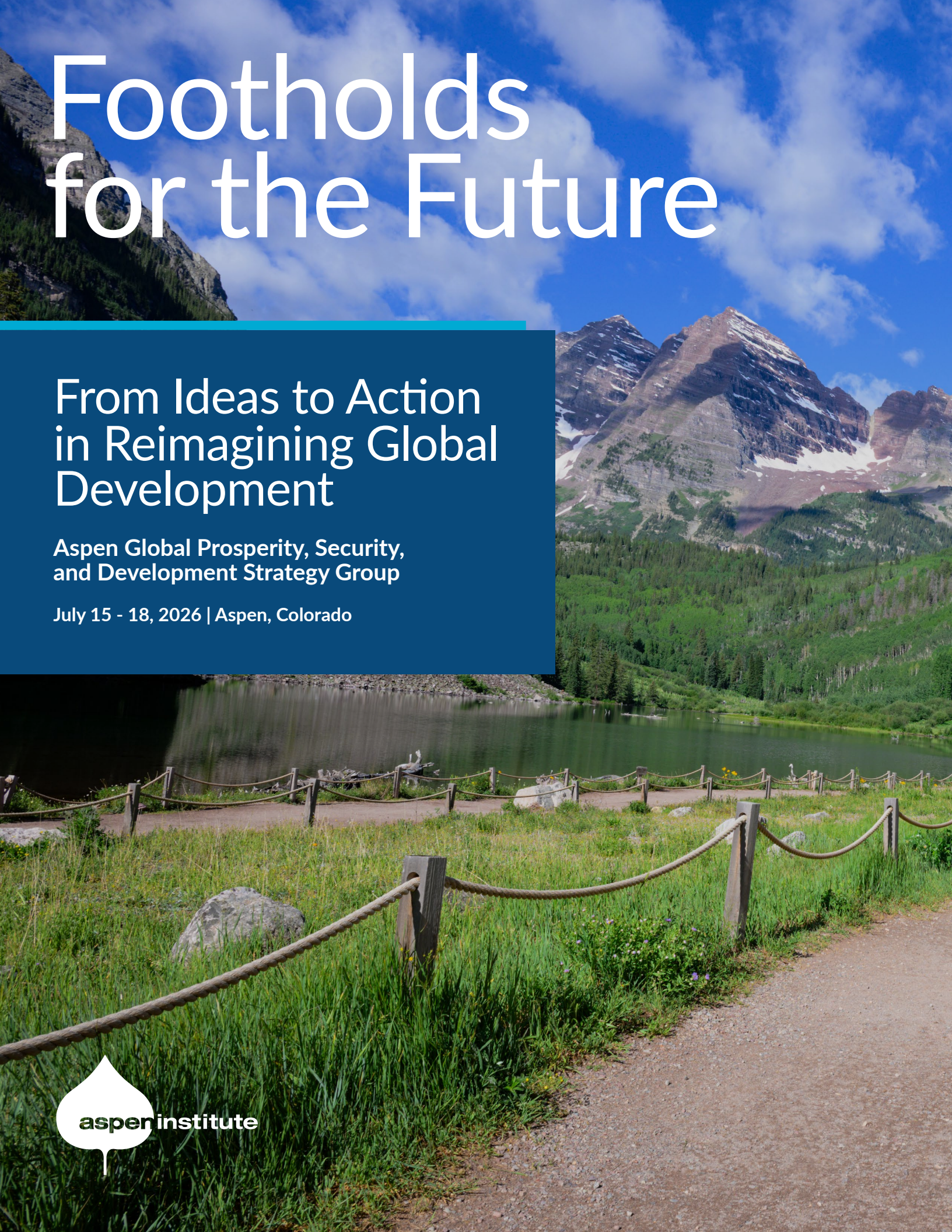

Footholds for the Future

From Ideas to Action in Reimagining Global Development

Aspen Global Prosperity, Security, and Development Strategy Group

July 15 - 18, 2026 | Aspen, Colorado

aspen institute

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We look forward to continued collaboration in 2027 and invite other partners to contact us to join this important work.

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About The Aspen Global Prosperity, Security, and Development Strategy Group

The Aspen Global Prosperity, Security, and Development Strategy Group is housed within the Aspen Global Innovators Group. It is a high-level, nonpartisan platform designed to foster constructive, trust-based dialogue, bridge institutional silos, and generate practical recommendations to shape a forward-looking global development agenda.The Strategy Group convenes global leaders across multilateral, corporate, nonprofit, philanthropic, and policy sectors to reimagine international development and humanitarian assistance—and to develop near-term action plans that move these ideas forward.

To learn more, visit aspenglobalinnovators.org/en/global-prosperity-security-development/

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Executive Summary

The system of global cooperation for shared prosperity was shaken with the July 2025 closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), marking the end of an era in global development. A number of governments across the world followed suit: The UK cut its Official Development Assistance (ODA) by 10.8% 42%; Germany reduced its assistance by 17.4%; and the global decrease in ODA totalled 23.1%, a loss of approximately $40.8 billion in 2025 (OECD 2026).

This shift in the international aid system left health clinics, farmer cooperatives, small scale businesses, and schools across the Global South without access to lifesaving medicines, fertilizers, seeds, computers, and equipment. The response to this reduction in funding was immediate with global leaders, NGOs and philanthropists rising to meet this challenge. Practitioners and policymakers rallied for the continuation of some resources. At the same time, global institutions began to tackle the question of what comes next, drawing on lessons learned from decades of work. They envisioned a future with the core value of global cooperation at its center as well as a stronger, more effective system to support those goals.

> **"International development has seen models of success in the past, but as the world evolves, so too must our approaches. We must build on lessons from the past, learn from emerging models, and embrace new ideas that have yet to be tried to align with new economic realities."**
>
> **Henrietta Fore,** Chairman & CEO, Holsman International

In the wake of these events, the Aspen Global Prosperity, Security, and Development Strategy Group met for the first time in the summer of 2025 on the sidelines of the Aspen Security Forum. Bringing together a bipartisan group of foreign policy, defense, and intelligence experts, the Strategy Group explored how global development must evolve in a changing geopolitical landscape. A strong consensus emerged that development is essential to national security and global cooperation, serving as a critical tool of diplomacy and defense.

Following that gathering, the Aspen Global Prosperity, Security and Development Strategy Group met again for a week in Bellagio, Italy in early 2026, where members emerged with a set of **five core principles to guide a reimagined global development system:**

1. **Increase development finance** tools and resources and expand pathways for public and private sector funds to work together.
2. **Support and reimagine national sovereignty efforts** by advancing country-led development.
3. **Build platforms and systems** that reduce fragmentation in development.
4. **Support innovation for scale and impact** across education, health, agriculture, and economic development.
5. **Ensure human dignity** as a core operating principle of development.

Building on these principles as the foundation for effective global development, the Strategy Group gathered with a larger, diverse group in Aspen, Colorado in July 2026 for another set of multi-day deliberations. The meeting, entitled *Footholds for the Future: From Ideas to Action in Reimagining Global Development*, examined high-impact approaches and case studies in key issue areas to explore how these principles could be translated into practice. The Strategy Group also discussed promising big ideas and how to translate them into actionable models.

Key Priorities for Action

The Strategy Group's discussion in Aspen generated several priorities to advance a reformed global development system:

- **Increase Development Finance:** Amplify promising models to build pathways for public and private capital, reform incentives for development finance institutions to allow for higher risk development lending, and expand new innovative models to increase finance.
- **Advance new models for sovereign-led development:** Support national sovereignty efforts by strengthening partnerships with country-led initiatives, including the Accra Reset, to enable new ways of working with countries in the lead.
- **Harness data and artificial intelligence:** Explore Development Data Compacts and AI to strengthen development systems and improve service delivery.
- **Scale innovative public-private partnerships:** Leverage existing infrastructure and cross-sector collaboration to expand reach, efficiency, and impact. Identify elements of successful public-private partnerships and promote new models to strengthen private sector involvement.
- **Trust as capital:** Explore models that build on relationships of trust to access and mobilize capital for social good. Identify new partnerships and innovative financing models that build on trust as a key ingredient of capital mobilization.
- **Security starts with human development:** Advance investments in human development as a critical pre-condition of national and global security. Education, health care, clean water, and food security are fundamental to human dignity and contribute to national and global security.
- **Build a more compelling narrative:** To mobilize political will and sustained support, craft win-win narratives that recognize benefits to both donor and receiving countries and emphasize economic gains for both.

