, justice, and ending poverty.



Parliamentary Breakfast

Bright and early on Thursday, ninety of our delegates were joined by Parliamentarians for breakfast at the Hyatt Hotel.

The event was underscored by a powerful keynote delivered by Drew Havea, Chair of PIANGO.

Attendees heard from representatives from each of the major parties.

Senator Jess Collins of the Liberal Party considered the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar and reflected on her conversations with members of her community affected by the crisis, thanking ACFID members for their continued work in the region.

Senator Mehreen Faruqi spoke against the genocide in Gaza, calling for greater Australian government action in Palestine and for the protection of aid workers from prosecution.

The Hon Pat Conroy MP addressed the urgency of climate action for Australia

and our Pacific partners.

“For the Pacific, climate change is not a future issue; it an existential one...

ACFID members, as our partners, are at the forefront of supporting the region in action against climate change...

What matters is that Pacific priorities drive Pacific outcomes.

**Because when the
Pacific is stronger,
Australia is stronger.”**



The morning concluded with a panel of cross-sector voices centred around the theme of Strategic Partners: Civil Society at the Heart of Australia's Aid.

Panellists included Maulani A. Rotinsulu (ASEAN Disability Forum), Brigadier Jennifer Harris (Australian Defence Force), Flora Vano (ActionAid Vanuatu), Susan Brown (United Nations Development Programme), and chaired by John Lamerton (Global Mission Partners).

The panel offered a rich discussion on the diverse ways civil society and institutional actors collaborate to strengthen regional resilience and inclusion. Maulani emphasised the pivotal role of civil society in advancing disability rights and embedding inclusion within ASEAN's regional frameworks. Jennifer gave insights into Defence's regional engagement, framing it as a key contributor to Australia's soft power, and reflected on how civil society organisations complement Defence's efforts. Flora added a practical perspective, illustrating how ActionAid Vanuatu has leveraged partnerships with government to promote women's empowerment across the region. Susan brought a global lens to the



conversation, outlining how UNDP works alongside civil society organisations to foster civic organising and strengthen local capacities in the communities where it operates.

Collectively, these contributions highlighted the interconnected roles of government, international organisations, and civil society in shaping inclusive and resilient regional systems.



Keynote

Towards a Global Tax Architecture Fit for Purpose in Our Times



Professor Jayati Ghosh
Professor of Economics at UMass Amherst
Research Associate at the Political Economy
Research Institute

What better way to open the formal conference proceedings for 2025 than Professor Ghosh's address on transformed global tax architecture.

Like many conversations over the week, and indeed across the sector this year, Prof Ghosh framed her delivery in terms of recent major disruptions: USAID, erosion of rules-based order, increase in climate-related disasters and the layering of poly-crises.

Prof Ghosh called for a reimagining of global development finance in the wake of these changes. Donor-recipient models and micro-financing models have not been as effective as we presupposed.

We should be critical of these models, not from an ideological resistance to aid, but rather in terms of how beneficial they are for those they purport to serve. Recipients of traditional financing models are sometimes treated as objects rather than subjects of aid. Under a charity- donor model, needs were often viewed in silo rather than compounding and aid was provided as specific objects to address specific problems, for example the installation of wells to address water access. Under a micro-financing model,

under which it was imagined that people could "lift themselves by their own bootstraps" through accessing small credits in short periods at high interest rates. We then moved to a cash-transfer model, in which aid was provided via funds, access to which was sometimes conditional, sometimes unconditional (although even then particular requisites needed to be met to access these transfers). In all cases, we looked to small-scale immediate solutions to large systemic problems. Prof Ghosh called us to fundamentally reimagine aid financing.

We need to move from a model in which we think of aid as a bilateral (or limited multilateral) relationship between donors and recipients, and aid itself as charity, to global public investment. Climate change, pandemic, instability and political conflict, extreme poverty and inequality, are experienced as global phenomenon. We collectively undergo these challenges, and so in the face of 'global public bad', we need to be working on 'global public good'. These are challenges for humanity, not individual citizens or nations.

This will require a fundamental shift in the way we approach aid. It is critical to



enable every country their own public revenue, particularly where resources are rightfully theirs but the global system prevents them from accessing them. Our asks for multilateral banks to be recapitalised and dramatically expand their lending are not sufficient. We must demand that global rules and order be changed; countries must be able to access their own means to public revenue. This is true of every country in the world – resources are being denied to the public by very broken systems of global tax systems.

