Cerrito
FORUM 2025

REPORT ON THE 8TH CERRITO FORUM:

CRISIS AS A CATALYST FOR THRIVING

14–15 October 2025, Cerrito, Paraguay

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Summary

The international development agenda stands at a critical inflection point. With only five years remaining to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), mounting evidence suggests that current models of cooperation, aid, and social investment are insufficient to deliver on their transformative promise. The world faces compounding crises, environmental degradation, conflict, inequality, and technological disruption, that expose deep systemic fragilities. Yet within this uncertainty lies a profound opportunity: to redefine the very architecture of development.

The **8th Cerrito Forum**, held on 14–15 October 2025 in Cerrito, Paraguay, convened global development practitioners, social entrepreneurs, business leaders, policy-makers, and community innovators around a singular conviction, that crisis, far from signaling the end of progress, can serve as a *catalyst*. Under the theme ***"Crisis as a Catalyst for Thriving,"*** the Forum invited participants to reimagine development from the ground up: to move beyond static paradigms and to center human potential, family resilience, and community agency as the engines of social transformation.

With over 20 sessions featuring 40+ speakers from 15+ countries across civil society, the private sector, and government, **the 8th Annual Cerrito Forum** was a magnificent representation of cross-sector collaboration to identify and amplify solutions in times of crisis. It demonstrated that the future of global development depends on our ability to move from crisis response to crisis redesign. Across keynotes, panels, workshops, and field experiences, a consistent message emerged: transformative development requires shifting power, deepening agency, and reimagining how knowledge, technology, and resources circulate within communities. Crises will continue to expose the limits of existing systems; what matters is whether institutions use these moments to entrench the old or to build the new.

Speakers and participants converged on a shared blueprint for progress. Development must become more human-centered, behaviorally informed, data-empowering, technologically ethical, and financially adaptive. It must elevate community voices, reward collaboration, and invest in the ingenuity of families and youth. It must replace scarcity-based narratives with stories of capability, resilience, and possibility. And it must cultivate a culture of learning, across governments, companies, NGOs, and social enterprises, that acknowledges complexity while insisting on dignity.

The field visits to the women's committees offered participants an intimate and compelling view of grassroots innovation in action. Far from abstract program descriptions or distant case studies, these encounters allowed visitors to observe how women are designing practical, community-centered solutions to the challenges they face. Participants saw firsthand how committees organize collective savings mechanisms, incubate microenterprises, negotiate better market access, and build leadership pathways for women who have historically been excluded from economic decision-making. The visits revealed the ingenuity behind these models: simple structures that generate income, strengthen social capital, and create stability for families, while requiring minimal external resources. For many attendees, the women's committees embodied the core themes of the Forum: agency, collaboration, and the transformative power of local leadership. They demonstrated that innovation in the field is not always high-tech or capital-intensive; it is often human-centered, relational, and rooted in community solidarity.

Hosted by **Fundación Paraguaya** on the occasion of its 40th anniversary, the Cerrito Forum has, since its inception in 2017, become a space for collective reflection, experimentation, and innovation. Each year, it gathers practitioners and thought leaders who challenge conventional approaches to poverty eradication and human development. In 2025, the Forum reaffirmed a belief that animates Fundación Paraguaya's work: that sustainable progress emerges not from dependency or external aid alone, but from *empowered individuals, vibrant families, and self-reliant communities.* **DEVEX** served as the first ever **Media Partner** of the event and sponsors included **Atlas Network**, **Cervepar,** and **Tupi.**

A series of high-profile keynotes grounded this thesis in evidence and lived experience. **Gaby Arenas** reframed crisis as a scientifically measurable "window of heightened salience" in which individuals and societies briefly see reality with uncommon clarity. **Jaime Viñals** showed that transformation is sustained through purpose, consistency, and disciplined execution when facing fear or scarcity. **Kiana Calloway** illustrated how those closest to injustice hold the knowledge required for redesigning broken systems. **Joseph Grenny** and **Ted Moser** provided a framework for converting insight into action: crisis must be met with behaviorally informed systems of support and platform-based approaches that continuously connect families to solutions. Together, their contributions converged on one proposition: crisis becomes a catalyst for thriving only when people are recognized as protagonists, institutions design for agency, and systems evolve toward inclusion, dignity, and shared ownership.

Across the Forum, participants explored practical strategies for building human-capital-centered development ecosystems. Sessions on workplace empowerment and community data emphasized that when individuals own their data, define their priorities, and co-create their pathways out of poverty, they move from passive beneficiaries to active architects of their futures. Panels on measurement argued that data must be returned to communities in forms they can interpret and act upon; measurement is not merely technical, but moral. Conversations on well-being revealed an urgent need for institutions to adopt life–work approaches, embed listening cultures, strengthen emotional competencies, and design environments that support the whole person, not only the professional identity. Digital-rights and cybersecurity discussions stressed that technology becomes a tool of equity

only when anchored in human protections, regulatory clarity, and community trust.

The Forum also engaged critically with the future of technology in social transformation. Sessions on AI highlighted its potential to democratize insight, reduce administrative burdens, and reveal previously hidden patterns of need. Yet speakers warned that AI can also exacerbate disparities if deployed without transparency, explainability, and ethical alignment. The strongest takeaway: AI must augment, not replace, human relationships, frontline experience, and community wisdom. Technology achieves equity only when people remain at the center.

Other plenaries addressed the evolution of development finance and the changing architecture of social entrepreneurship. **Brigit Helms** challenged the field's assumptions about financial returns, arguing that impact capital must be measured by lives improved rather than investment multiples, and that early-stage enterprises require blended finance models, catalytic instruments, and gender-inclusive systems to survive the "valley of death." She emphasized that social entrepreneurship is not the commercialization of charity; it is the redesign of markets to serve communities. Participants echoed that achieving scale requires new forms of partnership among governments, investors, companies, and civil society, models that break silos and align incentives around long-term transformation.

Experiential learning throughout Cerrito reinforced the intellectual themes with real practice. Through cultural events, visits with women's committees and local families, agricultural school tours, and interactions with student-run enterprises, participants saw how dignity, entrepreneurship, and creativity converge in daily life. These encounters underscored that culture is not decorative; it is developmental. Community identity, artistic expression, rootedness, and solidarity are themselves assets that produce resilience and innovation.