Building on these priority areas, the Strategy Group is advancing its work through partnerships and dedicated workstreams focused on development finance reform, supporting the sovereignty movement, and innovation across health, education, agriculture, and economic development. By forming cooperative agreements and collaborating with organizations and initiatives leading in these areas, the Strategy Group will mobilize resources, amplify and accelerate promising solutions, and move high-impact ideas to implementation. Across these partnerships, the emphasis is on speed, thoughtful collaboration, and creating efficient pathways to impact – shifting the Strategy Group's focus from incubation into action.

The Strategy Group is committed to working toward global prosperity for all and to furthering the belief that every person, everywhere, should have access to health, security, and economic opportunity. In an increasingly interconnected world, achieving this vision requires new approaches to cooperation and assistance grounded in respect and mutual benefit. Through its partnerships and workstreams, the Strategy Group will amplify promising solutions, advance innovation, and mobilize the resources needed to make this vision a reality.



Lee-Roy Chetty, Minh-Thu Pham, Noam Unger, and Maura O'Neill

Introduction

From July 15-18, 2026, a distinguished group of leaders from across government, business, philanthropy, multilateral institutions, and civil society gathered in Aspen, Colorado, to chart a path forward for the future of global development. Earlier gatherings of the Strategy Group came against the backdrop of shifting undercurrents and a global development landscape that was already quietly transforming. In light of those changes, this meeting created space to ask uncomfortable questions, challenge longstanding models and assumptions, acknowledge where existing approaches fall short, and ultimately debate what comes next.

> **"Hope is the deliberate choice we make every morning when we choose to be builders. The old terrain has shifted, and the former architecture has collapsed. There is no point in mourning the past. We must convene, invest, and build the new landscape together for future generations."**
>
> **Dr. John Nkengasong,** Executive Director for Higher Education, Collaboratives & Strategic Initiatives, Mastercard Foundation

The transformation of the international aid landscape has raised urgent questions about how development can remain effective and sustainable. While governments, civil society organizations, and philanthropists have sought to address immediate funding gaps, the broader challenge extends beyond replacing lost resources. It requires rethinking how development is conceived, financed, delivered, and rooted in countries and communities it is intended to serve while preserving international cooperation and shared prosperity.

Meeting this challenge requires a shared set of guiding principles. The Strategy Group's February 2026 convening in Bellagio, Italy established five core principles that informed the July meeting: **Increasing development finance** tools and resources and expanding pathways for public and private sector funds to work together; **supporting and reimagining national sovereignty efforts** by advancing country-led development;



> **"When you renovate or build a house, sometimes it's better to tear down an outdated structure so you can rebuild it faster and nicer. That is where we are with foreign assistance."**
>
> **Ted Yoho,** Former Congressman from Florida, U.S. Congress

building platforms and systems that reduce fragmentation in development; **supporting innovation for scale and impact** across education, health, agriculture, and economic development; and **ensuring human dignity** as a core operating principle of development.

Building on the above principles, the Strategy Group took the conversation further in Aspen in July 2026 by moving the discussion from principles to practice and from broad ideas to real-world cases. The Group identified and deliberated examples of development in action where these principles were put into practice. It also examined the opportunities, barriers, and conditions necessary to support local uptake, take successful approaches to scale, and ensure their long-term sustainability.

The Group's agenda in Aspen was structured around six key areas of development policy: **development finance; public-private partnerships; the emerging sovereignty movement; global health; agriculture and food security; and the role of artificial intelligence and digitization in development.** Within each area, participants discussed and debated case studies that offered new ways of thinking about development. Critically, the case studies demonstrated the potential of the five core principles in how development must evolve.

Over three days of discussion, several cross-cutting themes emerged, revealing common challenges, opportunities, and questions that extended well beyond any single sector. The following sections seek to capture the key insights, proposals, and tensions that emerged from these discussions.



"Lawmakers and staff know we aren't just rehashing past debates over USAID. We are looking forward. We are asking: How do we build a better system that preserves the best of our humanitarian legacy impacting global health, severe malnutrition, and agricultural assistance while embracing commercial engagement, trade, and enterprise development?"

Charlie Dent, Executive Director & Vice President, Aspen Institute Congressional Program

The Promise of Development Finance

Mobilizing private capital for social and economic impact through development finance has been a critical element of development resource mobilization for several decades. However, there remains a major gap between available capital and unmet need. Risk and return ratios that expect profitable returns of 10-15% and above are common, misaligning potential high-impact projects and their respective returns. The majority of private capital currently flows to large-scale infrastructure and technology-based projects. This leaves high-potential health, education, economic development, and other projects without a channel to move from philanthropy to equity and other investments. Largely, the robust private capital market remains outside of traditional international development.

> **"We need to put the 'D' (Development) back into the DFC and related initiatives. We must figure out how to drive greater developmental impact that is financially sustainable by mobilizing private capital alongside concessional finance."**
>
> **Matthew Bernstein,** Partner, Mayer Brown

The urgency of unlocking private capital for development was a key theme across all discussions and every sector. With dramatic declines in ODA, private sector capital must be mobilized to meet investment needs in health, agriculture, human capital, and infrastructure. To address the persistent challenge of private capital being out of reach of major development efforts, the Strategy Group looked at case studies that provide potential new operating models. The case studies showed how de-risking, for example, can unlock capital; how faith-aligned financing builds trust; and how innovative lending can be extended through intermediary guarantees even in high-conflict areas to enable investments in micro, small and medium enterprises.



Yasmin Madan

Global Development Incubator: Convergence and Aceli Africa

Global Development Incubator (GDI) supports the development and scaling of transformational social impact ventures. By connecting leaders, ideas, and capital with the implementation capacity needed to bring them to scale, GDI helps advance solutions that drive systemic change (Global Development Incubator 2026).

CONVERGENCE

Convergence, a global blended finance platform led by the Global Development Incubator, is a first-of-its-kind global network for blended finance that generates blended finance data, intelligence, and deal flow to increase private sector investment in developing countries. The platform has three programs:

1. **A Design and Feasibility Fund:** The Design and Feasibility Fund subsidizes upfront costs for new entities including legal and structuring fees. This supports new microfinance funds and other development finance institutions (DFIs).
2. **A Syndication Platform:** The Syndication Platform allows public, DFI, and private investors to co-evaluate deals transparently. It addresses the problem investors face of having to spend significant time and money reaching out to potential partners whose mandates don't align, enabling the project to gather multiple investors.
3. **A Benchmarking and Blueprint Database:** The Platform also builds a historical record of deals, giving institutional investment committees comparable deals to reference.

To date, the Convergence Platform has attracted 165 members and mobilized more than $2 billion dollars in investments. However, challenges remain. Available data is limited and bespoke. Additionally, risk capital remains in short supply. Given that blended finance depends on catalytic, concessional capital, sourcing of this first-loss capital is challenging.

THE ACELI AFRICA SOLUTION (SME AGRICULTURAL LENDING)

Aceli Africa is a market incentive facility operating across five East African countries - Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Zambia. It is designed to de-risk commercial bank lending to agricultural small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) by addressing the high transaction costs and perceived risks. The model works through three interventions:

1. **Origination Subsidies:** These subsidies offset the high operational cost for commercial banks to branch out and underwrite agricultural loans in rural areas.

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2. **Portfolio guarantees:** A first-loss portfolio guarantee that wraps around bank loans, covering both real and perceived agricultural risk.
3. **Impact premiums:** Additional financial incentives for loans that are climate-smart, gender-inclusive, or focused on food security, supporting longer-term sustainability goals.

Aceli has demonstrated significant impact. To date, 55 participating lenders have signed up across five countries. 6,733 commercial loans, roughly three per day, have been executed. 64% of those loans – nearly two out of every three – went to first-time borrowers accessing formal credit, typically in the $25,000 to $250,000 range. In total, $514 million in commercial capital has been mobilized, reaching 2.6 million smallholder farmers.