Prof Ghosh highlighted an avenue for moving towards equalising resource distribution: the taxation of multinational corporations. Multinationals are still taxed according to conventions designed over a century ago, at a time when multinational corporations were few and with much less power and revenue. Today, they are highly concentrated and dominate global profits. We need to modernise global taxation. Under tax law, multinationals are treated as individual companies by country – for

example, Apple France is treated as a separate company to Apple South Africa – allowing them to transfer profits in high-tax countries to their counterparts in ‘tax haven’ countries. Where the tax system treats them as separate companies, we know that it is the same set of shareholders that benefit from their profits and revenue. A modernised global tax system would treat multinationals as single entities. There are a few ways to do this: each country in which the company operates could tax its share of the company’s total profits using a basic formula, or we could set a minimum tax on all multinationals and enforce a ‘top-up’ tax on profits arisen in jurisdictions with less than the minimum tax threshold. Notably neither of these options require increasing tax rates, just enforcing the existing tax rates on multinationals.

Attempts have been made to introduce such measures. The OECD attempted to create a minimum tax rate. After much debate, a low rate of 15% was agreed upon. Even set at such a low rate, the

United States withdrew from the agreement. However, there is hope. The prolonged and effective work of the African Union has led to the negotiations of a global tax treaty within the UN system. All countries must push their governments to be active and positive participants in the UN tax treaty. Australia has signed on but only very reluctantly. Prof Ghosh called for Australian agencies working in this space to continue to push the Australian government to actively and enthusiastically engage in the process – a system that reinforces the concentration

of wealth does not serve any nation of citizens, only a very select and limited set of individuals.

Prof Ghosh's address left us thinking about grand-scale change and inspired us to continue to push for global reform on unjust and exploitative systems. A powerful tone set for the day.



Watch Prof Ghosh's address here

“Reimagining development requires us to move away from development assistance towards the idea of public development; to move away from a donor-recipient model and start recognising that all countries and all people face global challenges... we must be demanding a change in the global rules and norms.”



Panel

Beyond the Optics: Building Transformative Partnerships that Matter



Chey Mattner
(moderator)



Maulani A. Rotinsulu



Nayomi Kannangara



Upenyu Mawande

Building on Prof Ghosh's powerful address, attendees heard from an outstanding panel of sector experts on the impact of well-aligned partnerships.

The panel featured Maulani A. Rotinsulu (ASEAN Disability Forum), Nayomi Kannangara (International Women's Development Agency), Upenyu Mawande (Judith Neilson Foundation), and chaired by Chey Mattner (CAN DO).

Chey opened the session by framing the values necessary to partnerships: trust, humility, respect, reciprocity, and solidarity consistently come up in research with global civil society organisations and are essential to ensuring lasting and impactful organisational relationships. How we work together is just as important as what we work towards.

Nayomi spoke to decolonisation, especially in an Australian context where we must practice decolonisation both domestically and internationally. Decolonisation means 1) viewing our organisations as resourcing local organisations, whose technical expertise is shaped by lived experience and context, and 2) centring partners' priorities in organisational strategy and decision-making.

Upenyu spoke to equality and compassion, citing that 70% of partnerships fail due to communication breakdown, goal misalignment, lack of trust, and financial power dynamics. Funders and implementers must be seen as equal partners and the relationship should decentre organisational identity and focus on mutual understanding and shared goals. "The narcissism of small differences often gets in the way of true collaboration."

Maulani answered in terms of inclusivity and authenticity. Partnership is "a living relationship built on trust, respect, and shared responsibilities and vision." It means listening deeply and valuing lived experience, which leads to genuine consultation. Most importantly, inclusion should be a foundation of partnership, not an afterthought or checkbox.

Morning Concurrent Sessions



All at Sea: Legal, Operational, and Humanitarian Imperatives in Protection in Maritime Conflict

This session explored the critical issue of civilian protection in the maritime domain, a challenge intensified by rising global displacement, armed conflict, and irregular sea movements. The discussion underscored the urgent need for coordinated legal and humanitarian responses at sea, bringing together diverse expertise on maritime protection and disaster response.

Flora Vano highlighted the devastating impact of climate-related disasters on Vanuatu, noting that under-resourced countries often rely on better-resourced neighbours for disaster response. This dependency, however, leaves many vulnerable, particularly women and girls. ActionAid Vanuatu addresses this gap by delivering emergency response training to women and girls, equipping them to act when disasters strike.

