

# We The People

Defending Democracy—from Crisis  
to Collective Action



## Introduction

As democratic institutions face unprecedented challenges, inequality, and global economic realignments, new approaches are urgently needed to protect civic space and reimagine governance. We the People: Defending Democracy from Crisis to Collective Action was convened by *The Digital Economist* in Washington, DC, alongside the 2025 World Bank–IMF Spring Meetings, to catalyze cross-sector dialogue on defending citizen rights, advancing transparency, and building resilient, inclusive economic systems.

The convening drew experts from public policy, economics, technology, civil society, and grassroots organizations. Throughout this one-day event, nine sessions engaged key stakeholders from around the world, from North America, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and Southeast Asia. These sessions tackled a range of intersecting issues: digital governance, public goods, health equity, geopolitical sovereignty, sustainability with a shared commitment to structural justice, and systems-level innovation.

The event opened with visionary remarks from Navroop Sahdev, CEO and founder of *The Digital Economist*, and closed with a collective reflection and a call to action led by her and Jose Luis Carvalho, executive director of *The Digital Economist's* Center of Excellence on Human-Centered Global Economy.





## Sessions Overview

### **1. Opening Remarks: Defending Democracy in a Fractured World**

Framing the global crisis of democratic backsliding and the collective tools needed to rebuild civic trust.

### **2. The Global Fight for Democracy: Defending Rights in the Age of Digital Authoritarianism**

Addressing algorithmic repression, state surveillance, and civil society resilience.

### **3. Citizen Security and the Future of Rights**

Examining how rights-based governance responds to political instability, migration, and violence.

### **4. The Commons Under Attack: Protecting Public Goods, Digital Spaces, and Natural Resources**

Centering sustainability, information access, and environmental governance.

### **5. Trade, Geopolitics, and the Economic Battle for Sovereignty**

Navigating new economic blocs, supply chain dependencies, and national development strategy.

### **6. Women's Rights, Diversity, and the Economic Power of Inclusion**

Making the case for inclusive institutions as drivers of growth and equity.

### **7. Building a Global Coalition for Human-Centered Governance**

Highlighting models that align digital transformation with dignity, civic trust, and fiscal resilience.

### **8. Health-Care Access and Sovereignty**

Exploring the links between public health delivery, data governance, and collective well-being.

### **9. Where Do We Go from Here? A Call to Action**

A synthesis session focused on translating insights into action across sectors and communities.

Across the program, participants surfaced urgent insights into how to reclaim democratic practice, design inclusive digital systems, and build coalitions that prioritize people over platforms.



## Session 1

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### Opening Remarks: Defending Democracy in a Fractured World

This opening session set the stage for the entire convening by outlining the current crisis of global democracy, marked by eroding public trust, institutional fragility, and declining civic participation. Speakers highlighted the urgency of reframing governance as a shared responsibility between governments, civil society, and the private sector. The session positioned democracy not as a static system but as a process that must evolve to reflect justice, equity, and resilience. Participants called for leadership grounded in humility, collaboration, and long-term systems thinking.

#### Moderator

##### **Navroop Sahdev**

Founder and CEO  
The Digital Economist

#### Panelist

##### **Bernardo Weaver**

Chief Executive Officer Weaver  
Advisory; formerly The World Bank

#### Key Contributions from Speakers

Navroop Sahdev opened the summit by framing the urgent need for convening in a moment marked by global democratic erosion and structural uncertainty. She underscored how the legitimacy of the Bretton Woods institutions—and by extension, the post-WWII global order—is increasingly under scrutiny, driven by a withdrawal of US leadership on the global stage. This vacuum has accelerated multipolarity while simultaneously heightening geopolitical fragility. Navroop pointed to a historic 2024 election year—where over half the world’s population voted—as a backdrop to the rise of right-wing populism, climate extremities, and youth radicalization. Disillusionment with democratic institutions, compounded by the hijacking of power and marginalization of young voices, has catalyzed a dangerous openness to authoritarian ideologies. She called for a renewed social contract built on justice, inclusion, and long-term stewardship.



Bernardo Weaver focused on the economic contradictions embedded in current US policy decisions, particularly around tariffs. He warned that protectionist measures are harming the very populations that uphold essential services—such as seasonal migrant workers, vital to the agriculture sector. He emphasized that energy costs and broader inflationary pressures are exacerbated by these policies, noting that the US government appears to be acting against its own strategic interests. Bernardo's intervention pointed to the need for coherence between economic policy and national well-being, especially as global power dynamics continue to shift.