Key Takeaways

Convergence and Aceli Africa illustrate the potential and challenges of mobilizing private capital for development. Both cases demonstrate how catalytic capital, risk-sharing mechanisms, and better data can unlock private sector investment. Convergence helps to address structural barriers to blended finance and provides critical data to build an ecosystem to support increased blended finance. Aceli reflects how targeted incentives can expand lending to higher-risk markets and foster more sustainable private-sector investment.

The Barrier of Unrealistic Risk and Return Expectations

The financial gap between unused capital and unmet needs will not close without DFIs and multilaterals taking more risk. For instance, the U.S. Development Finance Corporation (DFC) has maintained a conservative risk posture since its inception despite repeated public commitments to the contrary. Participants argued that this will not shift until compensation and incentive structures change within and outside DFIs, whereby creative risk taking and weighing impact rather than profit are rewarded.

> **"We can talk about taking risks until we are blue in the face. Until we talk about compensation for how people are rewarded for their creativity instead of the potential for failure, things will not change. We must change the motivation and incentives within development finance institutions."**
>
> **Robert Mosbacher Jr.,** Chairman, Mosbacher Energy Company

Faith-Aligned Financing: The Original Trust Capital

A large percentage of private capital resides in religious entities. Christian charitable giving is estimated at $1.4 trillion annually worldwide (Center for the Study of Global Christianity 2025). Over $146 billion of that is in the U.S. alone, representing 23% of all U.S. charitable giving (Giving USA 2026) and equivalent to 33 national ODA budgets combined. And, global Islamic finance assets stand at approximately $4.4 trillion to $6.5 trillion in global markets (ICD and LSEG 2026).

The principle underlying these large scale funds is trust. Individuals trust their religion to invest funds wisely, given their emotional connection and loyalty to their religion.

Many development interventions fail during local consumption and uptake. The concept of the "Permission Gap", introduced by a participant, describes the gap between what a community materially needs and what they feel morally, socially, or spiritually permitted to accept. Faith, trust, and faith-based financing can help bridge this gap by building trust and strengthening local legitimacy.

Faith-aligned financing represents a significant, underutilized opportunity to mobilize private capital for social impact. One example is Every Pregnancy, the world's first Zakat-approved Muslim collaborative. Every Pregnancy raised over $130 million from nearly 200,000 individual donors across three Ramadans, becoming the fastest growing faith-aligned capital mobilization in history.

Key Takeaways

Frameworks for faith-aligned finance are needed to mobilize capital at scale. Large-scale religious funds should be developed and directed toward clearly defined needs. Delivery pipelines should be audited to identify where trusted faith-based partners could help overcome community-level barriers and improve the effectiveness of funding. Institutional investors could pressure test existing project pipelines for compatibility with faith-based financing, potentially drawing new pools of non-speculative, interest-free capital.

"Trust is currently the single most expensive input in development finance."

Dr. Alaa Murabit, CEO, RAIS & Senior Advisor, Sustainable Growth, 500 Global



Discussions also touched on where and how to mobilize private capital for global development. One participant raised the potential of religious charitable giving as a critical, untapped resource, with buy-in and trust intrinsic to the relevant religious community.

Participants also discussed place-based financing efforts targeting areas of particular need. The Middle East Investment Initiative (MEII) mobilized significant capital for businesses in the West Bank, Gaza, and Tunisia. It utilizes DFC guarantees, bilateral government funding, and local staff to source viable investments with proven results.

"MSMEs are the undisputed backbone of developing economies. Helping a small business clean up its bookkeeping isn't as flashy as ending polio, but financial literacy and bookkeeping are the foundational building blocks of financial inclusion leading to economic growth."

Rami Khoury, Executive Vice President & Managing Director, Middle East Investment Initiative



The Middle East Investment Initiative: Facilitating Small Business Access to Finance

The Middle East Investment Initiative (MEII) supports sustainable economic growth and job creation across the Middle East and North Africa. Through strategic public–private partnerships, MEII supports micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). It does this by providing loan guarantees, financial support, and capacity-building initiatives that help businesses grow, create jobs, and contribute to long-term economic development in the region (Middle East Investment Initiative, 2026).

MSMEs are critical to growing economies. MEII acts as a specialized financial orchestrator between DFIs and local commercial banks. In this model, a DFI such as the U.S. DFC provides a master guarantee to MEII, which in turn issues targeted guarantees and technical assistance to local commercial banks. Local banks then extend loans ranging from $1,000 to $2 million to local MSMEs.

Rather than giving banks a blanket portfolio guarantee that they might apply to existing top-tier

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clients, MEII underwrites on a loan by loan basis, targeting risky but cash flow-viable businesses that banks would otherwise reject. In addition, when small businesses cannot produce the financial statements banks require for loan officers to evaluate them, MEII deploys trained university accounting interns to install off-the-shelf software to support the creation of business cash flow statements. This unlocks credit support from commercial banks to small businesses who would have otherwise been excluded.

Operating across the West Bank, Gaza, and Tunisia, MEII has issued over five thousand individual guarantees backing $660 million in loans, with individual loan sizes ranging from $1,000 to $2 million. The largest single guaranteed loan reached $16 million. Over 15 years of operation, MEII has maintained a cumulative loss rate below 2% and supported more than 40,000 formal private-sector jobs.

Key Takeaways

MEII demonstrates how targeted loan guarantees to an intermediary can reduce lenders' exposure to risk in individual loans, enabling commercial banks to finance MSMEs they might otherwise overlook. Combined with technical assistance, this model mobilizes commercial private capital, supports job creation, and promotes economic growth.

"The success of the Middle East Investment Initiative demonstrates the critical importance of involving experienced financial professionals on the ground in developing countries who understand local markets, business needs, and the barriers to accessing capital. These professionals serve as the essential bridge between international development finance institutions and local businesses, translating financial tools—including loan guarantees, direct lending, equity investments, and political risk insurance—into practical, tailored solutions that mobilize capital, support business growth, create jobs, and drive sustainable economic development."

James Pickup, Vice President & General Counsel, Aspen Institute;
President & CEO, Middle East Investment Initiative

New Models of Public–Private Sector Partnership

Public–Private Partnerships (PPPs) have been critical levers for large scale development impact for years. However, it is generally held that the role of the private sector in development remains largely untapped. A public-private partnership is a long-term contractual arrangement between a government agency and a private sector company to fund, build, or maintain critical services or infrastructure. At its best, PPPs bring private sector technology, management expertise, risk-sharing, and efficiencies to services. They enable large-scale, upfront capitalization that governments cannot fund alone. The PPP model is believed to be most effective for high-cost, high visibility projects that involve social and technical complexities, with high-level government buy-in and the potential to enhance local competencies over time. With declining ODA, PPPs are again emerging as critical elements in a new roadmap for development assistance.

> **"Corporate partnerships fail when constrained by short 2-to-3-year grant windows. Extractive industries and supply chains require decade-long commitments and their partnerships should be framed around the long-term to achieve enduring results."**
>
> **Susan Reichle,** Co-Founder, Aid Transition Alliance

Cases of effective PPPs were explored with an eye to identifying the key elements of success and lessons learned. Participants discussed the history of the Lobito Corridor in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Zambia and current plans for development. The Corridor is an ongoing infrastructure project with large-scale private sector investment and the potential for high social and economic impact.



> **"We have not yet fully harnessed the power of markets, business, and the private sector to advance development. In this moment of disruption, we must deeply interrogate what we've learned from the past, what's possible in the future if we are truly bold and innovative, and step into new territories with private sector partners."**
>
> **Marika McCauley Sine,** Former Chief Sustainability Office, Starbucks

The Lobito Corridor: A Rail Line Connecting Angola, DRC and Zambia

The Lobito Corridor is a transcontinental railway and logistics network connecting the Atlantic port of Lobito in Angola to the mineral-rich Copperbelt regions of the DRC and Zambia. The rail line speeds up the transport of critical raw minerals – primarily copper and cobalt – from Central Africa to western and global markets. When completed, the rail line has the potential to reduce the transport time of critical raw materials from copper producing regions to the sea from over one month by truck to one week by train.