Franz Putsch shared insights on managing migration and maritime movement, emphasising the complexity of ensuring safe passage for migrants. International collaboration is essential but often hindered by disparities in countries' resources and capacity to respond effectively.

Andre Smit examined the challenges within international maritime law, which was designed for a different era of conflict. Modern warfare technologies, such as long-range weapons, complicate obligations like rescuing shipwrecked or wounded individuals. Multiple overlapping legal frameworks and jurisdictions further add to this complexity.

Commander Jennifer Graham reflected on Defence's role in crisis response, citing the Royal Australian Navy's evacuation of civilians during the 2020 bushfires. She highlighted the difficulties of rescue missions on warships, where commanders must balance crew safety with legal mandates. International cooperation remains vital to ensure the most capable vessels undertake rescue operations.

Supported by:



Making AI Work for People and Purpose



Speaker: Scarlett McDermott

The session focused on the opportunities and risks of AI, as well as how it is being used across the sector. In particular, attendees discussed intentionality and risk management.

Scarlett presented a risk matrix to illustrate the ways in which AI use can create or increase risk to organisations. She also shared ways in which AI is impacting the Sustainable Development Goals, encouraging organisations to consider how AI can also create opportunity as well as risk. What matters most is intentional and considered use.

“The way we choose to implement technology has a huge impact on the world.”

“AI is already happening in your organisations, and we’re going to see those ripple effects continue”



“I am a technology optimist. I do think there are a huge number of ways we can use AI and technology more broadly to have a positive impact. But these won’t happen by accident.”

Transforming Development: Towards Justice & Reparations



Speakers: Kate Lee, Michelle Higelin

Attendees heard from some ACFID members who are driving systemic change through their development and humanitarian programming. Speakers invited the audience to think about impact on a grand-scale, such as how global tax and debt reform can support increased investment in locally-led development and vital public services.

The backdrop for this session, and for all sessions, was of course the global cuts to ODA, and how in a changing world we can continue to support locally-led programs and humanitarian assistance.

“We need structural change more than programmatic. We need to work with allies and social movements on this space. Building evidence drives change.”



Blended Finance: a pathway to impact, or a risk to rights?



Speakers: Shane Nichols, Conor Costello, Rod Goodbun

This session gave attendees an opportunity to learn more about blended finance as a financial model for NGOs. Speakers represented diverse views of blended finance, from early adopters to cautious critics, with a focus on increasing visibility of sectoral positions and building shared knowledge.

Shane Nichols: "We've had several ACFID-level conversations about the declining aid funds. We need to be open to new ways of working, rather than digging our heels in. Blended finance is one of those tools, and with the right guardrails (ensuring development impact) it can be a helpful one."

Rod Goodbun: "I propose we reject the idea that this (blended finance) is the best Australia can do. And we push harder on where we can source funds from to increase ODA."

Participant: "Anything we can do to attract a small part of these giant private sector pots of money, is a good thing. We need it."

Conor Costello (Plan): "We can all agree this is an important and also niche development modality. It's never going to be the majority of the aid program... It's about understanding, learning from organisations like Good Return. The complexity has been one of the barriers to overcome."



Innovative Approaches to Menstrual Health: Empowering Women and Girls in Challenging Environments



Save the Children



OPPORTUNITY
International
AUSTRALIA



Speakers: Morseda Chowdhury, Lisa K. Piper, Kaysha Gabara, Sarah Adams

This session, hosted by UNICEF Australia, Save the Children, and Opportunity International Australia, showcased practical women-led initiatives to addressing menstrual health challenges across the Asia-Pacific. The presentation featured two key initiatives: the Oky app in Papua New Guinea, which offers girl-centred, open-source menstrual education and tracking, and the Health Leaders program in India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Nepal, which trains women to deliver menstrual and reproductive health education in their own communities.

Speakers outlined major barriers, including misinformation, stigma, and limited access to products. They also shared practical strategies for supporting girls and women in low-resource and remote settings, with a focus on inclusive, low-tech approaches. Delegates gained insights into implementation lessons, cultural considerations, and partnership models that link health programs with financial inclusion.



Keynote

Defending Civic Space in Myanmar



Naw Ei Ei Min

Founder and Director, Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together (POINT)

After a break for lunch, networking, and reflection, delegates heard from Naw Ei Ei Min.

Naw Ei Ei Min is an Indigenous Karen Woman from Myanmar. She has been the founder and Director of the Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together (POINT) since September 2013. She has been working for the civil society movement, especially the rights-based approach to development in the country, since 2007.