### **Moderator's Commentary**

Navroop guided the discussion by addressing the absence of a coherent US policy in defending civil rights—domestically and abroad—and its growing alignment with authoritarian regimes. She underscored the betrayal felt by international partners, including European allies, as well as the domestic erosion of civil liberties. The conversation centered on the reality that political institutions in the United States—long considered pillars of global democratic leadership—are increasingly seen as captured by entrenched political and economic elites.

Drawing on audience concerns and global comparisons, she emphasized that democratic legitimacy cannot be decoupled from economic justice. The United States, often seen as a standard-bearer of liberal democracy, is now facing deep internal fractures: an electoral system under strain, growing disenfranchisement of working-class and rural populations, and extreme polarization driven by a sense of abandonment. The result is a paradox where citizens vote for policies that often undermine their own well-being, driven by a belief that the system no longer represents them.

Ultimately, the moderator highlighted the core theme: power resides with the people. Rebuilding trust requires confronting uncomfortable truths about institutional decay and reclaiming democratic agency through structural reform.



## Key Takeaways

- **Crisis of Legitimacy at the Core of Democratic Institutions**  
The weakening of US democratic leadership has global ripple effects, accelerating instability and undermining confidence in multilateral systems.
- **Electoral Systems Are Under Strain**  
With increasing polarization and elite capture, democratic systems risk serving a narrow class of interests, eroding public trust and participation.
- **Disenfranchisement Fuels Authoritarian Tendencies**  
When large segments of the population are economically and socially excluded, they may embrace populist or authoritarian narratives out of frustration and fear.
- **Reclaiming Democracy Requires Structural Change**  
Civic education, institutional reform, and renewed social contracts are essential to revitalizing democratic participation.
- **Connection to Spring Meetings**  
As the World Bank and IMF face calls to reform, this session emphasized that defending democracy goes beyond political systems—encompassing how global economic governance institutions distribute opportunity and reinforce inclusion.





## Session 2

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# The Global Fight for Democracy Defending Rights in the Age of Digital Authoritarianism

This session explored the profound impact of information and communications technology (ICT) on democracy, focusing on the rise of digital authoritarianism and strategies to defend rights in this new era. The discussion unpacked how both state and corporate actors increasingly shape, and sometimes suppress, dissent through digital means. Panelists examined the dual role of technology as both a tool for empowerment and a mechanism for control, highlighting the urgent need for transparent, accountable governance and multi-sector collaboration to safeguard democratic values.

### Moderator

#### **Jose Luis Carvalho**

Executive Director  
Center of Excellence, The Digital  
Economist

### Panelists

#### **William Vogt**

Senior Executive Fellow  
The Digital Economist

#### **Ann Dunkin**

Former CIO for the US  
Department of Energy

### Key Contributions from Speakers

William Vogt provided insights into mapping digital authoritarianism based on his recent publications, illustrating how technology exacerbates both the scale and speed of actions. He has also pointed out the direction of possible solutions:

- **Mapping Digital Authoritarianism**

William Vogt outlined how the optimism that ICTs would naturally foster democracy has been upended by the reality of state and corporate actors vying for control over digital spaces. He described the “race for network control,” where governments and technology companies sometimes collaborate, sometimes clash, but often sideline civil society and minority voices. Striking examples include China’s “Great Firewall,” Russia’s internet controls, and the complicity of Western tech firms in enabling censorship and surveillance even within democratic contexts.



- **Algorithmic Control and Information Manipulation**

William emphasized the proliferation of algorithmic filtering, bot-driven amplification, and the fusion of state and corporate interests in shaping online discourse. These practices erode trust, polarize societies, and make it increasingly difficult for citizens to access reliable information. He highlighted how AI-driven surveillance tools enable real-time monitoring and have a chilling effect on dissent and civic engagement.

- **Creative Resistance and Civil Society Response**

Despite these challenges, William pointed to creative forms of resistance emerging globally. Activists are using encryption, VPNs, and vanishing messages to evade surveillance, while humor and figurative language are deployed to bypass censorship. International cooperation, support for independent media, and the development of global norms for digital rights are critical to countering digital repression.

Ann Dunkin has provided insights into how technology can be used for the public good and also the risks to society if its usage is unbalanced, as well as how to ensure governance for positive outcomes.

- **Technology Management for the Public Good**

Drawing on her experience in public sector technology management, Ann Dunkin confirmed that the trends described by William are increasingly visible, even in established democracies. She warned that when technology is deployed without transparency or accountability, it centralizes power and excludes marginalized voices, undermining the ability of institutions to serve all citizens.