The rail line at the heart of the Lobito Corridor dates to the early 1900s and was severely damaged during the Angolan Civil War. China restored basic functionality between 2004 and 2015 through a $2 billion "rail-for-oil" financing deal, and In 2022, Angola awarded a 30-year operating concession to the Lobito Atlantic Railway (LAR), a joint venture between three private companies. In 2023, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Zambia created a tri-national government agency to harmonize cross-border transit regulations.

International further bolstered the project. The Biden administration pledged $560 million in infrastructure loans, and in December 2025, newly sworn-in DFC CEO Ben Black finalized those loan agreements, describing the corridor as a cornerstone for U.S. strategic alliance-building in Africa. Investments from the European Union, the African Development Bank, and the Africa Finance Corporation have followed, in part as a strategic counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Key Takeaways

The Lobito Corridor demonstrates the potential of coordinated, cross-border investments to build integrated regional systems, strengthen trade, and advance economic development in the transport of strategic resources. Investors are seeking to benefit from critical mineral resources, while local governments are seeking to establish pathways for the development of critical minerals that provide economic opportunities in-country. A complex, multi-country transport corridor for the movement of high-value minerals requires sophisticated public–private collaboration with a goal of benefit to all stakeholders. Close attention to the operationalization of the corridor as it unfolds will yield lessons for effective approaches to resource-based, public–private partnerships going forward.

Recognizing the extractive nature of the Lobito Corridor's restoration focused on critical minerals, participants also discussed the idea of piggybacking agriculture support efforts onto the infrastructure investment of the Lobito Corridor. The goal would be to strengthen agriculture supply chains and food security for communities bordering the Corridor. This idea is a new model that builds on infrastructure investment to address human development needs, coordinating public sector leadership, private sector capital, and development expertise for economic and development impact.

"My core conviction is that the innovations and solutions already exist—those closest to the problem are best suited to solve it. What are the concrete mechanisms that connect these frontline innovators to public and private buyers? That's what we need to unlock."

Hala Hanna, Executive Director, MIT Solve

Coca - Cola and MIT Solve: Save the Orange Campaign

The MIT Solve and Coca-Cola Save the Orange campaign addresses the devastating impact of citrus greening, a bacterial disease threatening the world's orange supply.

Citrus greening has affected orange trees in 58 countries, threatening smallholder livelihoods and global food supplies. In response and utilizing AgriTech, BioTech, Data Science, life science, and public policy, a team of MIT professors and industry stakeholders, with Coca-Cola in the lead, stepped in to serve as anchor researchers and partners.

Coca-Cola had a direct commercial stake in the effort. As a major buyer of oranges for its Minute Maid and Simply Beverages brands, the company sources fruit from growers in Florida, Brazil, and Mexico. In Florida, citrus greening has contributed to declining yields, while the broader threat to global orange production poses risks to the company's supply chains. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) data, U.S. orange production fell from almost 5 million tons in 2016 to under 2 million tons in 2025 (USDA, Foreign Agricultural Service., n.d.).

Through the partnership, Coca-Cola helped connect research laboratories that were otherwise working with fragmented datasets. Researchers used generative AI to screen 20 years of biological data and coordinated testing of thousands of custom peptides in trees.

New treatments and application technologies are part of a multi-pronged coordinated effort to restore tree health, citrus production, and farmer profitability. In this innovative project, Coca-Cola and MIT Solve are using generative AI for data simulation to compress research timelines from years to months.

Key Takeaways

Corporate self-interest can be a powerful driver of sustained investment in development solutions. Unlike corporate social responsibility budgets which are often discretionary, investments that protect core supply chains address direct business risks, creating incentives for collaboration. The Coca-Cola–MIT Solve partnership model shows how aligning commercial interests with scientific innovation can generate scalable solutions to critical challenges.

Ultimately, participants emphasized that private-sector anchor engagement in development efforts is critical in this moment of declining ODA. New, market-based models of public, private, and philanthropic partnerships are necessary to explore and promote. Three structural principles emerged as essential to successful partnerships:

1. **Urgent Business Risk or Opportunity:** Businesses and governments must share a clear incentive to address a particular challenge in a specific geography.
2. **Mutual Benefit:** Each partner must contribute its comparative advantage and derive clear value from the collaboration.
3. **Third-Party Brokering:** Neutral intermediaries can bridge cultural differences, align terminology, and manage differing risk tolerances over time.

A Global Partnership for Education: The Child Learning and Education Facility (CLEF)

Côte d'Ivoire is the world's leading cocoa producer, yet child labor revelations in the industry led to trade barriers and legal liabilities in Western markets. At the same time, limited, and in some cases zero, availability of primary schools in cocoa sourcing communities further underscored the need for action.

In response, companies representing 80% of the global cocoa market came together through the World Cocoa Foundation to partner with the Ivorian government, the World Bank, and the Global Partnership for Education to establish the Child Learning and Education Facility (CLEF).

The initiative, chaired by Côte d'Ivoire's prime minister, mobilized $97 million to build 400 primary classrooms and reach one million children.

Key Takeaways

The CLEF model illustrates how aligning commercial incentives, sharing risks, ensuring mutual benefits, and coordinating complementary capabilities can enable private-sector resources to address systemic development challenges at scale.

"In any rural village, health, water, energy, and agriculture are intertwined in the quality of life. Each of these systems can be good business investments. We need easy, simple pathways to make it so."

Henrietta Fore, Chairman & CEO, Holsman International



Breaking the Charity Paradigm: The Emerging Sovereignty Movement

2025 marked a turning point in global humanitarian aid and development. Along with the dismantling of USAID and declining ODA, momentum grew behind country ownership and national sovereignty. While the sovereignty movement is not new, fresh momentum emerged for it with increased support and recognition that the industrial aid complex could no longer be relied upon. Welcoming the notion of investment not charity, trade and not aid, countries traditionally reliant on western assistance and multilateral institutions are now promoting a new and provocative plan to achieve development goals.

> **"Relying on an industrial aid complex has failed to transform economies or stop brain drain. The future of global cooperation must be built on mutual strengths, knowledge transfer, and strategic negotiation—not handouts."**
>
> **Dr. Edem Adzogenu,** Global Emissary, Accra Reset

Participants emphasized the critical role of national governments in shaping global development agendas. The discussion centered around two primary case studies. The first is the Accra Reset, an African–led global platform for institutional reform and investment-anchored transformation. The second is the Aga Khan Foundation's 50-plus years of service and investment in local communities.

The Accra Reset: An African-led Global Movement for Reform

On August 3rd, 2025, leaders gathered at the Sovereignty Summit in Accra, Ghana. They established that global health and development require a complete architectural reset based on three fundamental shifts:

- **Mindset Shift:** Acknowledging that perpetual global turbulence and unstable aid budgets require countries to create domestic systems capable of managing shocks and putting "skin in the game."
- **Focus Shift:** Countries must define their own development priorities as it cannot be assumed that international actors share priorities with the Global South.

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- **Financing Shift:** To stop the reliance on humanitarian handouts, nations must leverage domestic resources, eliminate capital flight and opaque procurement, and engage sovereign wealth funds as well as the local private sector.

The Accra Reset builds on a rejection of the dependency model of aid. Led by Ghanaian President John Mahama and other former African heads of state, the Accra Reset is **putting forward a proactive plan for development.** With a focus on enlightened self-interest, the Accra Reset is not an isolated African movement. Rather, it is a global initiative designed and led by a dedicated Global South political authority with partners spanning South Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, and others. The Reset is designed to invest in human capital, transform domestic production capacity, and create equal partnerships to rebuild global development cooperation around practical sovereignty and shared prosperity in the Global South and beyond.

To translate this vision into action, the Accra Rest established a Presidential Council comprising 12 Heads of State from Southeast Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The council provides the political authority to execute four major flagship workstreams:

- **High-Level Panel on Global Health Reform:** Co-chaired by leaders examining finance, governance, and local manufacturing.
- **High-Level Consultative Group on Commitments:** Tasked with tracking all multilateral financial pledges to identify where funds stall—whether due to regulatory barriers, infrastructure gaps, or bureaucratic processes—and ensure resources reach frontline communities.
- **Health Investment National Gateway Enablers (HINGE):** Reframing health from a fiscal burden or drain on government budgets into an economic multiplier that drives national GDP growth and job creation; training health ministries to write investment cases rather than grant proposals.
- **Sovereign Institute for Negotiators:** Building high-level capability for African and Global South negotiators to secure equitable terms during international trade, tech transfer, and bilateral compact discussions.