Ei Ei Min's role at POINT facilitates the formation of a common platform for Indigenous peoples/Ethnic Nationalities in Myanmar for environmental problems and natural resource management. It acts as a mediator between the government, private sector, and Indigenous communities to bring about constructive engagement in the country's sustainable development. She received the U.S. Embassy's Women of Change award in 2017. She is also an Executive Council Member of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) from September 2016 to June 2025 and an ICCA Consortium Member. She advocates for sustainable environmental and economic policies for all Myanmar people, regardless of gender or ethnicity.

Ei Ei spoke to the critical role of Indigenous leadership in addressing issues that affect Indigenous peoples, work that is too often dominated by non-Indigenous-led organisations. Through POINT, she seeks to bridge the gap between government, INGOs, and religious organisations, ensuring that Indigenous voices are not only heard but drive agendas and policy. Her message was clear: Indigenous-led solutions are essential, both for Indigenous-specific initiatives and for broader efforts to create lasting change.

Ei Ei's work through POINT focuses on climate and environmental protection, areas where Indigenous communities are already doing the heavy lifting on the ground. She stressed that inclusion of Indigenous voices and knowledge systems is not optional, it is fundamental to effective climate action. POINT also plays a vital role in amplifying these voices internationally, facilitating representation of Myanmar's Indigenous groups at global climate forums such as COP, often stepping in where government presence is absent.

Despite ongoing challenges, Myanmar's civil society continues to adapt. Social enterprises managed by Ei Ei's team help



sustain operations and fund activities. With more than 135 Indigenous groups, including those split across the India-Myanmar border, diversity and collaboration remain central to resilience.

Advocacy lies at the heart of POINT's mission. The organisation calls for international pressure on breaches of International Humanitarian Law and champions Indigenous rights within global climate policy. Yet Ei Ei reminded the audience that real impact begins at the community level. Support must reach those on the frontlines through initiatives such as building local capacity, documenting community protocols, and conducting research and environmental impact assessments to inform future strategies.

Her message was powerful: Indigenous communities are not passive stakeholders, they are leaders. Recognising and resourcing their work is key to driving meaningful, sustainable change.

Afternoon Concurrent Sessions

Embracing Local Leadership: Identifying Leverage Points for Transforming Development



Speakers: Melissa Bungcaras and Dr Keren Winterford

This interactive session asked participants to play as executives of an imagined NGO developing a strategy for locally led development. Applying Donella Meadows' concepts of leverage points (places within a system where a small shift can lead to big changes), participants identified how and where they could influence change in the international development system.

Participants were also asked to commit to applying the framework for six months. Researchers from the Institute for Sustainable Futures will follow up after six months with a survey and discussion to understand how the framework has impacted their work.

Importantly, the session considered multiple conceptions of 'locally led', recognising the diversity of views within the sector.

"We don't all have the same view of locally led development. We should recognise that there are competing views within this system."

- Dr Keren Winterford



Integrating Peacebuilding: From Theory to Practice in Humanitarian, Development & Peacebuilding (HDP) Programming



Speakers: Lea Perekrests and Clynton Beukes

This session addressed the problem of sustainable development in the context of peacebuilding. Delivery of aid without addressing underlying drivers of conflict can perpetuate instability, while development programs that ignore fragility may fail to achieve lasting impact. How then do we work effectively across the Humanitarian, Development, and Peace (HDP) nexus?

Participants heard from IEP and World Vision about their positive peace framework through a case study of collaborative action. The presentation featured the challenges faced, frameworks, and outcomes achieved. Participants then participated in a group exercise applying a peace lens to a scenario, using the Positive Peace Tool.

Clynton: “Things don’t always progress in a linear way. Sometimes, things get better, then they get worse, then they get better again. So how can we sustain progress during shock events happen?... How do we better integrate program delivery and peacebuilding? We centre local communities, adaptive programming, and ask the question, ‘what are some risks / shock events that your community faces?’. We then program with those shocks in mind.”

Lea: “It’s a framework that can be applied to governments, to a local school. We use neutral language so that everyone can use it. ‘Not words’ are safe to use - for example ‘human rights’ is just ‘acceptance of other’s rights.’”





Speakers: Santosh Nepali, Arpita Karki, Hilda John Ranjit Kumar, Davide De Micheli, Olive Mateo Orate, Eleanor Trinchera, Anshu Adhikari, Kirsten Hawke, Dr Andrew Catford, Savana Shrestha, Kabir Ratna Sthapit, Man Dhoj Khatri

This session examined how transformative partnerships can address systemic inequalities and climate injustice through locally led action. Opening remarks from Kirsten Hawke, DFAT's Locally Led Development Advisor, highlighted the significance of locally led development within DFAT's approach.

