



**Unlocking sustained
outcomes with
a "people-first"
approach to
development**



Foreword



The world has undergone rapid and dramatic shifts over the few months we have been working on this case for change, in ways that only amplify its significance.

Local leadership capacity is always critical, and it is even more vital in times of crisis. Community resilience in public health, economic, and education outcomes will rely on the activation, capability, ingenuity and leadership of all people at the familial, communal, regional, and national levels. Local leadership must craft and drive responses to changing demands and innovate in real time to meet urgent but varied local needs.

Moreover, the movement to tackle the systemic oppression of marginalized groups — whether along lines of race, gender, caste, or creed — has made more visible the ways in which current systems and approaches can silence the voices and stifle the leadership of individuals from marginalized communities.

Current events present us with an opportunity to immediately apply the mindset and principles that this document seeks to promote. The development community will undoubtedly face challenges in responding to the devastating, wide-ranging effects of the pandemic. Through investing in the capacity of people in impacted communities and countries, we can enable these communities to emerge stronger, more resilient, and more prepared to create a better future. Our efforts toward these ends will ensure that we both respond to the crisis at hand and empower communities to address the unknown challenges that lie ahead.

Who we are

We are a community of practitioners, academics, and public and private sector actors who have seen first-hand the impact of investing in people and leaders. We are each committed to pursuing the principles outlined in this report through our development work. As a community, we are working to promote greater awareness and adoption of an approach to development that puts investing in the agency and leadership capacity of people in developing contexts first.



Executive summary

Sustainable development requires a “people-first” approach that cultivates the agency and leadership capacity of all people in impacted communities.

Global development has had mixed results in fostering sustainable, systemic change. While the global development community recognizes that local ownership is critical to achieving sustained outcomes and greater impact, efforts to foster local ownership have so far had mixed results. We think this is in part because these efforts to foster local ownership have been inconsistent.

There is a growing body of evidence pointing to the importance of leadership capacity to development outcomes, and we have seen firsthand that intensive, continuous efforts to foster that capacity can enable greater local ownership and sustained results.

Yet, we are still far from the point where development actors approach problems by first considering the investments we need to make in local people to unleash the volition, capability, and leadership that exists within communities. Instead, our development paradigm prioritizes defining the problems, identifying practices, interventions and infrastructure that work in one context and replicating them in others on behalf of local people, rather than supporting local people to strengthen their own capabilities to identify, prioritize, and solve their own problems as a more promising path to sustainability.

We believe we need to evolve this paradigm towards a “people-first” approach that prioritizes cultivating individual agency and local leadership in developing contexts. Bringing this approach to a global scale will ultimately require the development community to embed this belief in its core strategies and initiatives by prioritizing approaches that foster individual agency, build pipelines of new leaders, and invest in the development of people who hold positions of leadership today.

This vision represents a meaningful shift in how we address development challenges. All stakeholders have a critical role to play in making it a reality if we are to have any real chance to activate the changes humanity so urgently requires.

On leadership

We believe leadership is an action and something that anyone can exert. The people who have contributed to this document envision a world where everyone – from our young people to their families to people at every level of the system – exerts leadership towards a better future. At the same time, we recognize positional leadership: those who by nature of their positions have significant influence over the welfare of others. In this document, our commitment to developing leadership references developing the ability of everyone to exert leadership including, but not limited to those in positions of influence.



An untapped opportunity: The case for cultivating human agency & leadership

There is ample evidence demonstrating that leadership influences national development outcomes. A 2005 study laid the academic groundwork by demonstrating that individual political leaders can have a significant impact on the economic growth of nations.¹ This economic growth, further research finds, is often correlated to the national leader's level of training.²

There is also nascent evidence suggesting that strong local leadership capacity could make locally-owned development more effective. Two studies — one in China and one in Sierra Leone — found that placing higher-skilled villagers in charge of development programs led to better results.^{3,4} Additionally, one explanation offered by researchers for the suboptimal outcomes of some locally-owned development programs is that the leadership training offered through these programs was not intensive or wide-reaching enough (only .7% of the affected population in one community-driven development program received any leadership training and the per capita investment was marginal).⁵

A research working paper published by the Harvard Kennedy School on "Development as Leadership-Led Change" explores what it takes to get change done and, particularly, what role leadership plays in effecting change. The paper concludes that "development is all about change, change requires space, space can be created through leadership and the kind of leadership that leads change has peculiar characteristics".⁶

These findings indicate that developing local leadership capacity deserves a position of greater prominence on the development agenda, although further research will help to continue refining the best ways to cultivate that capacity.