Taken together, the Forum offered the global development community a coherent and actionable agenda:

1. Crisis creates a temporary window for systemic redesign, leaders must use it strategically.

2. Agency is the foundation of human development; systems must be built around it.

3. Behavioral science and platform-based models can make change predictable and scalable.

4. Measurement must be reciprocal, dignifying, people-centered, and behavior-focused.

5. AI and technology must amplify, not supplant, human judgment, wisdom, and relationships.

6. Financial instruments must evolve to support mission-first enterprises, not replicate commercial biases.

7. Community voice, cultural identity, and local ownership are indispensable for lasting change.

Above all, the Forum reaffirmed that sustainable development emerges not from external prescriptions but from empowered individuals, thriving families, and communities trusted with the resources and authority to determine their futures. Cerrito's unique ecosystem, where learning, enterprise, and agency intersect, served as living proof that crisis can indeed be a catalyst for thriving.

The Forum closed with a renewed mandate: to carry Cerrito's lessons outward. To strengthen institutions so they listen better, measure more ethically, experiment more boldly, and partner more equitably. To support leaders who are building the next generation of social enterprises, community platforms, and inclusive technologies. And to widen the coalition of practitioners committed to development models that are not merely efficient, but transformative.

As participants return to their countries and communities, the work continues. The insights shared in Cerrito have already begun to shape new collaborations, inform program redesigns, and inspire broader reflection on what it means to create systems where human potential can flourish. The Forum stands as a reminder that global development is not only about reaching goals, it is about building the conditions under which people can thrive, even and especially in times of crisis.

Opening Leadership Perspectives: From Vision to Transformation

In his opening remarks, Luis Fernando Sanabria, Chief Operating Officer of Fundación Paraguaya, welcomed participants by reaffirming the organization's founding conviction that crisis can be a starting point for creativity and progress. Reflecting on the school's transformation from financial insolvency to self-sufficiency, he highlighted Cerrito as living evidence that adversity can trigger innovation when communities are trusted with ownership. Mr. Sanabria's remarks captured the pragmatic optimism that defines Fundación Paraguaya's approach, an ethos that views every challenge as an opportunity to learn, adapt, and lead. He reminded participants that the students themselves were not passive observers but active co-hosts, embodying the Forum's central message that empowerment is best learned through participation and practice.

> *The world has changed in terms of international cooperation. We live in a time of crisis, but that is where opportunities arise for entrepreneurs and businesspeople.*

Dr. Martin Burt, Fundación Paraguaya

Building on this foundation, Dr. Martín Burt, Founder and CEO of Fundación Paraguaya, delivered a compelling call to reimagine development economics from the bottom up. His address contextualized the global retreat of traditional aid flows and urged social entrepreneurs and private actors to find opportunity in crisis. Drawing on local examples, from the market price of Paraguayan cheese to the entrepreneurial success of Cerrito students, Dr. Burt illustrated a powerful truth: that poverty persists not because of scarcity, but because of constrained imagination and systemic fatalism. He argued that prosperity emerges where dignity, entrepreneurship, and innovation converge, and that the fight against poverty must embrace profitability and purpose as mutually reinforcing forces. His message was clear and galvanizing: crisis is not a dead end—it is the birthplace of new paradigms for human flourishing.

Plenary - **Opportunities that Emerge from Crisis**

In her keynote, Gaby Arenas, Co-Chief Facilitator of Catalyst Now, frames crisis not as rupture alone but as a time-bound window of opportunity that reveals possibilities already present yet previously unseen. She grounds this thesis in a searing personal story: after her Venezuelan foundation publicly exposed state-linked gun distribution to youth (despite asking not to be named), she and her team faced threats and persecution; within a week she fled with her husband, infant and young daughter to Bogotá, living in one room for six months. Out of that upheaval emerged the TAAP Foundation, which has scaled across 14 countries, reaching 4.6 million people, a practical demonstration that radical redesign during crisis can generate broader, faster impact when solutions become common goods rather than proprietary programs.

Scientifically, Arenas explains that crises don't create opportunities; they reveal them by activating the brain's salience network, sharpening attention at individual and societal levels. This heightened awareness is temporary, typically 18–36 months, before systems refreeze into a "new normal," underscoring the urgency to act while the

> *And another myth: crises aren't solved by optimism. To overcome a crisis, you have to prepare, you have to learn to use it strategically.*
>
> **Gaby Arenas, Catalyst Now**

window is open. Building on this scientific lens, Arenas identified three structural barriers that crises have the power to break: visibility, collaboration, and experimentation. Each, she argued, represents a domain of human and institutional behavior that typically resists change, until disruption forces us to confront it.

The first barrier is visibility, the capacity to recognize realities that have long been normalized. Crises illuminate what societies have grown accustomed to ignoring. Arenas shared the example of Jeroo Billimoria's Child Helpline, born after a disaster in Mumbai exposed the suffering of children who had been invisible to public systems. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic thrust the neglected issue of mental health into the spotlight. For decades, depression and anxiety were dismissed or stigmatized; suddenly, when leaders, teachers, and families experienced them firsthand, the conversation changed. Where governments acted swiftly to institutionalize mental health care, embedding it in public policy and workplace norms, outcomes improved dramatically, including reductions in substance dependency and suicide rates. Arenas' point was that visibility must translate into policy before the window closes. Crises give us the moral and political momentum to recognize hidden suffering; transformation occurs only when that recognition is codified into lasting systems.

The second barrier is collaboration, who we choose to sit with and who we choose to avoid. In times of calm, institutions often operate within silos, protecting turf and identity. Crisis makes such separations untenable. Arenas illustrated this through Compromiso Valle, an initiative born amid Colombia's 2021 social unrest. In Cali, business leaders, activists, and police, groups historically estranged, began to meet, listen, and build together. What started as a fragile act of trust evolved into a platform uniting over 730 companies, generating 4,000 jobs, and improving life for 77,000 citizens. The lesson was clear: crises dissolve the illusion of separateness. They remind societies that collaboration is not an optional virtue but a survival strategy, one that, when embraced, can yield both economic and social dividends.

The third barrier is experimentation, the rules we stop challenging. Under normal conditions, institutions cling to mandates and routines. In crisis, rigidity breaks down, allowing creativity to surface. Arenas contrasted two post-crisis responses: Haiti, where the 2010 earthquake prompted a flood of external aid that sidelined local agency, and GOONJ in India, which turned recurring monsoon floods into an opportunity for community-led innovation. GOONJ's model empowered villagers to rebuild using local resources and knowledge, creating systems that endured beyond external funding cycles.

Through these examples, Arenas underscored that experimentation without local ownership is exploitation; experimentation grounded in trust becomes transformation. The question for development practitioners, she suggested, is not whether to innovate, but who gets to define what innovation means.

