



## INSIGHTS SUMMARY

# PARTNERSHIPS SERIES

18 TO 20 MAY, 2026

18 May: ***From Promise to Practice: How Partnerships Can Deliver AI for Global Development***, AI for Global Development Conference, with the University of Cambridge

20 May: ***Getting Growth Right: a vision for global prosperity in the next decade***, Global Partnerships Conference, with FCDO and LSE

20 May: ***Ambition in the Face of Crisis and Constraint***, Business Fights Poverty Community Forum

**In a context of overlapping crises, rising need and shrinking resources, social impact organisations must do more, for more people, with less. The challenge is how to stay ambitious in practice. Two routes stand out: systemic partnerships that bring business, government, civil society, academia, funders and communities together around shared challenges; and human-centred AI that can unlock knowledge, increase efficiency and extend capability, while managing risks around bias, exclusion, accountability and trust.**

These themes shaped Business Fights Poverty's Partnerships Series, held from 18 to 20 May and timed with the FCDO Global Partnerships Conference. The series opened with "**From Promise to Practice: How Partnerships Can Deliver AI for Global Development**", hosted with the University of Cambridge Centre for Human-Inspired Artificial Intelligence. Speakers included Olayinka David-West, Dean, Lagos Business School; Payal Dalal, Executive Vice President, Global Programs, Center for Inclusive Growth, Mastercard; Luis Fernando Sanabria, COO, Fundación Paraguaya; and Dr Jaishree Naidoo, Radiologist, Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder, Envisionit Deep AI.

The second event, "**Getting Growth Right: A Vision for Global Prosperity in the Next Decade**", was hosted with LSE and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). It opened with Seema Malhotra MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Minister for Equalities and Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Indo-Pacific, FCDO, and closed with Ismaël Nabé, Minister of Planning, International Cooperation and Development, Government of Guinea. Speakers included Susan Brown, Deputy Head and UN Assistant Secretary General, UNDP; Professor Lord Nicholas Stern, IG Patel Chair of Economics and Government, LSE; Payal Dalal; and Asif Saleh, Executive Director, BRAC.

Alongside the panels, more than 40 Business Fights Poverty community members contributed insights through breakout discussions as named contributors across the first two sessions. The series then concluded with the Community Forum, "**Ambition in the Face of Crisis and Constraint**", which brought together nearly 40 experts from the Business Fights Poverty community to share practical experiences of partnership, AI and the mindset shifts needed to stay ambitious. The insights that follow draw from speakers, named contributors and community members across the week.

## **SESSION 1: FROM PROMISE TO PRACTICE: HOW PARTNERSHIPS CAN DELIVER AI FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **INSIGHT 1: AI'S PROMISE DEPENDS ON THE SYSTEM AROUND IT**

The strongest message from Session 1 is that AI's impact depends less on the model than on the system it enters. Speakers and discussions repeatedly pointed to the "infrastructure layer": data governance, institutional ownership, compute, connectivity, digital literacy, workflows, policy, regulation, funding and trust. The agricultural advisory example made this practical: a tool may be technically feasible, but it still needs farmer registries, weather and soil data, local languages, ownership of the farmer relationship, payment for compute, and accountability when something goes wrong. AI becomes promising only when the problem, domain and institutional conditions are aligned.

### **INSIGHT 2: RESPONSIBLE SCALE REQUIRES PARTNERSHIPS THAT CLARIFY OWNERSHIP, RISK AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Partnership was not treated as a warm aspiration, but as the operating model for AI in development. No single actor can provide the technology, data, local legitimacy, finance, evidence, regulation, implementation capacity and long-term stewardship required. Effective partnerships need to clarify who pays for customisation, who owns the data, who maintains the system, who carries risk, and who is accountable when things fail. The materials also stress that public systems need government ownership, but not government-only delivery. Private sector, civil society, academia, frontline workers and communities all bring different assets that need to be deliberately coordinated.

### **INSIGHT 3: THE MOST USEFUL AI MAY BE SMALL, SPECIFIC AND HUMAN-AUGMENTING**

The session challenged the assumption that bigger AI is always better. In many development contexts, the most useful tools may be small, task-specific models that can work in low-connectivity environments, run locally or offline, use less compute, and support a clear frontline task. Across poverty reduction, healthcare, financial inclusion and agriculture, the strongest use cases were about augmenting people, not replacing them. AI can help social workers reach more families, health workers triage urgent cases, NGOs learn faster, and small businesses access finance or information. The aim is to extend human capability and judgement, not design people out.

#### **INSIGHT 4: AI IMPACT MUST BE JUDGED BY OUTCOMES, COSTS AND HARMS, NOT ADOPTION ALONE**

Participants consistently warned against measuring AI success through usage, satisfaction or technical performance alone. The real test is whether AI improves health, livelihoods, education, safety, financial resilience, decision quality or access to services. But the full cost must also be counted: compute, maintenance, data governance, infrastructure, environmental impact, organisational capacity and long-term affordability. Several discussions also warned that AI can amplify harm, including fraud, misinformation, exploitative recruitment and unsafe decision-making. Post-deployment evaluation is therefore essential, especially because AI systems can drift, degrade or perform differently in different populations and contexts.