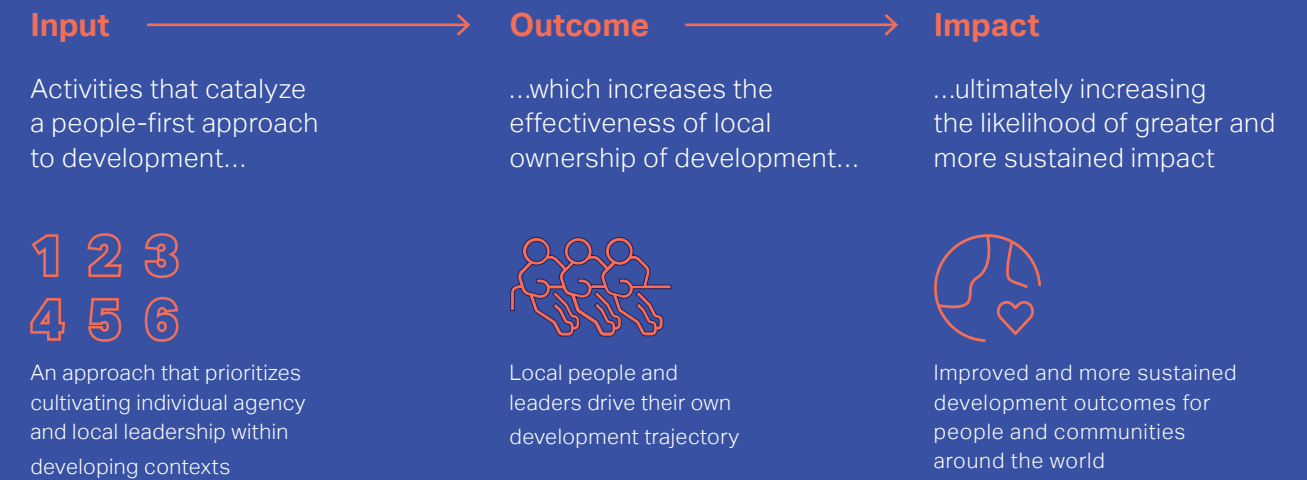
The impact we have witnessed first-hand from initiatives focused on this work gives us confidence that developing leadership capacity is both possible and critical to increasing the likelihood of improved outcomes and systems change.

Although all major aid agencies have included "capacity building" as a key program element since the mid-1990s, in practice, capacity building efforts to date have primarily focused on targeted technical skills for the purpose of implementing specific projects and interventions, rather than a more comprehensive toolkit that includes the soft skills needed for leading long-term change. These include decision-making skills, relationship management, self-awareness, adaptability, and a growth mindset among others.⁷ A keyword analysis of Official Development Assistance (ODA) grant descriptions found that only \$15.2M went to projects related to local "leadership development" across sectors in 2018—approximately .01% of total development assistance and a fraction of what was spent on reproductive health, for example, or roadway construction.⁸ **There is a clear gap and an untapped opportunity resulting from the lack of a concerted effort to invest in the fundamental leadership capabilities that are critical to driving sustained outcomes.**

“ Not paying enough attention to identifying and supporting local leadership in Africa is a huge missed opportunity. We need a paradigm shift to focus on enabling people in developing contexts to help themselves.”
— **Dzingai Mutumbuka, Former Minister of Education of Zimbabwe**

Theory of change

Cultivating agency and local leadership, via a people-first approach, is critical to local ownership of development and, in turn, improved outcomes and lasting systems change. This theory of change is laid out below.



Principles of a "people-first" approach

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1 When development occurs, it occurs because of local leadership
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2 The volition, agency, and leadership skillsets of local individuals can be developed and nurtured
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3 Everyone can exert leadership — not just the elite, or those with existing power
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4 Leadership is fundamentally a collaborative rather than individual capability
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5 Development must be rooted in and adapt to local people's context and culture
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6 The impact of investments in people may take years to fully take shape

Bringing the “people-first” approach to a global scale

Bringing this approach to a global scale will ultimately require the whole development community to embed this philosophy into its core strategies by embracing a “people-first” mindset, committing sustained resources, and nurturing approaches that foster individual agency and local leadership.

