

Putting People, Agency and Leadership First: Developing Collective Leadership as a Path to Sustainable Development

In this People First Talk on the margins of the UN General Assembly, we discussed the importance of developing collective leadership as a path to sustainable development. Watch the talk [here](#).

Key ideas

- System change does not happen from governments alone, but rather when we have collective leadership - leaders at every level of the system, who bring diverse perspectives & experiences, working collaboratively and learning together in order to transform whole systems.
- Fostering this type of collective leadership requires intentional investment in people. This means cultivating the leadership of people over technical solutions, with a focus on leadership that is collective, locally-rooted, and diverse. It means investing in growing people's sense of purpose, their agency, their inclination and ability to collaborate with one another, and their willingness to challenge unjust systems.
- To really take this People First approach will require mindset shifts in the global development community, including a willingness to cede control, so that we truly believe in the power of local leaders, invest in activating their capacity, and let them drive the change.
- This will require us to decolonize our institutions, and interrogate practices and policies that privilege those few who have had disproportionate access to opportunities (e.g., English skills, elite education, personal networks). We must also disrupt systemic barriers that prevent under-represented groups (e.g., women, racial minorities) from taking on positions of influence.
- Investments in leadership development will take time, but these can be supported by philanthropic capital that is more flexible, unrestricted and invests with this long game in mind.



Wendy Kopp
CEO & Co-Founder,
Teach For All
(moderator)



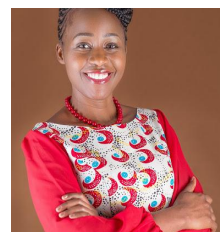
**H.E. Ellen
Johnson Sirleaf**
Former President of
Liberia



**Darren
Walker**
President, Ford
Foundation



**Anne Marie
Burgoyne**
Managing Director,
Emerson Collective



Caren Wakoli
Founder &
Executive Director,
Emerging Leaders
Foundation



“The challenges we face are complex and adaptive, and there is no way that top-down solutions are going to solve them. We need to put the power in local leaders, and we need to expose them to what’s working in other contexts so that we have development that is both locally led and globally informed.”

— **Wendy Kopp**, Teach For All

“When Ebola struck we had a prediction - that one million people, one million Liberians - would die within a year. I then saw the power of people because I called all the community leaders and announced I was going to reject this prediction and that it was their responsibility to save lives and livelihoods. And they would work with their leaders within communities to ensure that we had those front liners in the communities...and I think Liberia was able to solve Ebola in record time.”

— **H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**, Former President of Liberia

“If you believe in real leadership in countries, you have to build institutions in those countries. If you believe in leadership in Africa, you have to build African institutions.”

— **Darren Walker**, Ford Foundation

“There are many on ramps to take on this work and it’s important to really believe in the individuals themselves and allow them to find their own power. Some of that is through very traditional means and some of that is through people being in fellowship together and that builds collective power.”

— **Anne Marie Burgoyne**, Emerson Collective

“The moment you invest in that leader, in that one leader, who then invests in another, and we create a multiplier effect, that leads to sustainable change.”

— **Caren Wakoli**, Emerging Leaders Foundation

The People First Community is a cross-sectoral and globally diverse group of practitioners, academics, and public and private sector actors with a shared belief in the importance of prioritizing investing in collective leadership development as a path for sustainable development. For more information on the People First Community and effort, please visit peoplefirstdev.org. If you are interested in joining this Community, please sign-up [here](#). To suggest a topic or speaker for an upcoming Talk, please email people@peoplefirstdev.org.