#### **INSIGHT 5: INCLUSION REQUIRES COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP, CRITICAL LITERACY AND THE RIGHT TO SHAPE AI**

Session 1 went beyond “include more data”. It asked who defines the problem, whose knowledge counts, who owns community data, and who benefits from the value created. Low-resource languages, oral communities, women, offline populations and local knowledge systems can be excluded or misrepresented if AI is built mainly from wealthy, connected, English-speaking contexts. The Quechua example raised the risk of communities contributing data that companies later monetise. Inclusion, therefore, means community-led design, fair data governance, benefit-sharing, critical AI literacy and genuine agency over whether and how AI is used. AI should be built with communities, not merely deployed to them.

## **SESSION 2: GETTING GROWTH RIGHT: A VISION FOR GLOBAL PROSPERITY IN THE NEXT DECADE**

### **INSIGHT 1: GROWTH SHOULD BE MEASURED BY LIVED PROGRESS, NOT OUTPUT ALONE**

The session did not reject GDP, but it was clear that GDP alone cannot tell us whether growth is improving lives. Participants argued that people experience progress through safety, livelihoods, jobs for their children, health, education, environmental quality, dignity, community, resilience and confidence in the future. The practical challenge is to create measures that are comparable enough to guide policy, but grounded enough to reflect everyday realities. The discussion also stressed that metrics only matter if they shape decisions. Getting growth right means moving from abstract measurement to policy, investment and delivery that people can actually feel.

### **INSIGHT 2: RESILIENCE IS NOW CENTRAL TO PROSPERITY**

The discussion repeatedly returned to the vulnerability of households, small businesses and communities to overlapping shocks: climate events, cost of living pressures, cybercrime, scams, conflict, market disruption and insecure livelihoods. Better growth, therefore, needs to focus on financial health and resilience, not just productivity. People and small enterprises need to meet daily needs, manage volatility, reach future goals and trust the systems around them. A small amount of progress can be wiped out by one shock if people lack savings, insurance, social protection or institutional support. Growth that is not resilient is fragile progress.

### **INSIGHT 3: INFORMALITY MUST BE RECOGNISED AS NORMAL AND DESIGNED INTO POLICY**

A strong theme was that current growth models often fail because they do not properly understand the informal economy. In contexts such as Bangladesh, most jobs and livelihoods are informal, yet policy often treats informality as something to be eliminated rather than a reality to be recognised and supported. Participants called for voice, visibility and validity for informal workers and microbusinesses. This includes access to finance, savings, insurance, protection and policy recognition. The point was not to underplay the value of formality, but to acknowledge that getting growth right for the majority means designing around how people actually work, trade and survive.

### **INSIGHT 4: CLIMATE, NATURE AND SOCIAL INVESTMENT ARE THE GROWTH STORY, NOT A CONSTRAINT ON IT**

The session challenged the idea that climate action inhibits growth. Climate and nature-compatible investment were framed as foundations for future productivity, jobs and resilience. Clean electricity, better cities, public transport, healthier land systems, restored natural capital, and more productive agricultural incentives can all strengthen prosperity. The discussion stressed that climate, nature and growth

are deeply interwoven: polluted cities, degraded land, damaged forests and poisoned rivers undermine economic wellbeing. But people need to see benefits early, through lower energy costs, cleaner air, better transport, stronger livelihoods or more secure communities. Political viability depends on making the gains tangible.

### **INSIGHT 5: BETTER GROWTH NEEDS PARTNERSHIPS, RIGHTS AND A STRONGER PUBLIC NARRATIVE**

The conversation highlighted that getting growth right requires clear incentives, shared risk, patient delivery, political courage and a story people can understand. Participants discussed the need to explain why development spending, climate investment and resilience matter to taxpayers and communities, using concrete examples rather than abstract concepts. The line “getting growth right means getting rights right” is important because growth needs legitimacy, trust, equity and inclusion. Institutions such as FCDO can support this not only through funding, but through convening, underwriting risk, influencing policy and holding long-term partnerships together.

## **SESSION 3: AMBITION IN THE FACE OF CRISIS AND CONSTRAINT**

### **INSIGHT 1: STAY ROOTED IN PURPOSE, BUT ADAPT LIKE A LIVING SYSTEM**

The forum framed crisis and constraint not only as threats, but as a moment to redesign how social impact happens. Participants explored the idea of moving beyond resilience towards anti-fragility: using disruption to become stronger, more adaptive and more regenerative. The “be the oak” metaphor captured this well. Social impact leaders need to stay rooted in purpose, values and communities, while adapting branches, tactics and partnerships as conditions change. This is especially important when organisations are facing conflict, funding pressure, political shifts and internal restructuring. Ambition means holding the North Star steady while being flexible and agile about the route.