To illustrate the mindset shift that is necessary, we have laid out three illustrative examples contrasting a conventional approach to address a development challenge and a “people-first” approach to address the same challenge. In each example, the role of the development actor shifts towards bringing local communities to the decision-making process and unleashing their leadership in a flexible, adaptive way rather than focusing first on delivering specific interventions and technical skills.

	From conventional development...	...to people-first development
	Development predominantly prioritizes supporting time-bound projects and interventions to deliver measurable outcomes at scale	Development predominantly prioritizes supporting local people and leaders' capacity to own solutions, continuously improve, and deliver sustained outcomes
Primary goal:	Quick, measurable outcomes	Sustained, measurable outcomes
Timing:	Short-term (<3 year) projects	Long-term (5+ year) programs
Focus:	Identifying and scaling solutions	Cultivating individual agency and leadership, so local people lead their own development progress
Training:	Technical skills to implement	Problem-solving and leadership skills to increase capacity to drive progress for themselves and the wider community
Example 1: Addressing poor agricultural yields and food security	Development actors determine a modern irrigation system is needed and develop a plan after assessing the existing system based on Western standards. Capacity building occurs on the back-end to prepare local actors to maintain the irrigation system	Development actors establish a program that exposes farmers to new ideas and helps increase their capacity to identify, analyze and solve problems themselves. The farmers determine that an updated irrigation system would be helpful for their community and development actors provide technical/financial support as needed
Example 2: Improving education outcomes	After diagnosing the needs of the education system, development actors build a new network of schools. They then engage the local community to determine who will manage and operate the schools going forward	Development actors help the Ministry of Education establish a teachers college to develop a pipeline of teachers and school leaders. The Ministry of Education consults with the college to set national education priorities, which may include identifying promising school leaders and helping them build new schools with international support
Example 3: Helping families improve their socio-economic wellbeing	Development actors work with national governments to develop school feeding and public works programs designed to lift families out of poverty in a particular region	Development actors work with national governments and local NGOs to provide resources to help families set and meet their own unique poverty alleviation goals. NGOs and community leaders convene as groups to share what has been working for families in their regions

Achieving “people-first” development at scale requires us not only to adopt a people-first mindset, but to grow and improve initiatives that foster agency and leadership. Some initiatives focus on the most fundamental element of leadership—having a fortified sense of agency and the ability to solve problems and create change in one’s own life, while others work to build pipelines of future leaders for a particular sector or region. Others focus on developing higher-order leadership competencies like negotiation, adaptive management, and decision—making skills among established leaders, and there are also approaches focused on fostering collaboration across leaders and sectors, recognizing that leaders are most effective when they work together.

To help illustrate the kinds of initiatives that are important, we’ve highlighted some of the exemplars within each of these categories.

Initiatives to develop human agency

Poverty Stoplight is one organization that recognizes that stimulating individual volition and encouraging agency is the critical first step to developmental progress. Created in 2010 by Fundación Paraguaya, Poverty Stoplight is an app-based tool that enables families to become the agents of change in their own poverty elimination strategy. The tool helps households track their standing across 50 indicators, enabling people to identify existing challenges and formulate personalized strategies to lead themselves out of poverty. More than 80,000 Poverty Stoplight surveys have been administered in over 23 countries.⁹ In Paraguay alone the tool has helped 30,000 families overcome poverty.

