



Plenary Panel

Local Leader Spotlight - Leading from the Front: The New Humanitarian Vanguard



Moderated by **Adelina Kamal** (Co-founder and Steering Committee Member, Southeast Women Peace Mediators) and **Emma Beals** (Senior Advisor, European Institute of Peace) the panel brought together frontline leaders from some of the world's most complex conflict zones to share their experiences, challenges, and insights. Speakers included **Salai Za Uk** (Executive Director, Chin Human Rights Organisation, Myanmar), **Ross Skowronski** (Founder and CEO, Mission Kharkiv, Ukraine), **Awad Mohammed** (Emergency Response Room representative, Sudan), **Safaa Elagib Agam Ayoub** (Founding Member and President, Community Development Association, Sudan), and **Ahmed Ekzayez** (Chief of Programs, White Helmets, Syria).

The discussion centred on the critical role that local leaders and organisations play in humanitarian crises, often stepping in as first responders where international systems fall short. **Mary Ana McGlasson** (Director, Centre for Humanitarian Leadership) facilitated the Q&A session.



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Panellists highlighted the resilience of their communities, the innovative solutions they have developed in response to crisis, and the urgent need to shift power and resources to local actors. The session underscored the importance of global solidarity and a reimagined humanitarian system - one that **recognises and invests in locally led efforts** as central to effective, sustainable crisis response.

Opening the conversation, **Salai Za Uk** from Myanmar laid bare the compounding crises faced by communities resisting military oppression and recovering from natural disasters. He described how **aid is often manipulated by the regime** and called for direct support to local networks rebuilding institutions in liberated areas. "Please don't be complicit," he urged. "Working with the military funds more airstrikes on civilians. Work with those on the ground who are building hope."

From Ukraine, **Ross Skowronski** shared how Mission Kharkiv emerged from chaos, transforming from a volunteer chain into the first NGO to deliver chemotherapy in besieged cities. Without prior exposure to humanitarian systems, their team **developed SOPs rooted in community needs**, such as transparent medicine tracking and underground, missile-proof cold storage. "We didn't follow standard practice," he said. "We followed what people needed - and built the standards ourselves."

The session turned to Sudan, where **Awad**

Mohammed described the grassroots model of the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs). Born from cultural traditions of mutual aid, ERRs form a nationwide civilian-led response network of over 2,000 volunteers, structured from neighbourhood to national level. Their decentralised system offers everything from emergency health to psychosocial support. "We are not politically affiliated," Awad emphasised, "We are only with the people."

Expanding on this, **Safaa Elagib Agam Ayoub** of the Community Development Association recounted her journey from international humanitarian work to building a locally rooted organisation.





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Speaking as both a practitioner and displaced woman, she questioned the persistent cycles of incomplete peace and fragmented aid. “There is no dislink between humanitarian and peace work,” she said. “We must stop treating women as recipients—they are the builders of community resilience and should be at the peace table.”

From Syria, **Ahmed Ekzayez** of the White Helmets delivered a powerful intervention on reclaiming narrative and legitimacy. “We are not anomalies,” he said.

“We are the norm that works.” Rejecting the framing of local actors as under-capacitated, he called for a shift from capacity building to capacity exchange.

The White Helmets, known for life-saving search and rescue, now manage programmes across mine clearance, education, and climate resilience. Despite losing 10% of their team over 14 years, they remain embedded in their communities. “Trust from donors came because we earned trust from our people first.”





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“Community action is not separate from governance – it is resilience in motion. These efforts must shape how we define humanitarian response.”

Emma Beals

Senior Advisor, European Institute of Peace

“Please refrain from working with the military regime – that’s signing a death sentence for civilians. Instead, support those on the ground who are building hope.”

Salai Za Uk

Executive Director, Chin Human Rights Organisation



“We didn’t wait for the international system to recognise us – we built that trust from the ground up. Don’t call it capacity building anymore. It’s capacity exchange. And that begins with listening to those closest to the crisis.”

Ahmed Ekzayez

Chief of Programs, White Helmets

“We didn’t focus on what would look good in proposals. We focused on what people actually needed – and built our systems around that.”

Ross Skowronski

Founder and CEO, Mission Kharkiv





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"Our Emergency Rooms are not political – they are built by communities, for communities. This decentralised model is how we respond with dignity and care. But we need solidarity – not just words, but resources that are flexible and that respect our structures. We are not waiting for change. We are already leading it."

Awad Mohammed

Emergency Response Room representative

"There is no divide between humanitarian support and peacebuilding. Women on the ground are not beneficiaries – they are builders of resilience."

Safaa Elagib Agam Ayoub

Founding Member and President, Community Development Association



"Community action is not separate from governance – it is resilience in motion. These efforts must shape how we define humanitarian response."

Adelina Kamal

Co-founder and Steering Committee Member, Southeast Women Peace Mediators

"Don't focus on earning donors' trust first. Start by engaging with the community, understanding their needs, and earning their trust. When the community believes in you, donor trust will naturally follow."

Ahmed Ekzayez

Chief of Programs, White Helmets





Critical Action Steps



Support local leadership in crisis zones, empowering them to drive responses grounded in community priorities.



Prioritise trust-building with local communities to deliver sustainable, accountable, and context-driven aid.



Reject donor-led agendas misaligned with realities on the ground, and champion solutions shaped by local actors.



Develop adaptive, resilient tools — such as missile-proof storage and real-time tracking — to safeguard aid delivery.



Facilitate cross-context collaboration among local responders to accelerate learning, innovation, and solidarity.



Strengthen the humanitarian–development–peace nexus to enable long-term recovery and community-led rebuilding.