Three Types of Crises, Three Strategies

Not all crises behave the same way. Arenas proposed a typology of three: sudden collapses, slow erosions, and personal or organizational disruptions, each demanding a distinct strategic posture. Sudden collapses, such as natural disasters or pandemics, require rapid mobilization, transparent communication, and immediate coordination. Success depends on visibility and speed: getting accurate information and resources to those most affected. Slow erosions, by contrast, are long-term crises like corruption, climate degradation, or inequality. These require persistence and institutional stamina, mechanisms that make the invisible visible over time. Tools such as Fundación Paraguaya's Poverty Stoplight exemplify this approach, enabling families to self-assess their living conditions, visualize poverty's dimensions, and take ownership of their

progress. Finally, personal and organizational crises, the quiet collapses that occur within institutions and sectors, call for reinvention. Arenas noted that today's global development ecosystem is experiencing such a crisis. The contraction of donor funding has exposed the sector's structural dependency on external aid. Rather than doubling down on austerity, she urged leaders to seize this disruption as an invitation to redesign the system itself, to evolve from a grant-based model toward one of mission-aligned sustainability.

A Call to Reinvent the Social Sector

In her closing section, Arenas turned the mirror back on the audience. "We have learned to survive," she said, "but not always to evolve." The development field's reflex to "do more with less" may sustain operations, but it also perpetuates exhaustion and stagnation. What the sector faces now, she argued, is not a funding problem but a design problem, a structure that prizes dependency over durability. Her five-step roadmap for transformation begins with acknowledgment. First, admit the problem: name the dependency openly and measure it. Second, solve it collaboratively: no organization can reinvent alone. Third, bring in outsiders, from business, technology, and finance, to co-create new capabilities and revenue models. Fourth, tell better stories: shift the narrative away from scarcity and toward real examples of progress. Finally, conduct an honest system diagnosis: examine incentives, governance, and power to ensure that new models reinforce mission, not bureaucracy. In this reimagined future, business and government become co-investors in social innovation, while civil society retains its ethical compass. The result is a resilient social sector, one able not only to endure crisis but to lead through it.

Session
- Empowering Human Capital

Moderated by **Larry Reed of Thrive Lights (USA)**, this discussion brought together **Jason Westenskw of Zachry Corporation (USA)** and **Andy Cox of Signal (UK)** to explore how the Poverty Stoplight methodology empowers both employees and marginalized communities to take ownership of their progress. Jason described how Zachry, a century-old construction company in the United States, first discovered the tool in Paraguay and adopted it not as a productivity metric but as a reflection of the firm's core value that "every person matters." What began as a volunteer project abroad evolved into an internal movement of self-improvement. Through participatory "life maps" and peer groups, workers identified priorities such as budgeting, physical health, and savings. Even modest initiatives, like cutting energy-drink consumption or setting up direct-deposit savings, built agency, trust, and community. Jason emphasized that agency activation, not corporate control, drives change: employees learn from one another, not from HR, and digital literacy challenges have themselves become confidence-building exercises.

> *Who owns the data? The people in the community and we give it back to them. Agency starts at the micro level with the individual but it spreads to the macro level when policymakers hear their stories and make decisions that can help.*
>
> **Andy Cox, SIGNAL UK**

From the UK, Andy Cox explained how Signal adapted the Stoplight in a context where poverty is politically invisible yet affects one in six people. His organization reframed the tool around "agency," helping participants visualize their lives on a single page and choose achievable steps toward stability. Cox illustrated the transformation through a Newcastle woman who used her life map to overcome depression and climb both a literal and metaphorical mountain. At a systemic level, he described "data democratization" workshops where citizens and policymakers co-interpret Stoplight data, turning lived experience into policy reform. One example led to an insurance company offering £2-a-month home coverage for job seekers, enabling mobility and employment. Both

speakers converged on the same insight: agency is the catalyst of human capital, when individuals own their data, choices, and progress, structural change follows from the ground up.

Session
- Cyber Security and Digital Rights

The panel framed cybersecurity as everyday safety, not a niche "IT" concern. **Moderator Bruno Vaccotti of Penguin Group** opened with a personal incident, detained and interrogated after his data was compromised, to underscore that "I'm not important" is a dangerous myth. From there, the conversation linked corporate standards for digital security like ISO 27001, digital rights, and newsroom realities: security failures rarely start with servers; they begin with people, norms, and policy gaps. The group stressed that risk multiplies when weak regulation, biased algorithms, and opaque data markets collide, especially for women and LGBTI+ communities who face intensified online/offline harms. Bottom line: building resilience means treating cybersecurity as a public-interest function that blends human behavior, governance, and technology, then acting before the next breach, not after.

> *Understanding technology is also about humanizing processes and, above all, rethinking the future. That's it.*
>
> **Bruno Vaccotti, Penguin Group**

Axel Meyer of Intedya spoke about how cyber risk is mostly human, not technical, ISO 27001's 93 controls are ~60% people and process. He discussed how SMEs that suffer a breach often don't survive, so start with a risk diagnosis, clear policies, roles, and measurement. **Mariela Cuevas of TEDIC** shared her perspective that digital rights are human rights, and that technopolitics like algorithmic profiling, data brokerage, and AI bias, shape autonomy and can entrench gendered violence. She advised to name harms and design protections with women at the table. Leo Gómez of UNIDA said that you must treat posts, photos, and biometrics as security assets, and how unlike passwords, you can't change your face. Leaks, surveillance, and weak law create real-world threats to security, so practice "human" cybersecurity by reducing traces, managing passwords, updating software, and modeling your threats, as well as pushing for enforceable data-protection rules.

Plenary
– Hacking Social Change: Behavior, Technology, and Influence

In their joint keynote, **Joseph Grenny, renowned social scientist and co-author of Influencer and Crucial Conversations**, and **Ted Moser, global expert on digital platforms and technology-driven transformation**, delivered a compelling examination of how enduring social change happens, and why so many well-intentioned initiatives fail to achieve lasting impact. Grenny opened the session by grounding the audience in decades of behavioral science research showing that meaningful change is not the result of inspiration alone, but of systematically shaping the behaviors that produce desired outcomes. Drawing on Albert Bandura's work on human agency, Grenny emphasized that individuals change when they believe they can change and when their environment over-determines their success. Using vivid examples from The Other Side Academy, a peer-run community where people overcoming addiction, homelessness, and criminal histories achieve remarkably low recidivism and high employment, Grenny illustrated that transformation occurs when individuals are embedded in strong norms, supported by accountable relationships, and placed in environments where new behaviors are practiced continuously.