Similarly, **The Clothing Bank** promotes individual agency and self-belief by training South African women to become business owners. The two-year program provides 1,000 hours of experiential training and support to prepare unemployed mothers to open clothing businesses using donated merchandise from major retailers. The program nurtures agency by generating opportunities for women to solve challenges for themselves and naturally recognize their own capabilities in the process. By operating a sustainable business, women not only experience improved financial stability, but also a greater sense of ownership of their life outcomes. Last year, The Clothing Bank supported 832 women who earned nearly USD \$2 million in profits, collectively.¹⁰

Leadership pipelines

Other organizations focus on developing pipelines of leaders to drive change at the community, sector, or national level. **Teach For All**, for example, has adopted this approach in how it addresses the growing global education crisis — by developing collective leadership in classrooms and communities. Teach For All’s network partners (independent, locally led organizations) in more than 50 countries recruit promising leaders who work in classrooms for two years while participating in ongoing training and leadership development. Rather than addressing education quality through specific interventions or products, the Teach For All approach nurtures the ingenuity of leaders to work together to solve the problems that are most relevant to their communities, informed by what they learn through being part of a global network. The network’s impact extends well beyond the two-year service period as many of the teachers go onto be long-term educators, policy makers, advocates, and entrepreneurs in their countries. In Peru, for example, nearly a quarter of the program’s alumni are employed by the Ministry of Education. Worldwide, Teach For All alumni have started over 600 social enterprises, demonstrating the multiplicative effect of fostering leadership within communities.¹¹



Global Health Corps identifies high-potential young people, trains them to be effective leaders, and embeds them in impactful health organizations in Africa and the United States. In doing so, the organization has built a community of more than 1,000 change-makers who are nearly twice as likely to remain in the field of global health compared with comparable young professionals.¹²

African Leadership Academy (ALA) is another example of an organization building a pipeline of leaders to accelerate Africa's growth trajectory. For more than ten years, ALA has been working to create the next generation of African leaders through a specialized curriculum designed to provide hands-on leadership development and access to lifelong networks. More than 90% of alumni are actively engaged in work or projects (including 177 new ventures) to help move Africa forward.¹³

Emerging Public Leaders (EPL) is a public service leadership organization that is providing visionary African youth with the tools and experiences necessary to become effective and responsive public leaders. Since inception in 2009 as the President's Young Professionals Program (PYPP), EPL has provided a merit-based pathway for nearly 200 skilled youth to enter 40+ government institutions in Liberia and Ghana. EPL's goal is to nurture and support long-term meaningful careers in public service, with more than 85% continuing to serve in leadership positions in government post-fellowship.¹⁴

Development for established leaders

Some organizations, like **Building State Capability (BSC)** at Harvard's Center for International Development, are focusing their efforts on fostering the leadership capacity of governments. BSC works with government teams over an extended period of time to develop adaptive management skills. In Honduras, for example, the BSC team coached members of a government team for six months to help address key delivery and implementation gaps. The process of breaking down and addressing the problems that traditionally hamper policy success helped prepare the public officials to better deliver social services to their citizens and society.¹⁵

AMP Health similarly focuses on strengthening the leadership and management capabilities of public health officials. By working hand-in-hand with Ministries of Health, AMP Health tailors its approach to develop leadership and management capacities that are the most critical to the Ministries' strategic priorities. In Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Zambia, 98% of Ministry of Health officials who collaborated with AMP Health reported improvement in their individual leadership and management skills and 95% said the training has improved their ability to make significant contributions to public health in their countries.¹⁶

Collective leadership initiatives

Meanwhile, organizations like **Synergos** build inclusive partnerships including not only government but a diverse array of stakeholders including business and civil society. Working in more than 10 countries, the organization fosters "bridging leadership" to unleash the collective local capacity needed to enable local and national actors to more effectively tackle development challenges. Collaborations facilitated by Synergos have supported the creation of 132 social initiatives and 307 new ventures in the Arab World alone.¹⁷

The World Bank's **Collaborative Leadership for Development (CL4D)** initiative works to strengthen collaborative leadership to successfully implement development projects. In Burundi, for example, The World Bank provided coaching over several years to help public sector leaders develop adaptive management, team-building, and results-oriented problem-solving skills. The program helped prepare leaders and teams to systematically identify challenges and develop innovative solutions for overcoming institutional limitations.¹⁸

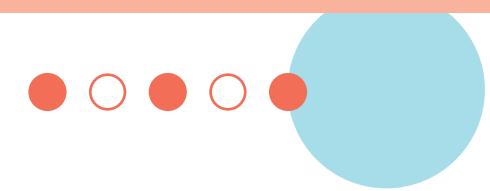
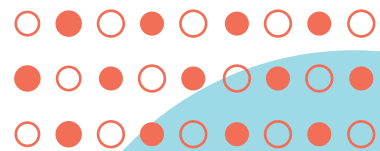
The common thread across these exemplars is a focus on coaching and developing people who are closest to the developing context, whether they operate at a national, regional, or community level. This focus is underpinned by a belief that people with deep understanding of local culture and context are best positioned to create lasting systems change in their communities and countries.