Key Takeaways

The Accra Reset model represents a powerful, broader shift from aid dependency toward Global-South led development. This includes strengthening country capacity to set their own priorities, mobilize capital, and shape the global development agenda around equal partnerships, shared investments, and mutual prosperity.

Participants highlighted that many factors including funding cuts, collapsing supply chains during the COVID19 pandemic, and demographic shifts have catalyzed the broader sovereignty movement embodied by the Accra Reset. On the African continent, where 70% of the population is under age 30, young people possess immense capability but lack local job markets. Charity and aid have played a historical role and led to tremendous progress, but are not a sustainable model for economic transformation. This transformation is possible. The Accra Reset secretariat cites the example of South Korea, noting that in the 1960s and following the Korean War, many felt that there was little hope for economic recovery in South Korea. Yet, through human capital investments and peer-to-peer partnerships, South Korea transformed from an aid recipient country to a major donor with a $1.8 trillion GDP.

> **"It behooves all of us to take a hard look at the industry we've worked in for decades—an industry that has faced serious challenges regarding who holds the wealth, who holds the power, and who sets the table."**
>
> **Peggy Clark,** Founder & Executive Director, Aspen Global Innovators Group; Vice President, Aspen Institute

Learnings from the Aga Khan Foundation

Long before sovereignty was a global theme, the Aga Khan Foundation was testing the same premise in the mountains of northern Pakistan: that durable change comes from building institutions, not distributing aid. The Foundation's mission states a commitment to sustainable progress, creating lasting change, bringing people together and shifting power back to communities.

The Aga Khan Rural Support Program

Traditional approaches to community development oriented around aid, short-term relationships, and lack of relationship between the donor entity and community members often result in interventions that do not address key challenges, build institutions, or catalyze country ownership.

To address this problem, the Aga Khan Foundation launched the Aga Khan Rural Support Program in 1982 in the remote mountains of Gilgit-Baltistan. In place of a short-term aid project, the program asked local communities to build an institution. This involved local village organizations setting their own development priorities, communities managing their own credit and savings collectives, and building local supply chains.

The Foundation provided technical advice and catalytic capital, but local communities held full governance and decision-making authority. Decades later, the institution remains fully operational, managed by Pakistanis for Pakistanis. It has evolved from managing basic agricultural credit in the 1980s to running AI incubators and tech hubs today.

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Key Takeaways

The Aga Khan Rural Support Program model demonstrates how catalytic investment and strong community ownership can build lasting local institutions that grow with the communities they serve.

The Aga Khan Foundation's Rural Support Program highlights three key imperatives for a new development architecture that is rooted in country-ownership. First, a shift from grant proposals to long-term co-investment vehicles. True institutional development requires decades, not three-year grant cycles with stand-alone audits. Second, long-term presence and local accountability is necessary. Organizations must remain embedded in communities over generations rather than executing temporary projects and exiting. Lastly, building trusted, non-partisan local institutions that survive political shifts, government turnover, and donor volatility is an essential element of progress.

The Role of Global North Institutions in a New Development Architecture

Discussions on the Accra Reset and the Aga Khan Rural Support Program prompted a larger conversation about global governance and the role of global north institutions in shaping the evolving development architecture. Ultimately, advancing a development architecture rooted in country ownership requires sustained investment in institutional capacity, education, and human capital. It also requires identifying political champions who share and sustain this vision.

"Co-designing with local communities is not a polite courtesy—it is a core strategy. Proximity ensures solutions are aligned, trusted, and sustainable."

Dr. John Nkengasong, Executive Director for Higher Education, Collaboratives & Strategic Initiatives, Mastercard Foundation



Rethinking the Future of Global Health

Over the 20th century advances in global health added 30 years to human life expectancy. This was driven largely by three core pillars: sanitation, vaccination, and antibiotics. Since 1990, the global child mortality rate dropped an estimated 60% (UNICEF 2026) and the global maternal mortality rate fell by 40% between 2000-2023 (UNICEF 2025). Global health is an essential investment and a fundamental driver of broader economic development.

Official Development Assistance (ODA) played a central role in these gains. However, declining aid budgets, mounting sovereign debt, and shifting geopolitical priorities underscore the need to rethink how global health is financed, governed, and delivered.

Four major structural shifts are shaping the future of global health:

- **Shifting Toward Country Ownership:** The global architecture must reflect country ownership.
- **Multi-Dimensional Financing:** Declining ODA requires mobilizing domestic resources, private capital, and innovative financing mechanisms.
- **Sovereign Debt as a Binding Constraint:** Unmanageable debt servicing in lower-middle income countries frequently exceeds combined national budgets for healthcare and education.
- **Refocusing Institutions:** Global bodies such as Gavi, Global Fund, WHO, and IDA require clarified mandates, less duplication, and simpler country access.

Against this backdrop, discussions centered on two case studies: the America First Global Health Strategy and its associated bilateral agreements, and the Gavi Leap Model. Together, these examples prompted a broader examination of how global and regional institutions are adapting to changing realities and strengthening country ownership.



"We have to hold two truths at once: 1) ODA has delivered extraordinary, undeniable results over the last 50 years in saving lives, eliminating disease, and helping nations stand on their own, and 2) we must aggressively adapt to a completely new world context"

Steve Davis, Senior Advisor, Gates Foundation

The Shifting Landscape of Global Health Financing and Delivery

Historically, the United States has been one of the leading providers of global health assistance, contributing more than $204 billion in foreign health assistance since 2001. These investments led to tremendous improvements in health outcomes over the past 25 years. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), for example, alone saved 26 million lives and prevented 7.8 million babies from being born with HIV. Between 2000 and 2023, HIV mortality declined over 70%, tuberculosis (TB) mortality by 51%, and malaria mortality by 63% in Sub-Saharan Africa. Over the same period, life expectancy across the region increased by 11 years, from 52 to 63 years (U.S. Department of State 2025).

The America First Global Health Strategy: Opportunities and Risks

The 2025 America First Global Health Strategy, advanced by the Trump administration, seeks to transform traditional U.S. global health aid through direct bilateral agreements with partner country governments. As a mechanism to further U.S. interests around the world, the new strategy sets out to advance U.S. priorities and move countries toward local ownership of their health systems.

Housed within the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Global Health Security and Diplomacy, the Strategy is implemented through memoranda of understanding (MOUs) negotiated with partner countries. These agreements establish five-year plans for U.S. engagement, with an emphasis on transitioning responsibility for health programs from U.S. assistance to domestic financing and country-led management. The MOUs mark one of the sharpest indicators of the U.S. shift from traditional aid to a more transactional, trade-based model of global health cooperation.

As of October 2026, 36 countries signed agreements with the United States. Across the 2026–2030 period, the agreements represent a combined **$26.7 billion in U.S. funding and country co-investment,** with domestic contributions accounting for 39% of the total. This represents an $8.1 billion reduction in U.S. government global health funding, equivalent to a 34% decrease in funding over the five-year period (KFF 2026).

Each MOU includes three structural requirements:

1. Health Workforce
2. Commodities and Supply Chain
3. Laboratories

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This includes commitments to fund 100% of frontline commodity purchases along with 100% of frontline health workers who directly deliver services to patients. The agreements also emphasize having laboratory capacity and data systems in place to monitor potential disease outbreaks and broader health outcomes. These systems are intended to become integrated into countries' long-term health information infrastructure, supporting surveillance and health system management beyond the duration of U.S. assistance (U.S. Department of State 2025).

Historically, PEPFAR built standalone, parallel systems for these three areas. Under the new MOUs, national governments are expected to assume authority in these areas over five years.