> *The most important asset you or I have is our capacity to understand 'why do people behave a certain way' and 'how can we help them change it?*
>
> **Joseph Grenny**

A central takeaway from Grenny's message is that influence is a learnable skill. Effective change leaders identify the "vital behaviors" that create disproportionate results, then activate six sources of influence: personal motivation, personal ability, social motivation, social ability, structural motivation, and structural ability. He underscored that measurement is not merely technical, it is moral: the data we collect, share, and act upon becomes the proof of our integrity as change agents. Without precise, behavior-based measurement, organizations drift toward activity over impact. Grenny challenged the global development community to stop fixing people and instead fix the systems of influence around them, arguing that talent is universal, but opportunity is not. Communities thrive when they have the structure, peer culture, and predictable expectations that make change not just possible, but inevitable.

Building on this behavioral foundation, Ted Moser shifted the conversation toward the future of change at scale, arguing that the development sector must evolve from running "programs" to building platforms. Platforms, whether digital, community-based, or hybrid, enable the continuous flow of information, support, and opportunity, rather than episodic interventions. Moser explained that traditional

approaches often only illuminate the "near side of the moon" the fraction of a person's needs that institutions can see. By contrast, platforms reveal the "dark side" of people's lived experiences by capturing real-time data, understanding user journeys more holistically, and connecting families to services dynamically instead of linearly.

For Moser, the Poverty Stoplight is positioned to become such a platform, one that not only measures indicators but also builds a living ecosystem around people's needs, choices, and aspirations. Platforms allow organizations to understand not just how individuals choose services, but how they use them, closing the gap between intention and implementation. When built ethically and grounded in trust, platforms preserve agency while enabling organizations to scale personalization and responsiveness. Moser emphasized that the future of social impact will belong to leaders who harness technology not to replace human relationships, but to multiply them.

Together, Grenny and Moser delivered a resonant message: lasting social change requires both behavioral insight and platform-enabled systems. Change happens when people are surrounded by supportive norms, clear expectations, and environments designed for success; and it scales when organizations adopt platform thinking that centers the individual and enables continuous adaptation. For global development practitioners, the keynote offered three overarching takeaways: 1) Behavioral change is predictable and designable, identify the vital behaviors and activate the six sources of influence. 2) Measurement is moral, organizations must commit to precise, behavior-based data that is shared ethically and used to empower communities. 3) Platforms are the next frontier, technology should reveal unmet needs, connect people to solutions, and amplify human agency rather than diminish it.

This plenary provided a powerful blueprint for moving from episodic interventions to sustained systems of support, offering the Cerrito Forum audience both the scientific foundation and the technological pathway to achieve transformational, community-led change at scale.

Session
– Community Data Analysis with Artificial Intelligence

In this plenary session moderated by **Professor Rob Krueger of WPI**, the panel explored how artificial intelligence can transform community development when used responsibly and anchored in trust. **Rafael Guerreiro of Zapform**, drawing on his background in telecommunications and community-centered tech, emphasized that AI can radically improve how local realities are understood, moving from static, spreadsheet-based reporting to dynamic pattern recognition and real-time feedback loops. He stressed that community members must remain co-creators of data, not passive subjects, and called for clearer regulation and transparency to prevent exclusion, bias, and misuse. **Davide Gallo of Vetta Solutions** built on this by framing AI as both a massive opportunity and a potential "digital divide in disguise." He argued that AI's power lies in capturing richer, more complex human stories than traditional surveys allow, but only if its use remains grounded in human judgment, ethical design, and organizational culture. **Zahid Torres-Rahman of Business Fights Poverty** highlighted AI's potential to dramatically expand collaboration, inclusion, and access to knowledge. Describing how generative AI has transformed his

> *"There's a revolution happening in the world of software right now, full of opportunities and challenges. We have a responsibility to ensure that AI works for people and is used for good, not to perpetuate disparity or serve profit alone.*

organization, Business Fights Poverty, he argued that AI can act as a multiplier for social impact, if and only if it is embedded within trust-based, human-centered relationships.

The panel collectively emphasized three takeaways for the global development community: (1) AI must strengthen, not replace, human agency and community voice; (2) trust, transparency, and accountability are the foundation for ethical AI deployment; and (3) social-impact organizations should embrace AI now, while self-regulating for equity, explainability, and inclusiveness. Ultimately, the panel concluded that AI is not a solution in itself but a powerful tool, one that can either deepen inequalities or amplify community-driven change, depending on the values guiding its use.

Plenary
– Climbing Out of Crisis Toward Prosperity

Jaime Viñals uses his journey from a casual volcano hike in Guatemala to becoming one of the few people to complete the "World Trilogy" (Seven Summits, Seven Islands, Seven Volcanoes) as a metaphor for how individuals and institutions confront limits, crises, and opportunity. He frames life as a constant internal battle between a negative side, driven by fear, excuses, and victimhood, and a positive side rooted in pride, purpose, and the will to improve. The turning point, he argues, is commitment: once he chose to own his decision to climb, complaints no longer "counted" only responsibility for the path he had freely accepted. From climbing all 594 summits in Guatemala on foot, to learning Andean mountaineering in South America and alpine and extreme techniques in Europe, Iceland and Indonesia, his story becomes a longitudinal case study in deliberate skill-building, incremental progress, and disciplined execution. Achieving his largest goals were not the result of exceptional talent or perfect starting conditions, but of starting with very little, learning continuously, and breaking self-imposed barriers like "I can't" and "I don't have enough."

> *To overcome any crisis, the first thing you need is a goal: your why. Why do I do what I do? If I combine that with commitment, consistency, and courage, I'll have the ability to break through any barrier or obstacle I find along the way.*
>
> **Jaime Viñals, Mountaineer**

The Everest narrative sits at the heart of his plenary as a structured reflection on crisis,

responsibility, and learning, highly relevant to global development practice. His first Everest expedition, flush with external funding and overconfidence, failed to reach the summit and ended with the death of four teammates. Viñals insists that such crises—whether accidents, bankruptcy, family breakdown or organizational failure, must be treated not as bad luck but as consequences we need to understand and own. We are, he says, authors of our successes and our failures. The second, self-financed attempt required creativity (raffles, selling his motorcycle, building credibility through other climbs), meticulous planning, and humility. That effort succeeded, but he contrasts his own outcome with that of a teammate who suffered severe frostbite and amputations, a difference he attributes not to luck, but to daily micro-decisions around discipline, like hydration, in an extreme environment. For Viñals, long-term resilience emerges from four pillars: clear purpose, commitment, consistency, and courage, expressed through teamwork, execution (finishing what you start), and the willingness to keep setting new challenges even after major milestones.