### **INSIGHT 2: FUTURE PARTNERSHIPS MUST BE BUILT ON INCENTIVES, TRUST, LOCAL CO-CREATION AND TRANSLATION**

The forum was clear that old partnership models are no longer enough. Grant-led, bilateral, single-issue partnerships that sit at the edge of business strategy are becoming less viable. Future partnerships need to connect to core business, address structural challenges, and be locally co-created with the people and institutions closest to the issue. The discussion also highlighted the importance of intermediaries and translators: people or organisations able to bridge business, finance, technology, social science, policy and community realities. Trust was described as infrastructure, requiring honesty about power, constraints, incentives, roles and accountability from the start.

### **INSIGHT 3: SCARCE RESOURCES REQUIRE CATALYTIC, PATIENT AND RECYCLABLE FINANCE THAT LEAVES CAPABILITY BEHIND**

A major theme was that doing more with less requires more creative finance. Grants remain important, but participants explored repayable grants, revolving loans, evergreen vehicles, catalytic capital and patient finance as ways to stretch resources further. The strongest message was to start with the problem, not the financial instrument. Sometimes, the right return is simply getting capital back so it can be redeployed. At the same time, impact should be judged by the legacy capabilities that remain after the project ends. Finance should build local resilience, capacity and ownership, not short-term activity that disappears when funding stops.

#### **INSIGHT 4: AI CAN UNLOCK CAPACITY AND ORGANISATIONAL MEMORY, BUT PRODUCTIVITY IS NOT IMPACT**

The forum surfaced practical uses for AI: analysing existing data, identifying trends, mapping systems, summarising evidence, supporting proposals, translating content, improving knowledge management and reducing administrative burden. One strong point was that organisations already hold large amounts of underused data from programmes, evaluations, forums and lived experience. AI can help unlock that organisational memory. But participants warned against confusing speed with impact. Women entrepreneurs using AI may save time without necessarily growing their businesses, and NGOs may become more efficient without improving outcomes. The test is whether AI supports better decisions, stronger relationships, greater reach and more meaningful results.

#### **INSIGHT 5: HUMAN-CENTRED AI NEEDS CLEAR CHOICES ABOUT WHERE TO USE IT, AND WHERE NOT TO**

The forum's AI discussion was notably cautious as well as optimistic. Participants raised concerns about bias, sensitive beneficiary data, data sovereignty, environmental costs, Western-dominated training data and the risk of replacing human judgement in work that depends on trust and relationships. Several contributors argued that organisations need explicit AI policies, board engagement and clear rules on what data can and cannot be uploaded. Just as importantly, they need to decide where not to use AI. The opportunity is to use AI to augment people, especially overstretched teams and frontline workers, while keeping humans responsible for judgement, interpretation, empathy and accountability.

## CONCLUSION

Across the Partnerships Series, one message came through clearly: staying ambitious in a context of crisis and constraint means changing how we work, not lowering what we aim for.

The challenges we face, from climate change and conflict to deepening poverty, are too complex for any single organisation to solve alone, particularly in the context of shrinking resources. Systemic partnerships are becoming essential: bringing together business, government, civil society, academia, funders and communities to align incentives, share risks, pool capabilities and build trust. The strongest partnerships require clear roles, local co-creation, honest conversations about power and accountability, and a commitment to outcomes that endure beyond any single project or funding cycle.

The series also highlighted the need to make scarce resources go further. This means reducing duplication, unlocking knowledge, sharing infrastructure, and exploring catalytic, patient and recyclable forms of finance. Grants remain essential, but in a low-aid world, organisations also need practical ways to mobilise additional capital, build resilience and leave behind capabilities that last.

AI emerged as a powerful tool for doing more with less, but only if used responsibly. It can help organisations unlock knowledge, reduce administrative burden, learn faster, extend the reach of frontline workers and make better use of existing data. But productivity is not the same as impact. AI's value must be measured by whether it improves people's lives, strengthens inclusion and supports better decisions.

Together, systemic partnerships and human-centred AI offer a practical route to renewed ambition. They can help us scale what works, respond faster to rising need and amplify human capability. But both must be grounded in trust, rights, local ownership and lived outcomes.

Looking ahead, these conversations will continue to shape our learning. How do we move from bilateral projects to systems collaboration? How can partnerships become more financially resilient in a low-aid world? How can AI and data help organisations do more with less while protecting trust, rights and inclusion? How do social impact professionals move stakeholders from engagement to action? And how do we measure value in ways that combine rigorous evidence, lived experience and a clear business case? These and other questions will be explored through forthcoming Business Fights Poverty publications and events, helping us deepen practical insight and spark new collaborations so that we stay ambitious in the face of crisis and constraint.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper draws on the insights of the many speakers and discussants across the Partnerships Series. We are very grateful for their contributions.

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