However, significant implementation and transparency challenges remain. One structural tension is that U.S. appropriations continue to be allocated on a single-year basis and earmarked for specific diseases, while the MOUs require country governments to integrate these into a unified national health budget. This mismatch between U.S. funding structures and country-led planning could complicate implementation. Additionally, concerns about transparency and one-sided data sharing are outstanding issues with America First Strategy. Because the MOUs have not been made public, it is difficult to assess and identify risk factors.

Despite the lack of official transparency around the MOUs, they present strategic innovation windows. Each MOU contains a Strategic Innovation Fund intended to support national data systems, supply chain efficiencies, and local capacity. These funds provide an entry point for applying global best practices, engaging local businesses, and integrating private-sector expertise and data capabilities into national health systems.

Key Takeaways

The central opportunity and risk with the America First Strategy is that the responsibility for global health delivery is shifting directly to national governments. This transition could strengthen national ownership, improve integration across disease programs, and align external assistance more closely with domestic priorities. At the same time, its success will depend on whether governments have the financing, institutional capacity, and operational flexibility to assume these responsibilities, and whether commitments embedded in the MOUs are acceptable to all parties.

Addressing Fragmentation in Global Health

Extreme fragmentation at both national and global levels was another key challenge raised by participants. A single recipient country, for instance, often hosts over 100 international organizations. This includes bilateral and multilateral agencies, more than 10 UN agencies, Gavi, and the Global Fund. Each entity often operates through its own grant cycles, banking arrangements, procurement guidelines, audits, performance indicators, steering committees, and more. At the global level, a proliferation of agencies has contributed to duplication, overlapping mandates, and competition. Participants called for a shift toward unified national platforms and integrated systems that move beyond vertical silos.

The Gavi Leap Model was highlighted as an example of the operational restructuring needed across the global health sector.

> **"A single recipient country often hosts over 100 international organizations—every single entity demands its own grant cycle, its own bank account, its own unique procurement guidelines and a host of other requirements. As Global Health Initiatives, we must become catalysts for the integration and alignment that Ministers of Health are asking for. Through the Gavi Leap, we are demonstrating that this is not only be possible but can be a major driver for improving healthcare delivery."**
>
> **Dr. Sania Nishtar,** CEO, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance

The Gavi Leap Model

The Gavi Leap model, launched in 2024, represents a major effort to reform the organization's operating model and strengthen country ownership. The reforms also seek to support African vaccine manufacturing and develop innovative public–private financing mechanisms such as the Scale-Up Facility. The Scale-Up Facility is a partnership between Gavi, Grand Challenges Canada, and 500 Global to leverage commercial capital and support the development and scaling of promising solutions.

The Gavi Leap is built on five key pillars (Nishtar 2025):

- **Country First:** Placing countries at the center of decision-making and giving them more agency over how GAVI support is deployed.
- **Tuning our Engine:** Implementing radical changes in the operations of the Gavi secretariat to improve decision-making, planning, delivery, and accountability.

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- **Powering Partnerships:** Strengthening collaboration across the global health ecosystem, including through a joint Global Fund–Gavi task force and cross-alliance working groups.
- **Embracing the Intelligent Age:** Exploring emerging technologies and digital solutions that advance Gavi's mission.
- **Harnessing the Future of Immunization**: Considering the challenges and opportunities that will impact and shape Gavi's work in the future.

The implementation of the GAVI Leap framework has led to structural reforms and changes in funding allocations for the 2026-2030 budget cycle. This includes allocating nearly 90% of Gavi's vaccine procurement budget directly to country vaccine budgets and reducing Gavi's secretariat operations by 33% (Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance 2025). While it is too early to assess in-country results, early indicators are promising, including Sierra-Leone's ability to secure a major 5-year commitment of $60.9 million tied to domestic health system indicators and co-financing (Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance 2026).

Key Takeaways

The Gavi Leap Model demonstrates how operational restructuring, streamlined processes, greater country ownership over priority setting and decision-making, stronger collaboration, and innovative public-private financing can strengthen health systems and advance long-term self-reliance.

Beyond individual institutional reforms, participants agreed that addressing fragmentation must be a priority for the global health sector. This includes strengthening national ownership, defining a limited role for global structures, and supporting regional entities. Africa CDC serves as a concrete example of this regional layer at work. At the national government level, participants called for governments to have stronger procurement, financial auditing, and impact measurement systems across sectors. Building these shared capabilities will reduce duplication and silos within governments and improve coordination among external partners.

Galvanizing Political Will for Global Health

Ultimately, major transformations require strong political champions. Bold leadership and global diplomacy between former president George W. Bush, former U.N. secretary-general Kofi Annan, and other world leaders enabled PEPFAR to succeed. Today, we see similar political commitment to advance global initiatives such as the Accra Reset. Building political will around these priorities is essential to sustaining reform and aligning diverse actors behind a common vision.

The future of global health depends on the ability to replace fragmented initiatives with coordinated, sustainable, country-led systems. This means reducing duplication across global institutions, strengthening national platforms and regional coordination mechanisms, and cultivating the political champions to sustain change. It also means harnessing advances in artificial intelligence to strengthen frontline health care, improve system efficiency, and enhance disease surveillance and biosecurity–all while managing the risks these technologies introduce. The objective is not simply to make existing institutions more efficient, but to build a global health architecture in which international, regional, and national actors reinforce one another in delivering sustainable health outcomes.

"Re-imgaining global health requires cultivating new political leaders and bold diplomacy."

Dr. John Nkengasong, Executive Director for Higher Education, Collaboratives & Strategic Initiatives, Mastercard Foundation

The objective is not simply to make existing institutions more efficient, but to build a global health architecture in which international, regional, and national actors reinforce one another in delivering sustainable health outcomes.



James Pickup, Henrietta H. Fore, and Peggy Clark

Systems-Level Innovation for Food Security and Agriculture

Alongside health, medicine, and education, agriculture is one of the most direct drivers of economic development. Agricultural growth is up to four times as effective as growth in other sectors at raising incomes, reducing extreme poverty, and alleviating hunger (International Development Association | World Bank Group). Yet, several converging crises are putting global food security at risk. These include water scarcity, price volatility and disease shocks, geopolitical conflict, mounting sovereign and farm-level debt, climate-driven changes in agricultural yields, and decades of declining investment in agricultural research and development (R&D).

Five Systemic Threats to Global Food Security

1. **Climate, Heat, and Water:** Water availability is among the most critical constraints on the future of food security. Agriculture accounts for approximately 72% of global freshwater withdrawals, much of it for irrigation. Rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and severe droughts threaten agricultural productivity and the stability of food supplies.
2. **Price Volatility & Disease Shocks:** The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how health emergencies and supply-chain disruptions can destabilize food markets and drive price increases overnight. Crop blights, zoonotic diseases, and medical shocks severely impact smallholder stability.
3. **Geopolitics and Input Costs:** The Ukraine-Russia war contributed to increased global energy, food, and synthetic fertilizer prices. This pushed millions of smallholders to the brink. Furthermore, political and ideological disputes over Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) continue to block stress-resistant and nutrient-enriched crops.
4. **Sovereign & Farm-Level Debt:** Crushing individual smallholder debt in developing countries, combined with mounting global sovereign debt limits, public spending capacity, and investment in agricultural productivity and resilience.
5. **Declining Academic and R&D Funding:** Agricultural research funding at U.S. land-grant universities has fallen by nearly half since the 1950s, threatening future innovation and advances in agriculture.

Addressing these systemic threats requires solutions that extend beyond individual projects. In the U.S., where agriculture, food, and related industries contributed approximately $1.537 trillion to the GDP in 2023, around 5.5% of the total (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2026), participants emphasized the need to reinvest in agricultural innovation and reframe the public case for doing so.

Public, private, and university-based agricultural research must receive sustained investment, with participants calling for a return to historical funding levels. International academic exchange should also be rebuilt, particularly to reverse declining interest in agricultural sciences at U.S. land-grant universities. Participants stressed that the declining expertise and loss of human capital poses a significant long-term risk to the sector's ability to innovate and adapt.

> **"The global development community alienates policymakers and the public by hiding human suffering behind sterile jargon. We must tell human stories to build the political will needed to fund agriculture."**
>
> **Dan Glickman,** Senior Fellow, Bipartisan Policy Center; Former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture

Securing sustained investment and political will also requires effective, human-centered messaging. Making the connection between agricultural research, farmers' livelihoods, food affordability, and national economic resilience can build the political will necessary to sustain funding. The challenge is not simply technological; it is also about rebuilding the public and political constituencies that support agricultural innovation.