The POWER Project, now in its third phase, was presented as a model for addressing gender and disability inequalities in rural Nepal through a consortium-driven approach. Grounded in Gender Equity, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI), human rights, and climate justice, POWER has achieved significant impact with modest investment by creating multiplier effects through:

- Inclusive governance and gender equality
- Empowerment of women and human rights defenders
- Policy advocacy on climate justice, gender equality, and disability equity
- Locally led, innovative solutions

INA shared how Australian NGOs can transition from traditional, centralised roles to becoming supportive intermediaries that foster leadership and sustainability in local civil society. This strategic, long-term partnership model is rooted in localisation, equity, and intentional power redistribution, with adaptable components tailored to diverse local contexts.

The POWER Consortium emphasised that relationships between actors are central to community transformation. Collaboration has enabled resource sharing, tailored technical expertise, and strong local networks.

Importantly, the discussion explored what truly transformative partnerships look like, how they differ from past models, and how organisations can collaborate meaningfully amid shrinking aid budgets and rising competition without falling into transactional patterns. Speakers reflected on moving beyond managing power imbalances to actively redistributing power, centering lived experience and local knowledge in decision-making.



Seizing the COP31 moment: the role of civil society in driving leadership, ambition and accountability



Speakers: Conor Costello, Flora Vano, Rod Goodbun, Sophie Hardefeldt

This session explored the leadership role the Australian Government could play if the host of the Australia-Pacific COP31. The presidency year represents a critical opportunity for Australia to drive greater action and ambition on climate change in line with Pacific priorities, including supporting the leadership of women and girls who are driving change across the region.

Pacific nations have been at the forefront of UNFCCC negotiations, championing increased access to financing for vulnerable countries, advancing calls for adaptation and loss and damage financing, and pushing for a fossil fuel phase-out. Their leadership recently contributed to strong findings from the International Court of Justice on governments' responsibility to act on climate change in accordance with global human rights agreements.

The session examined:

- The current state of negotiations on climate finance, adaptation, loss and damage, and fossil fuel phase-out, and how these shape outcomes for frontline communities, particularly women and girls who are disproportionately affected yet leading climate action.
- Pacific civil society demands for COP31 and how Australian organisations can act in solidarity.
- The Australian climate movement's priorities and organising efforts in the lead-up to COP31.

Speakers emphasised that COP31 is more than a single event; the presidency year can be leveraged to strengthen coordination between domestic and international climate movements, share learnings, and build networks with Pacific climate NGOs and activists. Civil society has a vital role in holding the government accountable to deliver climate ambition, finance, and gender-transformative action across the region.

Flora Vano highlighted the challenges Pacific participants face in attending COPs, noting that past delegations have been overwhelmingly male-dominated. Drew Havea from PIANGO reflected on mixed feelings within the Pacific about COP31, referencing the Blue Pacific agenda and the Nadi workshop as moments of shifting regional identity: "We are starting to see ourselves as part of Australia."

The discussion also acknowledged gaps in engagement with First Nations voices and the risk of privileging Pacific voices over Indigenous perspectives, underscoring the need for inclusive and intersectional approaches to climate advocacy.

Unconditional Cash Transfers: Could the answer to ending extreme poverty in the next decade be this simple?



Speakers: Meghal Shah, Praveen Lata, Eelco Vugs

This session explored how unconditional cash transfers are transforming the fight against poverty by placing trust and agency directly in the hands of people living in poverty. At the heart of the discussion was a simple but powerful idea: when people living in poverty are trusted with direct financial support, they are empowered to make choices that best suit their needs, invest in their futures, and drive lasting change in their communities.

The session opened with the pre-recorded video “From poverty to progress: 1 year of cash impact” by GiveDirectly, sharing lived experiences of recipients and highlighting tangible changes when communities determine their own priorities. This human-centred introduction set the stage for a deep dive into the mechanics, outcomes, and evidence behind cash transfers.

Drawing on research and field experience from Malawi and beyond, speakers examined how direct cash transfers improve economic outcomes, enhance household resilience, and challenge traditional models of aid. Evidence from large-scale pilots and rigorous evaluations shows recipients frequently invest in education, healthcare, agriculture, and small businesses, leading to measurable improvements in food security, income, and well-being. In Malawi, unconditional cash transfers have significantly reduced poverty and increased asset ownership, enabling families to make decisions that best support their communities.