- **Risks to Democratic Institutions**

Ann reflected on the dangers of eroding public trust when citizens feel manipulated or unheard. She cautioned that the normalization of surveillance and censorship, even in open societies, risks democratic backsliding and weakens institutional resilience. The ability to govern for the common good is compromised if digital transformation serves only powerful interests.

- **Strategies for Democratic Resilience**

She advocated for multi-sector collaboration—emphasizing that government, business, and civil society must work together to set standards and share best practices. She emphasized investment in digital literacy, privacy-preserving tools, and open access to information. Leadership that prioritizes inclusion, ethical use, and the public interest is essential to ensure technology supports democracy.



## Moderator's Commentary

Jose steered the conversation toward actionable strategies, posing key questions: How can we prevent technology from becoming a tool of control rather than empowerment? What role should public sector leadership and civil society play in shaping ethical, transparent technology governance? How can international cooperation bolster democratic resilience against digital repression?

He stressed that defending democracy in the digital age requires not only targeted reforms—such as securing election infrastructure and combating misinformation—but also deeper structural interventions to limit digital repression and build public trust.

## Key Takeaways

- **Digital Authoritarianism Is Not Confined to Autocracies**  
Democratic governments and private corporations can also adopt authoritarian tactics, making vigilance and accountability essential.
- **Blurred Boundaries**  
It is unclear at what point digital authoritarianism reflects a shift from a democracy to an authoritarian regime.
- **Multi-Sector Collaboration Is Critical**  
Governments, businesses, and civil society must work together to develop privacy-preserving solutions and global norms that protect human rights.
- **Leadership and Digital Literacy Matter**  
Ethical leadership and investment in digital literacy are essential to empower citizens and ensure technology strengthens.



## Session 3

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# Citizen Security and the Future of Rights— Safeguarding Freedom in an Era of Political Instability

Against a backdrop of political unrest, migration crises, and armed conflict, this session focused on how rights-based governance frameworks can address insecurity and social fragmentation. Experts discussed the balance between security measures and civil liberties, and the risks of militarizing civic space under the guise of stability. The discussion showcased successful models of community-centered safety and participatory justice from Latin America, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. The session underscored that real security begins with inclusion, not exclusion.

### Moderator

#### **Yuri Cataldo**

Co-Founder/GP  
Athenian Capital; Senior Fellow,  
The Digital Economist

### Panelists

#### **Joe Adams**

Immigration attorney; author of  
Extraordinary Aliens, and legal  
advocate for immigrant rights

#### **Mathew Yarger**

CEO of Demia  
Expert in decentralized systems and  
citizen-centric digital infrastructure





## Key Contributions from Speakers

Joe Adams provided a legal lens on the intersection of citizenship, security, and systemic inequities in immigration policy.

- **Legal Perspective on Citizen Security**

Joe emphasized that security is fundamentally tied to legal status but challenged the idea that due process should only apply to citizens. He argued that “security without affordability is just a privilege,” highlighting the financial burdens immigrants face when navigating the legal system.

- **Systemic Inertia in Immigration Policy**

He pointed out that, from a legal standpoint, little has changed—the system remains prohibitively expensive and structurally unjust, particularly for noncitizens.

- **Actionable Advice for the Audience**

Joe shared practical insights on how the audience can support immigrant communities, including funding legal aid, advocating for due process rights, and staying engaged in policy reform efforts.

Mathew Yarger explored how emerging technologies can reshape civic infrastructure, strengthen digital trust, and redefine citizen security.

- **Tech as a Tool for Citizen Empowerment**

Mat argued that decentralized systems and digital infrastructure are critical to modern definitions of security. He noted, “You think you’re in control until centralized infrastructure fails.”

- **Case Studies in Innovation**

He highlighted how countries like El Salvador and Liechtenstein have used blockchain and fintech tools to reduce crime, boost civic trust, and create GDPR-compliant incentives for engagement.

- **Trust Through Consistency**

Mat emphasized that trust in systems—whether public or private—is built through consistency and transparency, not just promises. His examples bridged the gap between abstract technology and real-world impact.



## Moderator's Commentary

The panel began with a grounding question: *What does it mean to be secure as a citizen—or a noncitizen—in an age of political fragmentation and technological centralization?* Moderator Yuri Cataldo drew connections between legal, technological, and economic dimensions of citizen security, challenging panelists and the audience to rethink security beyond traditional definitions.