Whether the particular approach centers on agency, pipelines, established leadership, or collaboration, the impact generated by these organizations and the many others that are working in this space demonstrate that cultivating agency and leadership is already driving real-world results.



“ We need to move away from the narrative that poor people are in need of saving. By recognizing and validating the solutions they develop, we can unlock the volition and leadership that already resides in these communities.”

— **Mauricio Miller, Community Independence Initiative**



Measuring success when taking a “people-first” approach

Measuring the impact of efforts to develop agency and leadership is both critical and challenging. The efficiency with which we can ultimately achieve sustained outcomes at scale relies on our ability to assess the effectiveness of approaches in a range of contexts, so we can understand what works and where. While the impact of efforts focused on developing broad human agency and leadership may take shape over many years, with the correct mentorship, self-leadership activation programs and support, the impact on individuals and gains within the system are often apparent

While there is promising evidence that leadership capacity is important for development outcomes, evidence that agency and leadership can be developed through targeted programs is more limited. It is our hope that the arguments and case studies highlighted in this document inspire greater interest in building evidence generation into agency and leadership development initiatives, as well as greater interest in research to further evaluate the link between efforts to cultivate leadership capacity and development outcomes and to systematically identify proven methodologies that work in a variety of contexts. Studying leadership development is undoubtedly a complex and long-term endeavor, but we believe that the payoff will be well worth the effort as this research is critical to accelerating the impact of this work.

within months. However, it is often challenging to unpack the causes of either long-term or short-term progress.

In response to these challenges, there are organizations that cultivate agency and leadership that have been finding new ways to assess their impact. Teach For All and African Leadership Academy (ALA), for example, evaluate the impact of their leadership development programs based on the shifts in beliefs and priorities among their participants and students, as well as on contributions their alumni make to target sectors in their communities. Drawing from these practices and others, we’ve offered some thoughts below on how to think about measurement when taking a “people-first” approach:

- In addition to assessing the change in capability of individuals leaders, evaluate the contribution of leaders (within the group) to the issues, sectors, and communities the program targets¹⁹
- Consider the purpose for which individual leaders are being developed when setting both immediate and long-term objectives
- Establish objectives for the desired impact and establish a system for capturing data over a long time horizon, since investments in people often take years to demonstrate sustained impact
- Partner with researchers to conduct qualitative studies assessing whether and how these approaches contributed to systemic change and sustained results

How development stakeholders can advance this shift

This vision represents a meaningful shift in how we address development challenges, and all stakeholders have a critical role to play in making it a reality. Below are some of the actions we are striving to take to achieve these goals and promote locally-led leadership.



As Practitioners, we are:

- Creating and using tools to evaluate our own use of people-first approaches
- Investing in local leaders within our organisations, our beneficiaries, and our partners
- Creating evaluation programs in partnership with researchers to refine our approaches
- Sharing learnings and challenges with other practitioners, including M&E results
- Advocating for this approach with the partners who fund and enable our work



As Funders, we are:

- Embedding questions about local agency and leadership development into existing RFPs
- Designing new programs with a people-first lens
- Experimenting with funding timelines and measurement approaches
- Sponsoring research and projects to better understand the impact of this work
- Convening internal and external conversations on this topic
- Making local agency and development of all individuals a strategic focus (e.g., dedicate a team to work on this focus area, include it as a reporting indicator)



As Researchers, we are:

- Growing scholarship around the links between agency, leadership and development outcomes
- Evaluating programs and documenting effective practices for fostering agency and leadership in a range of contexts
- Understanding the ROI of people-first investment approaches



As Government Officials, we are:

- Highlighting people-first programs that have helped you meet national priorities
- Requesting funding for people-first approaches, with appropriate timelines
- Assessing leadership skill needs in our countries and targeting aid contributions accordingly

What might you do? We invite you to join the conversation! Please share your ideas, give feedback on our evolving effort, and contribute to our expanded understanding and adoption of a “people-first” approach to development. For more information please contact people@peoplefirstdev.org.