Plenary
– Brigit Helms, Miller Center for Global Impact

Brigit Helms, Executive Director of the Miller Center for Global Impact at Santa Clara University, began her address with gratitude and familiarity, speaking not as a distant expert, but as someone whose roots and career were shaped in Latin America. Half Mexican and deeply connected to the region, she positioned herself within the same ecosystem of changemakers gathered at Cerrito. From that shared starting point, she unpacked a question at the heart of the global development discourse: how can social entrepreneurship reinvent capitalism from the bottom up?

> *We need to innovate financial instruments, catalyze others to act and connect social enterprises with sources of capital.*
>
> **Brigit Helms, Miller Center for Global Impact**

Helms argues that the capitalist system, as currently configured, leaves far too many people behind. For her, social entrepreneurship represents not a peripheral movement but a potential re-engineering of capitalism itself, a redesign from within that re-centers human purpose and community well-being. She illustrated this with the story of the Deacon, a small farmer from Githunguri, Kenya, whose life was transformed through Sistema Bio, a Mexican-born social enterprise now operating in Africa and India. By converting animal waste into clean biogas and organic fertilizer, the enterprise helped him triple his income, improve his family's health, and reduce environmental emissions. This, Helms emphasizes, is what authentic social entrepreneurship looks like, not charity disguised as commerce, but mission-driven enterprises that combine financial sustainability with measurable social and environmental outcomes. The form, whether nonprofit or for-profit, is secondary; what matters is the mindset of the entrepreneur and the model's ability to solve problems defined by communities themselves.

Defining the Social Enterprise: Beyond "Buy-One-Give-One"

Helms draws a sharp distinction between genuine social enterprises and corporate philanthropy models like TOMS Shoes, which promise that consumption equals compassion. While such companies have positive intentions, she noted, their impact can be superficial or even harmful, as when shoe donations disrupted local markets. True social entrepreneurship, she explained, focuses on systemic change rather than transactional goodwill: "We're not teaching people to fish; we're revolutionizing the fishing industry."

She cites examples from the Miller Center's global network, such as Clínicas Azúcar in Mexico, which now serves over 500,000 clients across 50 clinics, and Someone Somewhere, a brand that partners with craftswomen in Mexico's poorest regions, helping them triple their income. These cases, she noted, demonstrate that inclusive, community-defined innovation can achieve scale and sustainability.

The "Valley of Death" and the Capital Gap

Helms notes the structural barriers that prevent promising social enterprises from thriving, most notably, what she called the "valley of death." Early-stage ventures often have access to grants, microloans, and competitions, but as they mature, funding dries up just before they become viable. Impact investors, meanwhile, tend to engage only once annual revenues reach the $1–2 million mark, leaving a dangerous gap between promise and scale. The underlying issue is a failure of translation, entrepreneurs and investors "speak different languages." Financial instruments remain mismatched to the needs of mission-first enterprises, and capital providers often wait for others to move first. "Impact investors love to be the first," she quipped, "but never the second." The result is a distorted system where capital availability doesn't align with social innovation potential.

Helms calls for new financial architectures that blend philanthropy and investment into a true continuum of capital. At the Miller Center, this is known as the "capital stack" approach, layering different forms of finance to maximize leverage. In one pilot, the Center achieved a 12-to-1 ratio, with every dollar invested attracting twelve more. Such catalytic models, she argued, could turn the valley of death into a bridge of growth.

Helms offers a candid critique of the global impact investing narrative. While reports boast of $1.6 trillion in assets under management, she asked pointedly: "Where is that money? Because it isn't reaching the entrepreneurs." The promise that deep social impact can coexist with commercial-level financial returns, she warned, is misleading and harmful. For many social enterprises, particularly those tackling poverty and climate resilience, these dual returns are structurally incompatible. Instead of comparing social investment to commercial markets, Helms proposed benchmarking it against philanthropy, reframing impact investing as a more efficient form of giving, not a speculative asset class. "We must measure success not by ROI," she said, "but by lives improved."

Gender and the "Brilliance Bias"

Helms devoted a powerful section of her keynote to gender inequality in venture capital. Despite decades of advocacy, women-led businesses in the United States receive only 2% of total venture funding, a figure that is actually declining. The issue, she explained, is not performance, studies by BCG and others show women-led ventures often outperform, but perception. She describes

what researchers call the "brilliance bias": the unconscious association of genius with male imagery. Society's archetype of "the brilliant innovator," she said, too often defaults to men who "look like us." To counter this bias, Helms celebrated figures like Mae Jemison, the first Black woman in space, a doctor, engineer, and polyglot, who remains largely unrecognized in mainstream narratives. The call to action was clear: gender bias will not correct itself. It must be confronted intentionally, through awareness, representation, and equitable capital access.

Money, Mindsets, and the Role of Government

Helms also addresses one of the session's most provocative questions: whether all programs must be financially self-sustaining. Her answer was nuanced. "Not everything has to be entrepreneurial," she clarified. Governments retain a vital role in scaling proven solutions and providing safety nets. "We subsidize the richest man in the world, over $3 billion to Tesla, so why do we expect social enterprises working with the poorest to survive without support?" She argued for hybrid thinking, where entrepreneurship, public policy, and philanthropy each play complementary roles. The goal is not to commercialize every social good but to ensure every initiative, whether market-based or state-supported, is designed for lasting impact.

Helms closed by returning to the moral foundation of social entrepreneurship: purpose. When asked how to shift a mindset obsessed with profit, she answered simply: youth. Across regions, she sees young entrepreneurs driven not by personal gain but by a desire to solve the problems they witness firsthand. Their instinct, she said, is not transactional but relational: "If they respond to the pain points of their communities, the business model will follow naturally."

For her, the task is not to teach them to chase capital, but to trust their empathy as strategy. In an era of polycrisis, she concluded, the world does not need heroic lone saviors. It needs networks of collaboration, humility, and shared leadership, because the complexity of today's challenges demands nothing less.

Conversation Café: How Well-Being is Approached in Different Institutional Settings

Across the Conversation Café groups, participants emphasized that well-being is a multidimensional construct, spanning financial stability, physical and mental health, spirituality, emotional development, purpose, and social connection. While definitions varied, the collective insight was clear: organizations must first understand what well-being means to their people before they can meaningfully support it. Many stressed that staff cannot promote well-being externally if they are depleted internally; listening, empathy, and humility were repeatedly identified as core competencies. A holistic approach requires attending to the full person, family life, emotional states, spiritual grounding, pleasure in one's work, and the disciplined self-reflection needed to align personal and professional goals. Several groups highlighted that well-being generates tangible returns, including improved performance, healthier organizational cultures, and greater trust between teams and leadership.