The discussion also showcased how digital innovation is making cash transfers more efficient, transparent, and scalable. Advanced targeting using mobile data and satellite imagery, combined with user-friendly communication platforms, ensures programs reach more people, reduce costs, and deliver support safely and effectively. These innovations are critical for scaling up and ensuring even the most remote communities benefit.

Safeguarding, inclusion, and recipient protection were highlighted as integral to program design. Practical measures such as accessible feedback channels, community engagement, and user-friendly digital tools promote dignity, autonomy, and trust, especially for women and vulnerable groups.

“Poverty isn’t just a lack of money; it is a lack of choice and lack of power over situations. Unconditional cash really empowers people. The level of autonomy and agency is very powerful... This is truly something we do with people, not to them.” – Eelco Vugs

Panel

Driving Transformation through AI



**Susanne
Legena
(moderator)**



**Scarlett
McDermott**



**Prof Angie
Abdilla**



**Aarathi
Krishnan**



**David
Spriggs**

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming industries across the globe, and the international development and humanitarian sector is no exception. From predictive analytics to automated decision-making, AI is being positioned as a game-changer, but what does this really mean for the way we work, the communities we serve, and the values we uphold?

The panel featured David Spriggs, Scarlet McDermott, Aarathi Krishnan, Susanne Legena, and Prof. Angie Abdilla.

Susanne opened the session by asking where the panellists see the greatest potential for AI to support international development work. David spoke enthusiastically about how AI is helping organisations secure greater funding, pointing to significant improvements in fundraising, grant writing, and data analysis. Scarlett reminded us that AI is already built into many of the tools staff use every day, whether organisations formally adopt it or not. For leaders, this raises important questions: how do organisational values guide the use of these tools, and where can they genuinely improve processes without compromising ethics?





In thinking about governance and accountability, Aarathi expressed deep concern about the sector's reliance on technology controlled by private companies that operate without democratic oversight. She shared a sobering example from Afghanistan, where biometric data collected by NGOs and governments was later exploited for targeted killings after the Taliban takeover. No one has faced consequences for this misuse of data because of opaque structures and lack of regulation. Her message was clear: if we do not have full trust in a system, specifically in its data management and accountability structures, then it should not be used, especially in conflict zones. Angie echoed these concerns, warning that AI does not respect national laws or regulations. She urged organisations to build their own safeguards rather than waiting for governments to act, and suggested practical steps such as using smaller, locally stored language models for sensitive work.

Both Scarlett and David called for a values-driven approach. Organisations need to ask: do these tools align with our principles? Are they appropriate for sensitive areas like child safeguarding? As Scarlett noted, not doing anything is also a decision and one that carries its own risks. Angie added another dimension, drawing on Indigenous knowledge systems and calling for principles of reciprocity, regeneration, and relationality to be embedded in AI design.

The panel closed with a strong message: AI is not neutral. It amplifies existing power dynamics and introduces new vulnerabilities. While it offers opportunities to improve efficiency and unlock new possibilities, it also demands that we think critically about ethics, sovereignty, and cultural integrity. If we do not demand more from governments on regulation and take responsibility within our own organisations, we risk losing agency and autonomy. This was a provocative and inspiring close to the conference, marked by thoughtful discussion, challenging ideas, and calls for systems change.

Conference Close and Special Farewell

As we concluded two inspiring and powerful days, we bid a heartfelt farewell to Susan Pascoe AM, whose eight-year tenure as ACFID President has been marked by exceptional leadership. During her time, ACFID navigated major global and sectoral challenges, from the COVID-19 pandemic to shifts in international aid, while strengthening governance, the Code of Conduct, and the collective voice of civil society.

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is pleased to announce the appointment of Virginia Haussegger AM as its new President. Virginia is a respected journalist, gender equality advocate, and founder of the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation at the University of Canberra. She brings a strong commitment to advancing gender equality, strengthening civil society, and promoting integrity and accountability in public life.

Virginia joins ACFID at a pivotal time as the organisation shapes a new strategic plan to respond to growing global challenges. ACFID member NGOs and their local partners continue to make an outsized impact in 80 countries around the world and Virginia will lead the Board in supporting the sector's work.

ACFID's Board and members extended heartfelt thanks to Susan Pascoe AM for her dedication and leadership, and warmly welcomed Virginia Haussegger AM as she begins her term as President.

