



## *Side event at the Skoll World Forum 2024: Putting People First to Achieve System Change*

A conversation with [Claire Wathen](#), Director Networks and Partnerships, Skoll Foundation and Visiting Fellow at the University of Oxford, [Faith Rose](#), Program Director, Education Equity, BHP Foundation, [Fiona Mavhinga](#), Executive Adviser, CAMFED Association, [Folawe Omikunle](#), CEO, Teach for Nigeria, moderated by [Faith Abiodun](#), CEO, United World Colleges.

At the Skoll World Forum 2024, the People First Community was privileged to host a side event titled ***Putting People First to Achieve System Change*** at the Nest, Said Business School, Oxford University on Thursday April 11. Before the day of the event, I got the chance to attend several side events at the Marmalade festival and I observed a common question in the different conversations; how do we foster system change? This was perfect timing for us to socialise our concepts of investing in people first and collective leadership approaches for system change. I was so excited and nervous at the same time given that this was my first official event to organise and I was just a month into my new role as the People First Community Coordinator!

We had planned our session in a way that our audience would understand what investing in people first and collective leadership development means from a personal, practitioner, funder and researcher perspective. The event started with my personal story on the importance of investing in people first through my leadership journey at the African Leadership Academy, where I got hands-on leadership training which helped me to navigate my undergraduate studies in China. I later went ahead to be democratically elected as the first African student president of the Yenching Academy of Peking university as I pursued my masters degree, an honour that changed a lot of mindsets about race versus personal capability. I also shared about my experience at the Chief Justice Office of Kenya where I contributed to bettering Kenya's legal system and identified the intergenerational challenges that young people face in such spaces.

The panel started off with Folawe Omikunle the CEO, Teach For Nigeria who shared personal stories of the impact the organisation has made on individuals and communities across Nigeria. One story that stood out was about a community near the border, where children were lured into smuggling activities instead of attending school. In response, Teach For Nigeria fellows working in the area collaborated with local head teachers and community leaders to advocate for education among these vulnerable children. They tirelessly engaged border officials, rallying all stakeholders to emphasise the importance of educating young minds. Through their resilience and determination, they succeeded in shifting mindsets and mobilising the entire community towards a brighter future. As a result, more young people are now attending school.



Fiona Mavhinga the executive adviser of CAMFED association shared her story having been a beneficiary of CAMFED's work. Coming from a humble background, a scholarship from CAMFED helped her education dreams come to pass. She studied to become the first lawyer in her community! An achievement that she believes without CAMFED might not have happened. As an executive adviser, she is now using her experience to encourage other *sisters* in the program to become changemakers in their societies and the world at large. Her story made me rethink the different cultural practices that are negatively affecting our young people globally and are still being practised to date. I do believe that the solution to these kinds of problems greatly lie in investing in people first.

From a funder's perspective, Faith Rose a program director at BHP foundation spoke about her journey having overseen different projects and how communities in the Global South have been impacted when people first approaches are applied. She iterated that it is very important for funders to be flexible and trust practitioners to carry out development work. She gave an example about unrestricted funding in West Africa, where big foundations allowed her to spend over a year working with Ministries in Sierra Leone, finding policies that could break down bottlenecks. That investment in Ministry officials allowed a sea change in government, radical inclusion policy which fostered system change. I echo Faith's sentiments that it is important for funders to start shifting their mindsets and see beyond investing in technical solutions only and a proven way to do so is to prioritise investing in people first and collective leadership development approaches.

Claire Wathen, director of networks and partnerships at the Skoll Foundation, finalised the panel discussion by sharing her research on collective leadership and how impactful it is. Its impact stretches beyond regions. Practitioners are able to create partnerships which help in fostering change globally. Indeed it is high time that researchers and program evaluators start considering people first and collective approaches as a pathway to sustainable development when doing research and evaluating leadership development programs. Furthermore, I also encourage researchers and evaluators to collaborate more on these kinds of approaches in order to advocate their adoption in the international development space which will greatly contribute to meeting the different SDG goals in the set timeframe.

We also had a breakout session where the audience interacted with the panellists and shared their thoughts on collective leadership development and people first approaches in their communities, workplaces and their daily lives which sparked a lot of conversations! Community members Abigail Kajumba of Emerging Public Leaders and Wendy Kopp of Teach For All also shared their lessons and challenges in promoting collective leadership and people first approaches especially when engaging funders. I left the session challenged and convinced that indeed systems are made of people and in order to change these systems, we have to invest in people first!

### **Zecha Mpemba, the People First Community Coordinator.**

*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 prioritising 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](http://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](mailto:people@peoplefirstdev.org).*