Participants also explored practical mechanisms for strengthening well-being in institutional environments. One group used the metaphor of the heart's sinoatrial node, charging through stability and positivity, and discharging under stress, to illustrate the importance of emotional regulation and supportive environments. Others discussed strategies to reduce emotional transference within teams, including psychoeducational tools, first-aid mental health training, and structured support for families. A recurring theme was the need to revisit the idea of "work–life balance," reframing it instead as life–work balance, with life, and human dignity, at the center. Discussion groups noted that many employees report feeling happier at work than at home, emphasizing the workplace's growing role as a site of psychological safety and social connection. To strengthen this, groups proposed listening sessions, supportive conversations, and the use of tools like the Poverty Stoplight to personalize support and open dialogue. Several participants also urged social-purpose organizations to model best practices and to influence commercially oriented companies to adopt more human-centered approaches to well-being.

Plenary
– Kiana Calloway, Civil Rights Activist

Kiana Calloway delivered one of the Forum's most powerful testimonies, a story of transformation from incarceration to innovation. Having spent 17 years imprisoned for a crime he did not commit in an American state known for imprisoning Black men, Calloway described his journey from systemic injustice to self-determination. Even his travel difficulties en route to Paraguay, a moment where he again felt helpless, became a metaphor for the lingering constraints on freedom faced by those who have been marginalized. His central message was clear: freedom is more than release; it is agency.

He challenged the audience of policymakers and social entrepreneurs to confront the inequities of the U.S. justice system, where one in three Black men faces incarceration. Yet, rather than anger, Calloway offered hope. "The closest to the problems are the closest to the solutions," he declared, urging that communities must be resourced to lead their own change. His second birth, pursuing a master's in criminology while organizing his community, embodies his belief that proximity equals insight, and that personal experience is a form of expertise that systems must recognize.

> *This is how we re-envision and recreate what social justice looks like and how we change the world. The people closest to the problem know the space the best but have the least resources to fix it. We're changing that.*
>
> **Kiana Calloway, Civil Rights Activist**

Healing, Agency, and Human-Centered Metrics

In a moment that transformed the plenary into a collective reflection, Calloway invited participants to write three words, Love, Patience, and Forgiveness, and rate themselves red, yellow, or green. This exercise, modeled on the Poverty Stoplight framework, showed how indicators can become instruments of empathy, not bureaucracy. "If you're not your true authentic self," he said, "you'll be nothing to the work." Through shared dialogue and affirmation, the session evolved into a live demonstration of healing as development, a reminder that inner repair is foundational to social repair.

Drawing from his work at Roots of Renewal NOLA, Calloway explained how his team adapted the Poverty Stoplight to map and respond to New Orleans' reentry and community needs. Their "Communities Act Now" events brought together police, youth, and families through sports and dialogue, all built on human-centered metrics, identifying barriers to education, childcare, and employment from the community's own voice. Tangible results followed: parents re-enrolled in school, families accessed childcare, and youth reconnected with mentors. By transforming data into dialogue, Calloway demonstrated how healing, participation, and agency converge into sustainable change.

From the Margins to the Table

Calloway's story culminated in an act of civic reclamation: once denied the right to vote, he has now been elected to public office in Louisiana. "Politicians create menus for tables they've never pulled a seat up to," he said. "Now, I have a seat, and I carry my community with me." His trajectory, from prison to policymaking, illustrates that restorative justice and democratic participation are inseparable. His message extended beyond borders: whether in Paraguay or New Orleans, justice begins when communities define their own indicators of dignity.

Through lived experience, Calloway reframed poverty and exclusion not as failures of character but as failures of access and imagination. His story urged development leaders to treat agency as the foundation of progress, and to embed empathy and participation into every metric of success.

Session

– Towards a culture of innovation and impact

The panel explored how measurement can move beyond technical reporting to become a human, context-aware, and empowering process. Rather than viewing data as cold numbers, the conversation emphasized that each data point reflects real lives, emotions, and local realities. The speakers highlighted how tools like the Poverty Stoplight can help individuals recognize strengths they didn't realize they had, shifting mindsets from deficiency to possibility. They also discussed the importance of designing measurement systems that honor cultural context, return insights to the people who generate them, and support continuous dialogue between organizations and communities. Together, the panel encouraged seeing measurement not as an administrative exercise, but as a bridge between intention and impact, one that strengthens dignity, agency, and collaborative action.

> *Who defines success? Right now, the dominant culture has a predefined idea of what success looks like. The future is not just about identifying solutions, but about enabling and supporting communities to define and co-create the results they want to achieve.*
>
> **Dr. Stephen Kirnon, Pepperdine University**

Moderator **Carla Aguilar from Stanford Social Innovation Review** in Espanol steered a conversation that treated measurement as a living, human process rather than a technical chore. **Ibrahima Ball of Unbound** emphasized data as dignity: when families use tools like the Poverty Stoplight to self-assess, they discover strengths as well as needs, and locally adapted surveys, compared at the dimension level, respect each community's reality while still allowing global learning and peer-to-peer diffusion through groups like mothers' circles. **Mike Ritz, formerly of Gallup**, highlighted engagement as development: the same principles that lift employee engagement in companies (being heard, having clear expectations, feeling that someone cares) also apply to families using the Stoplight, and when workplaces take these needs seriously, the benefits spill over into homes, communities, and even broader civic life; looking ahead, he warned that AI and text/behavior analytics will bring us much closer to understanding the "why" behind people's choices, so they must be used deliberately for good. **Dr. Steven Kirnon of Pepperdine University** focused on giving data back and co-creating success: when research participants, whether Black mothers in the U.S. health system or formerly incarcerated men, see their stories and numbers returned to them, they stop being "cases" and become contributors, gaining confidence to demand better services, influence policy, and define for themselves what success looks like; for companies, sharing honest, segment-specific evidence is not only the ethical choice, it can become a strategic advantage.

Plenary
– Data-Driven Strategies

In this plenary, moderator **Carla Aguilar of Stanford Social Innovation Review in Espanõl** framed the core question: how can organizations harness the power of data and AI without losing sight of people? She led a conversation with **Davide Gallo of Vetta Solutions** and **Dr. Rob Krueger of WPI** on what it really means to be a "data-driven" organization, emphasizing that it's not about collecting more numbers but about turning them into humane, useful insights. Davide described a data-driven organization as one that seeks insight, like John Snow mapping cholera cases to a contaminated water pump, and stressed that today this includes "unstructured" data such as text, transcripts and language, not just spreadsheets. Rob added that the real "aha" moment for policymakers is when data stops being

> *Many organizations think they need data scientists, but what they really need are environments where people can confidently engage with data.*
>
> **Carla Aguilar of Stanford Social Innovation Review in Espanõl**

abstract and becomes personalized: when it reflects how families actually experience deprivation and helps them see themselves and their needs more clearly.