Acknowledgments

This work emerged from a convening at The Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in May, 2019 and a Rockefeller-hosted roundtable discussion in September, 2019 focused on "putting local people and leaders at the center of development." Boston Consulting Group provided additional research and analysis support from January through April 2020 under the direction of the following Planning Group:

- Melissa Adelman, World Bank
- Anshul Arora, Edvance Group
- Chris Bradford, African Leadership Academy
- Wendy Kopp, Teach For All
- Dzingai Mutumbuka, Former Minister of Education of Zimbabwe
- Robert Newman, AMP Health
- Gary Shearer, The Saville Foundation

Although the views expressed in this document summarize those held by the members of the Planning Group, they do not necessarily represent those of their respective organizations and should not be taken as such.

We would like to acknowledge Kim Baskin, Andrea Latoni, Anna Molero, and Sukriti Paliwal from Teach For All as well as the Boston Consulting Group team (Sima Golnabi, Nikhil Jain, Jeff Kiderman, Lane McBride, Claudia Newman-Martin, Caroline Pringle, Trish Stroman, and the BCG design team) for leading the analytical and strategic work as well as the creation of this document.

We would also like to thank the following individuals for offering their perspectives and expertise. While the views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of these contributors, we are deeply grateful for their time and thought-partnership in developing the findings of this report:

Masood Ahmed, Center for Global Development
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Matthew Bishop, Former The Economist Editor and Author of "Philanthrocapitalism"
Laura Bergh, The Greenlight Office
David Bonbright, Keystone Accountability
Jo Bourne, Global Partnership for Education
Tracey Chambers, The Clothing Bank
Sachpreet Chandhoke, Boston Consulting Group
Laurence Chandy, UNICEF
John Coonrod, The Hunger Project
Andrew Cox, AGRA
Nathalie Delapalme, Mo Ibrahim Foundation
Oley Dibba-Wadda, African Development Bank
Cheryl Dorsey, Echoing Green
Peggy Dulany, Synergos Institute
Natalia Gavrilita, Global Innovation Fund
Elizabeth Berry Gips, Village Health Works
Charles Goodyear, BHP Foundation
Guthrie Gray-Lobe, Harvard University
Yawa Hansen-Quao, Emerging Public Leaders
Batool Hassan, Acumen
Kaya Henderson, Former Chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools
Carrie Hessler-Radelet, Project Concern International
Rachel Hinton, DFID
David Hudson, Developmental Leadership Program
Baela Raza Jamil, Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi
Sharath Jeevan, STIR Education
Riaz Kamrani, The Citizens Foundation
Seth Kaplan, Institute for Integrated Transitions
Asyia Kazmi, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
Anna Bertmar Khan, Dubai Cares
David Korten, Living Economies Forum
Raj Kumar, Devex
Gina Lagomarsino, Results for Development
Paul Lorem, Tanuru Farms
Francisco Martin-Rayo, Boston Consulting Group
John McArthur, Brookings Institution & UN Foundation
Mauricio Miller, Community Independence Initiative
James I. Mwangi, Dalberg
Takeshi Oikawa, Boston Consulting Group
Folawe Omikunle, Teach For Nigeria
Raj Panjabi, Last Mile Health
Jenny Perlman Robinson, Brookings Institution
Kyle Peters, Boston Consulting Group
June Pym, The Saville Foundation/University of Cape Town/ ISFAP/SAICA
Rakesh Rajani, Co-Impact
Benamina Randrianavelo, World Bank
Burt Ronald, Tomorrow's Leaders in Training
Jaime Saavedra, World Bank
Sameer Sampat, Global School Leaders
Maïke Scharp, Boston Consulting Group
Peter Senge, MIT and Academy for Systems Change
Olivier Serrat, Independent Researcher
Dame Barbara Stocking, Murray Edwards College
Lawrence Summers, President Emeritus of Harvard University
Arjun Tasker, USAID
Shalini Unnikrishnan, Boston Consulting Group
Henri van Eeghen, Synergos Institute
Mabel van Oranje, Girls not Brides
Karina Wong, Small Foundation
Stavros Yiannouka, WISE, Qatar Foundation
David Young, Boston Consulting Group

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