Strengthening Africa's Food Systems

Shifting away from agricultural R&D, the discussion moved towards the structural challenges and opportunities facing African food systems. Agriculture accounts for roughly one-third of the African continent's GDP, provides a livelihood for 50% of the population, and feeds hundreds of millions of people across the continent and beyond every day.

Despite holding an estimated 60% of the world's uncultivated arable land (FAO 2026), Africa imports between $53 billion and $100 billion in food annually. Africa's food insecurity is not simply a consequence of insufficient production capacity; it is a reflection of weak cross-border logistics and regulatory barriers. It is cheaper for Nigeria to import rice from Asia than to source it from neighboring Burkina Faso.

> **"Africa's food security crisis is a movement problem before it is a production problem. Twenty years have taught us that higher yields are not enough. When food cannot move from where it is grown to where it is needed, the gains stay stranded on the farm."**
>
> **Alice Ruhweza,** President, AGRA



Addressing these barriers requires a shift from isolated agricultural interventions toward integrated regional food systems. AGRA, founded in 2006 with support from Rockefeller Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, is at the forefront of an African-led Green Revolution.

In the 20 years since it's founding, AGRA has invested in agricultural capacity, local markets, climate resilience, adaptation, and country-led policy reform. Its work has included training hundreds of African PhD-level plant breeders and supporting local seed companies; expanding smallholders' access to agricultural inputs through local agro-dealer networks; reducing the average distance farmers travel to obtain supplies from approximately 32 kilometers to fewer than eight; and securing a dedicated financing window with the Green Climate Fund for infrastructure such as cold storage, grain drying, and aggregation hubs.

AGRA's Sustainable Food Corridors Initiative

To address Africa's food security crisis, AGRA is partnering with TradeMark Africa to build 10 Sustainable Food Corridors across the continent. The initiative begins with a proposed $100 million, five-year pilot focused on three cross-border routes: Zambia–Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia–Angola, and Tanzania–Kenya. It aims to strengthen regional agricultural trade by leveraging existing infrastructure investments such as the Lobito Corridor.

The initiative rests on four key pillars:

- **Trade Facilitation:** Harmonizing cross-border standards, reducing border clearance times by 50%, and digitizing phytosanitary certificates to make agricultural trade faster.
- **Policy Frameworks:** Enforcing the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and the Kampala Mandate commitments.
- **Market Infrastructure:** Constructing aggregation hubs, cold-storage facilities, and warehouse recipient systems to reduce post-harvest losses.
- **Targeted Investments:** Scaling smallholder supply chains for rotational crops such as maize and soy. This can improve soil health through nitrogen and reduce synthetic fertilizer costs.

Key Takeaways

The Sustainable Food Corridors initiative makes concrete what the discussion on Lobito Corridor raised in principle: unlocking regional infrastructure can transform far more than mineral and energy trade. By applying cross-border coordination, harmonized standards, and aggregating infrastructure to agricultural trade specifically, the initiative seeks to connect surplus-producing regions such as Zambia to food-deficit markets such as DRC and Angola. By doing so, the Sustainable Food Corridors initiative turns existing trade infrastructure into a lever for regional food security and smallholder prosperity.

Moving to Systems-Level Impact

Participants proposed several ways to organize and accelerate progress. One recommendation was to establish a single, measurable continental target: ensuring that 70% of food consumed in Africa is produced and processed on the continent. A clear benchmark could help mobilize investors and catalyze complementary investments in infrastructure, processing, and regional trade more effectively than a collection of disconnected goals.

Another proposal focused on mobilizing Africa's young workforce. Participants described a model that recruits unemployed young adults, trains them in regenerative agriculture, and deploys them as coaches to support smallholder farmers. By organizing agricultural collectives and integrating technologies such as solar-powered machinery, the model seeks to make farming more productive, technologically enabled, and commercially viable while creating employment opportunities for young people.

Taken together, the discussion points to a shifting understanding of what agricultural investment at scale can achieve. Social enterprises once regarded as small, experimental efforts now operate at systemic reach. One Acre Fund, for instance, provides smallholder farmers with inputs, financing, and training across several African countries. Hello Tractor, often described as the "Uber for tractors," uses a technology to connect farmers with tractor owners and mechanization services.

Agriculture and food security is a systems challenge. Increasing production alone will not be sufficient without the infrastructure, markets, institutions, financing, and strong political will. These, combined with bold leadership, are needed to ensure that innovations reach farmers and agricultural products move efficiently from fields to consumers.



Steve Davis and Alexia Latortue

Digitization and Artificial Intelligence in Development

A discussion of the future of global development would be incomplete without examining the growing role of digitization and artificial intelligence (AI) in shaping how development is financed and delivered. Beyond their potential to improve service delivery and expand access to resources, these technologies are reshaping geopolitical competition, raising questions about digital sovereignty and data ownership, and creating new opportunities for countries across the Global South.

Against the backdrop of intensifying U.S.–China competition in AI, participants explored how countries can harness these technologies to strengthen domestic capacity, improve development outcomes across health and agriculture, increase financial inclusion, and expand digital public infrastructure through strategic economic partnerships.

Harnessing AI to Strengthen Development Systems

The world possesses many of the medical and agricultural technologies needed to improve health and food security, yet millions of people continue to suffer due to limited access. This is reflective of a persistent challenge in global development: the unequal distribution of resources, knowledge, expertise, and services. **With a projected global shortage of 11 million healthcare workers by 2030** (World Health Organization, n.d.)**, traditional delivery models alone are incapable of closing the existing gap.** AI and digital platforms offer solutions that could help address these disparities by connecting underserved communities to expertise and resources that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

"We do not have a crisis in innovation. We have a crisis in distribution."

Dr. Mohamed Aburawi, Founder & CEO, Atarona Ventures



Speetar: Reversing the Brain Drain Through Digital Platforms

Low-income countries lose roughly $16 billion annually training doctors who subsequently emigrate for better opportunities, thus contributing to domestic workforce shortages.

Speetar, a telemedicine platform launched in Libya in 2020, emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic to address the urgent need for remote healthcare. The platform enables diaspora physicians from Libya, Syria, Somalia, the West Bank, and Gaza to to provide remote consultations and mentor frontline healthcare workers in their home countries.

Speetar onboarded more than 1,500 specialized physicians in its first six months of operation.

Since its launch, Speetar has expanded its offerings to include mental health, chronic disease management, and maternal health, working with partners such as GIZ, the World Bank, and national ministries of health.

Key Takeaways

Speetar illustrates how digital technologies and platforms can mobilize diaspora expertise to strengthen local healthcare systems and connect local systems to wider networks of knowledge and support.

Participants also highlighted the transformative potential of AI and data in the agriculture sector. Across many African countries, limited agricultural extension capacity means that farmers often lack timely access to information on crop management, soil conditions, and other factors affecting productivity. AI-enabled tools are helping to close this gap by delivering relevant information in local languages and adapting information to farmers' specific circumstances. In the case of the U.S., agricultural data sensors show great potential to improve understanding of crop yields, soil quality, and land conditions. Wide-scale application of this data technology could be transformational in selecting farm lands, improving yields, increasing productivity, and creating new opportunities for agricultural trade.

Additionally, participants discussed how AI can unlock the value of localized data for increased financial inclusion. The Middle East Investment Initiative (MEII), for example, developed Tamweeli, a digital matchmaking platform that connects small-business loan applicants with participating banks. To address the difficulties small businesses face in documenting their financial histories, MEII partnered with AI developers to integrate voice recognition, optical character recognition (OCR), and unstructured data processing into a smartphone app. Small-business owners can enter basic sales information, while the app

automates back-end accounting to generate bankable credit histories. Micro-entrepreneurs who lack desktop computers or formal balance sheets can submit raw business receipts, which AI converts into structured credit reports for commercial banks.