Carla then guided the discussion toward people and practice: what skills and structures are needed to use data well? Davide argued that the critical capacity is not technical mastery but essential "soft" skills: the ability to iterate, prototype, and "learn how to learn," supported by organizational cultures that break down silos and give staff time to experiment with new tools. Rob pushed back on the idea of "soft skills," insisting they are foundational for policymakers who must interpret and act on data. On data ownership and ethics, Rob underlined that the person who gives the information should remain at the center, and that tools like the Poverty Stoplight are more ethical when people get something back from sharing their data. Davide introduced the idea of benevolence: people will trust data systems when, like a doctor, the institution clearly uses their information for their benefit rather than to profile or sell to them.

Carla also steered the conversation into AI readiness. Davide suggested that organizations are "ready" when they have basic data infrastructure (a simple data platform where tools can talk to each other), are already recording and storing their own knowledge (e.g., meeting transcripts), and staff are experimenting with different AI models as everyday "co-pilots." He stressed that AI will augment, not replace, analysts and social workers, and that over-reliance will cause "spectacular failures." Rob, drawing on his work with the Poverty Alleviation AI (PAI), warned that even when AI surfaces optimal interventions, human facilitation is essential to translate results into culturally relevant, co-created solutions rather than top-down prescriptions. To make this concrete, Davide demoed a self-service analytics tool that lets non-technical users query Poverty Stoplight

data in plain language ("How many families?" "What's the average score by dimension?"), illustrating how AI can democratize access to insights.

Looking ahead to 2030, Carla asked what the future of data-driven social organizations should be. Rob said the global development community must take data provenance and quality very seriously, especially for marginalized groups, avoiding the temptation to lean on cheap proxies and de-contextualized "big data" that ignores how and why information was collected. Davide envisioned social organizations running "highly agentic" AI-supported operations, where human–AI collaboration is as normal as using a personal computer today, and where tools are accessible enough that staff can interrogate their own data in natural language. Carla closed by underscoring the key takeaway: truly data-driven organizations are those that collect the right data in a human, transparent and reciprocal way, build internal confidence to work with it, and never lose sight of who the data is for and how it will be returned to them.

Culture and Experiences

Participants engaged in a rich array of cultural, educational, and community-centered experiences that showcased the depth of Paraguay's heritage and the ingenuity of its people. Traditional folkloric dance performances and Indigenous musical presentations offered an authentic glimpse into local history and ancestral storytelling, while tango lessons invited participants to experience one of the region's most iconic cultural expressions firsthand. Local artisans and craftspeople enriched the atmosphere with vibrant displays of handmade jewelry, baskets, and traditional crafts, creating opportunities for direct engagement with the creative economy and the livelihoods it sustains. A native drink of Paraguay, Tereré (of Guaraní origin) was served and enjoyed by many, and is an infusion of yerba mate prepared with cold water, a lot of ice and pohã ñana (medicinal herbs). The renowned Sonidos de la Tierra Water Orchestra further highlighted the intersection of artistry and sustainability, performing with instruments made from water and recycled materials, an inspiring testament to community innovation and environmental stewardship.

Community visits and educational experiences deepened participants' understanding of Cerrito's development model rooted in agency, entrepreneurship, and collective action. At the Escuela Cerrito agricultural school, student- and teacher-led tours demonstrated how young people apply classroom learning through real enterprise management, from crop production and dairy processing to hospitality and on-campus businesses. The dynamic "learn by doing, selling, and earning" model was further illustrated through immersive activities such as visits to the cheese factory, where students take part in every stage of production. Additional field experiences, including meeting families who have used the Poverty Stoplight to transform their life conditions, connecting with women's committees driving economic and social empowerment, and touring the Nelixia Factory to explore sustainable essential-oil production, offered powerful insights into how locally led solutions, strengthened capacities, and dignified opportunities reinforce community resilience and long-term development. Together, these experiences highlighted the essential role that culture, creativity, and grassroots leadership play in advancing equitable and sustainable change.


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Campesino
YERBA MATE
Campesino

Additional sessions, not summarized in this report, occurred throughout the two day event, on topics such as “What is an intrepreneur?”, “Digital education for development”, and “Evidence that transforms” and included speakers such as **Melissa Velazquez of Unbound, Marcela Astudillo of Fundación Carvajal, Guillermo Pou Munt of Orkidea Andina, Hugo Alonso of Cervepar, Ruth Pereira of Great Place to Work, Isabel Baggio of Banco da Familia, Martin Galarza of Saenz Jacome & Galarza, Georgia Schmidt of Banco da Familia, Wilson Valmerati Dutra of Zapform, Carla Arenales of Locfund, Alberto Samaniego of 55.design, Samuel Moguilner of Senpai Academy, Dra. Andrea Oñelik of Fundacion Retina, Cecilia Rojas of Paraguay Educa, Roberto Rubin of Dato, Wilson Valmerati Dutra of Banco do Emprendedor, Alejandro Bestard of Bex, Ángela Díaz of Nutriendo PR, Carlos Jara of Soluciones Ecológicas, Jeshem David Cassola of UFM, Juan Carlos Pane of La Colmena, and Julia Corvalan and Nancy Ramos of Fundación Paraguaya.**

Illustrator Laura Baez summarized the core lessons and takeaways found in both days of sessions beautifully in these graphics:


CRISIS
AS A CATALYST TO
THRIVING
DAY 2
SURPRISE
ENTHUSIASM
Cerrito
FORUM 2025
LEARNING BY DOING
INNOVATION
PERSONAL GROWTH
LEARNING
GUIDANCE
EXPERIENCES
EMPATHY
COURAGE
POWERFUL STORIES
INSPIRATION
SUPPORT
DRIVE
Cerrito
poverty stoplight
fundación paraguaya


CRISIS
AS A CATALYST TO
THRIVING
What am I learning?
A-HA Moments
Cerrito
FORUM 2025
KNOWLEDGE ALWAYS HAS ROOM FOR MORE
TECHNOLOGY WITH A PEOPLE CENTERED APPROACH
Raise Awareness
Self-reflect
CRISES REVEALS OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH ACTION & Renewal
WE CAN DO IT!!!
How important it is to know English
Beauty of nature
Beautiful Chaco
Are we DEPENDENT or are we changing the system?
"We need to care more about our MISSION than our ego"
TAKE CARE OF PERSONAL DATA
We are here thanks to DIGNIFIED WORK
WE'LL DO IT FROM WITHIN THE SYSTEM!!
Neuroplasticity is great, but it can make us get used to the new "normal"
CULTURE OF INTRAPRENEURSHIP
BUILD TRUTS BETWEN THE PUBLIC, PRIVATE AND SOCIAL SECTORS
The most important CAPACITY you possess is the ability to INFLUENCE BEHAVIORS
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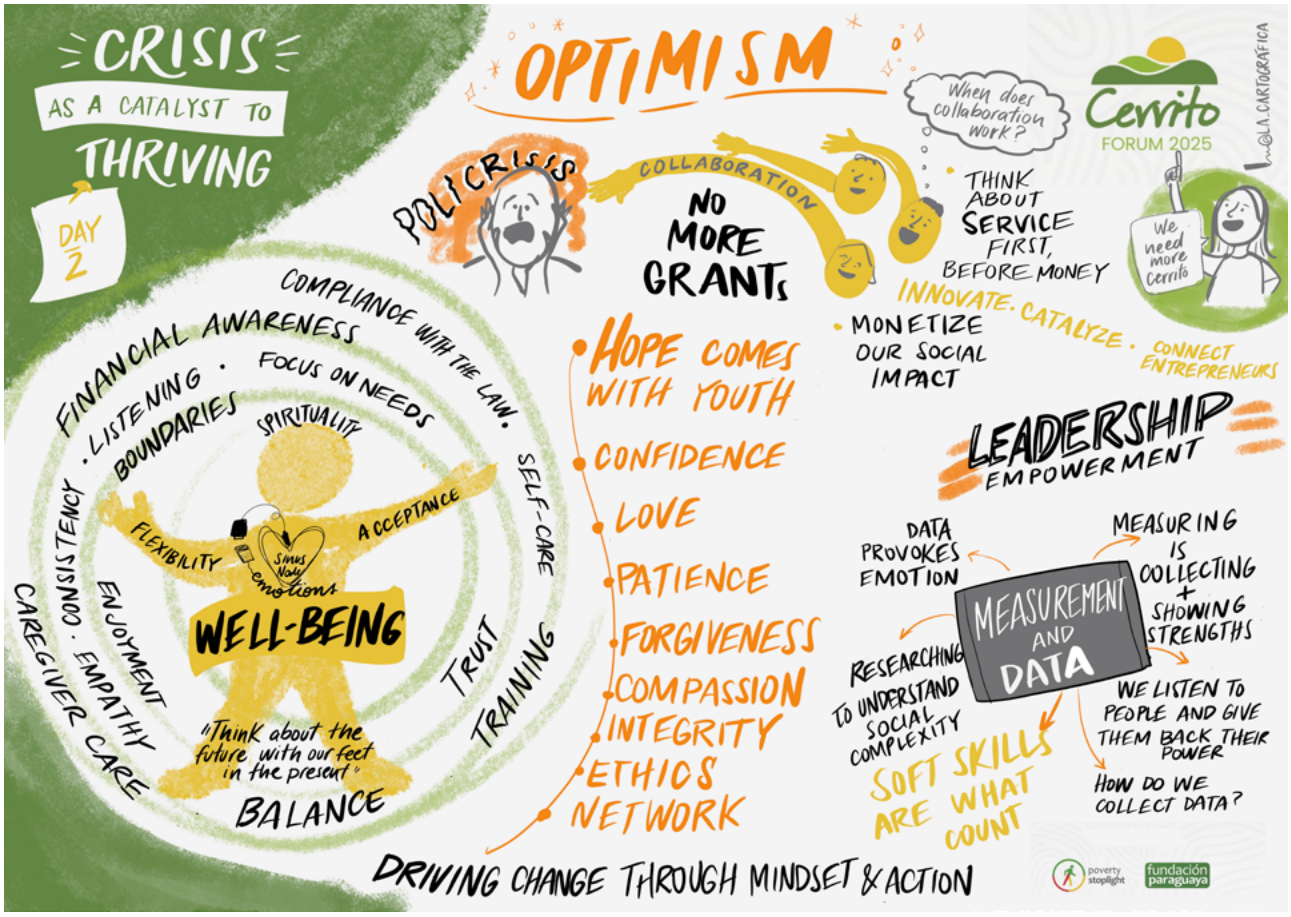
CRISIS
AS A CATALYST TO
THRIVING
DAY 2
OPTIMISM
POLICRISIS
COLLABORATION
When does collaboration work?
NO MORE GRANTS
THINK ABOUT SERVICE FIRST, BEFORE MONEY
Cerrito
FORUM 2025
We need more Cerritos
INNOVATE. CATALYZE. CONNECT ENTREPRENEURS
MONETIZE OUR SOCIAL IMPACT
HOPE COMES WITH YOUTH
CONFIDENCE
LOVE
PATIENCE
FORGIVENESS
COMPASSION
INTEGRITY
ETHICS
NETWORK
LEADERSHIP
EMPOWERMENT
COMPLIANCE WITH THE LAW
FINANCIAL AWARENESS
LISTENING
FOCUS ON NEEDS
BOUNDARIES
SPIRITUALITY
ACCEPTANCE
FLEXIBILITY
SELF-CARE
TRUST
TRAINING
ENJOYMENT
CONSISTENCY
EMPATHY
CAREGIVER CARE
WELL-BEING
"Think about the future with our feet in the present"
BALANCE
DATA PROVOKES EMOTION
MEASUREMENT AND DATA
MEASURING IS COLLECTING + SHOWING STRENGTHS
RESEARCHING TO UNDERSTAND SOCIAL COMPLEXITY
WE LISTEN TO PEOPLE AND GIVE THEM BACK THEIR POWER
SOFT SKILLS ARE WHAT COUNT
HOW DO WE COLLECT DATA?
DRIVING CHANGE THROUGH MINDSET & ACTION
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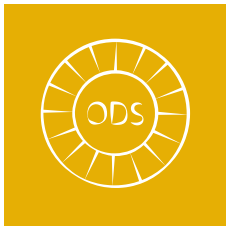

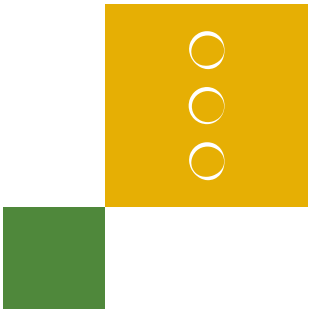

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