MEII reduced the information gap between banks and borrowers by unlocking the localized data they've worked with small businesses to create. Participants noted that the platform could provide an estimated 70-80% of the information banks would ordinarily require, accelerating due diligence and expanding access to formal financing.

Shifting the U.S. Posture to Proactive Digitization of Public Services

Historically, U.S. development finance institutions including DFC and previously the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), operated as demand driven, reactive mechanisms. They financed projects in response to identified demand and investment opportunities. Participants argued that this approach would be complemented by more proactive engagement with country governments and identifying and developing digital initiatives with partner countries.

> **"To lead in global development and bi-partisan economic strategy, the U.S. government must proactively package state-of-the-art Public Service Digitization Initiatives for partner nations."**
>
> **Robert Mosbacher Jr.,** Chairman, Mosbacher Energy Company

One proposed approach involved financing public service digitization initiatives through a combination of grants and loans as well as partnership with U.S. technology companies. Priority areas would include helping host governments digitize tax filings, tax administration, and land registries. By removing manual human discretion from government permitting systems and revenue collection, these digital systems could reduce bribery, improve rule-of-law predictability, and boost foreign direct investment.

Examples such as Estonia, Ukraine (Digital Ukraine), and India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) system demonstrate how comprehensive public digital platforms dramatically improve government capacity and national resilience. Adapting such approaches to partner-country contexts could help governments modernize public administration while creating a foundation for broader economic activity.

To prevent adding to sovereign debt burdens, participants offered transactions to be structured as Public-Private Partnerships or concessions where future digitized tax revenues service the project debt.

Geopolitics and Data Sovereignty

The geopolitical competition between the U.S and China underpinned the group's discussion on AI, data, and sovereignty. Participants offered a wide range of perspectives about China's role in artificial intelligence, its implications for U.S. engagement, and how governments should navigate the politics of the global AI race.

There was strong acknowledgement that China is positioning itself as the accessible digital partner for countries across the Global South – an alternative to the U.S. – while U.S. AI models remain costly and energy-intensive. Rather than framing AI as a zero-sum competition with China, participants recommended a broader approach that considers opportunities for cooperation with other key partners such as India.

Significant tensions surrounding digital sovereignty were also a point of discussion among the participants. Governments want data localized within their borders rather than exported to foreign cloud servers. However, U.S. tech companies face stringent export-control licenses on advanced AI chips and end-user verification. These competing priorities complicate efforts to expand digital cooperation across borders.

Digital public infrastructure was identified as an important part of the solution including digital identity and digital payment systems along with secure data exchanges.

Data, in the age of digital technology and AI, has become a source of strategic power and influence. Therefore, it is important that countries across the Global South are active participants rather than passive consumers of technology developed elsewhere. When countries share their local health, agricultural, or financial data without adequate governance arrangements to foreign AI giants, they risk losing control over how those assets are accessed, used, manipulated, and commercialized.

Just as medical research historically excluded women from clinical trials, AI models trained without Global South datasets risk creating "data-dark" or "invisible" nations. Participants underscored the importance of treating data as a strategic public asset with governance compacts and frameworks in the same likes as roads, ports, and power grids – a foundational resource for long-term development and growth. Data as a locally owned public infrastructure good should be governed safely to drive innovation and generate economic value.



"Data might be one of the last remaining frontiers of power."

Dr. Mohamed Aburawi, Founder & CEO, Atarona Ventures

Conclusion: Charting New Pathways for Global Development

The July 2026 Aspen convening underscored a recognition across sectors that global development has reached a defining inflection point. The contraction of traditional aid, shifting geopolitical dynamics, and escalating debt constraints exposed the limitations of fragmented, project-based interventions. From global health and agriculture to development finance, public-private partnerships, and artificial intelligence, the discussions pointed toward a common imperative: to move toward locally-led systems that mobilize financial and human capital, build trust, and deliver lasting impact.

Rethinking development begins with rethinking how capital is mobilized and deployed. **Public, philanthropic, and private funding should catalyze sustainable investment in systems and platforms** by absorbing early risks, demonstrating viable models, and encouraging private capital to enter underserved markets. Initiatives such as Aceli Africa and MEII illustrate how targeted support can expand access to markets and services. Yet, capital alone is insufficient. Financial institutions must also have the incentives and institutional flexibility to take risks. Increasing risk appetite and unlocking investment is as much a question of compensation and incentives as it is of the availability of capital.

> **"At our best we can be an incredible species, one that is capable when the odds are against us, of incredible strength, and courage, and magnanimity, and hope. These are times that summon all those qualities."**
>
> **Nick D. Kristof,** Journalist & Political Commentator, New York Times

Sustained change and long-term impact also require trust, which is often as essential to development as financial capital or technical expertise. Whether strengthening national health platforms, working through faith networks and village organizations, or extending credit to first-time borrowers, progress depends on trusted relationships that connect solutions to the people they are intended to serve. In a reformed development architecture, investments in trusted delivery systems are among the highest-leverage opportunities for achieving scale and lasting impact.

Sovereignty and country ownership must be a defining principle driving development interventions. From the Gavi Leap model and the Accra Reset to the Aga Khan Rural Support Program, the case studies discussed by

the Strategy Group demonstrate the importance of locally-led institutions and sustained national commitment critical to long-term impact.

Technology presents another frontier of opportunity, alongside new questions of power and control. Locally generated health, agricultural, and financial data could become a significant source of economic value in an AI-enabled development ecosystem. Capturing that value will require countries to retain meaningful control over their data and invest in responsible, locally relevant digital infrastructure. Development Data Compacts could establish the principles and safeguards needed to treat data as a strategic public asset while enabling innovation and investment.

Across these themes, the Group emphasized the need to move beyond standalone projects toward **durable national systems, stronger institutions, and regional economic integration.** The Lobito Corridor and AGRA's Sustainable Food Corridors Initiative illustrate how aligning infrastructure, cross-border trade policy, and private-sector incentives can connect markets and expand opportunities across agriculture, energy, and commerce. Realizing this potential requires sustained coordination among governments, development institutions, and private-sector partners. Supply chains and partnerships must become more responsive and act with speed to ensure that resources and solutions are delivered when and where there is need.

Ultimately, turning these ideas into action depends on **leadership, coalitions, and a compelling narrative for development.** Reframing development as a pre-condition to security, shared prosperity, and mutual economic growth will be essential to building the political will and partnerships needed to advance reform. Political champions, global institutions, entrepreneurs, philanthropies, and private-sector leaders must work together to sustain commitments, overcome institutional barriers, and translate promising approaches into practice.

The Strategy Group's discussions point not to the need for another institution, but to a more effective use of existing resources and relationships combined with a **fundamental shift in how authority, financing, risk, and trust are distributed across the development system.** The challenge is to translate these shared principles into specific, sustained action.

Recognizing both the breadth of the challenges and its own role within this broader ecosystem, the Aspen Global Prosperity, Security, and Development Strategy Group identified several workstreams through which

> **"If we do not frame a clear, understandable vision for global development with the American public and political leaders, we will lose a historic opportunity."**
>
> **Raj Kumar,** President & Editor-in Chief, Devex



it can make a distinct contribution. These include:

- Advancing development finance reform.
- Supporting the emerging sovereignty movement and the Accra Reset.
- Exploring innovative private and public sector approaches to development across health, education, agriculture, and economic development.

> **"We need to start thinking about education and healthcare and water and food security as upstream of national security. We do ourselves such a huge disservice by talking about them as consequences. They are actually what create national security."**
>
> **Dr. Alaa Murabit,** CEO, RAIS & Senior Advisor, Sustainable Growth, 500 Global

The Strategy Group aims to move from dialogue to implementation by forming cooperative agreements with leading initiatives in these areas, along with convening and mobilizing key global leaders.

As one participant put it, ideas can change the world, but they need the space and support to emerge. The challenge for the development community is to create those conditions and ensure that the people and institutions closest to the challenges have the opportunity to shape what comes next.



Hala Hanna and Alice Ruhweza

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The Aspen Global Prosperity, Security, and Development Strategy Group's Purpose:

Mobilizing global leaders from the multilateral, corporate, nonprofit, philanthropy, and policy sectors to re-imagine international development and humanitarian assistance and create near-term action plans to propel these ideas forward.

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