The conversation emphasized that *citizen security is no longer just about protection from physical harm* but about access to due process, economic participation, and digital autonomy. Joe highlighted the legal complexities faced by noncitizens and the systemic barriers to justice while Mathew demonstrated how decentralized technologies and financial innovations can empower marginalized communities and promote transparency.

The panel linked *surveillance, trust in institutions, and infrastructure resilience* to broader conversations about who controls modern systems of rights—and who they serve.

## Audience Interaction

During the Q&A, most questions were directed at Joe and centered on the current state of immigration policy in the US and abroad. Attendees were eager to understand what practical steps could be taken to support immigrants and ensure due process protections, especially in light of ongoing federal policy shifts.

## Key Takeaways

- **Insight:** Citizen security is no longer confined to state protections—it now includes digital infrastructure, legal status, and financial access.
- **Implication:** Without economic and legal accessibility, rights become a privilege—not a guarantee. New systems must be built with inclusion and resilience at the core.
- **Connection to Broader Goals:** This session advanced the Spring Meetings' goal of fostering systems-level change by showing how law, technology, and finance intersect to shape citizen rights globally.



## Session 4

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### The Commons Under Attack: Protecting Public Goods, Digital Spaces, and Natural Resources

This session focused on the critical challenges posed by privatization, extractivism, and monopolistic control over common-pool resources, examining their impact on natural environments, digital ecosystems, and information systems. Panelists discussed how these forces threaten sustainability, equity, and democracy while offering strategies to reclaim the commons as a global public trust. The discussion emphasized collaborative governance, legal protections, and community-driven solutions to safeguard public goods and shared resources.

#### Moderator

##### **Ambriel Pouncy**

Founder and Executive Director  
Fusion Fashion Tech Society

#### Panelists

##### **Rafal Libera**

Senior Executive Fellow  
The Digital Economist

##### **Sindile Mazibuko**

Founder and CEO  
Skyverse888 Foundation

##### **Michelle Del Valle**

Founder and CEO  
FinSat

##### **Nikhil Kassetty**

Software Engineer  
AI and Technology Thought  
Leader



## Key Contributions from Speakers

Rafal Libera contributed a systems-focused perspective on balancing local empowerment with global coordination, especially in the context of energy transition and resource management.

- **Localized Systems vs. Global Commons**

Rafal explored the tension between localized governance systems and global commons. He emphasized that while localized systems empower communities, they must integrate with broader frameworks to address global challenges, such as climate change, energy accessibility, and digital equity.

- **Energy Transition and Grid Access**

Rafal highlighted the critical role of the energy transition in addressing climate challenges and ensuring equitable access to energy resources. He discussed the importance of bridging the gap between the public and private sectors to close access disparities, particularly for underserved communities, and emphasized the need for cooperative frameworks to manage grid access sustainably.

- **Bridging Public and Private Efforts**

Rafal stressed the importance of fostering partnerships between the public and private sectors to effectively address gaps in common-pool resource management and infrastructure development. He highlighted examples where collaboration has advanced equitable solutions for managing shared resources.

Sindile Mazibuko offered a justice- and equity-oriented view on digital governance, emphasizing data sovereignty, accessibility, and the need for inclusive frameworks rooted in lived experience.

- **Data Sovereignty and Governance**

Sindile emphasized the importance of equitable access to reliable data for empowering marginalized communities and explained that digital personhood is an emerging legal and ethical frontier. Our digital identities require recognition, protection, and agency. She called for regulatory oversight and a polycentric governance model, rooted in Elinor Ostrom's principles, to address power imbalances in data centers and digital infrastructure, ensuring collaborative stewardship across local, national, and global levels. Most hyperscale data centers are concentrated in the Global North, creating disparities in control over the digital economy.



- **Inclusion and Accessibility**

Governance models for the digital era must prioritize accessibility, inclusion, and equity. Sindile advocated for polycentric, multi-stakeholder frameworks that are rooted in lived experiences and distributed accountability rather than centralized, top-down approaches. This approach ensures that diverse voices and perspectives are included in decision-making processes. She highlighted the need for governance systems to reflect the complexity of hyperconnected digital ecosystems.

- **Digital Justice and Sovereignty**

Sindile highlighted data sovereignty as essential for justice in the digital age, warning against the Global South becoming “digital colonies” of platform-dominated systems. She urged reclaiming the digital commons to ensure dignity, human rights, and control over our collective digital future. Without equitable frameworks, Sindile warned that marginalized communities would face further digital disenfranchisement. She emphasized that sovereignty over data is directly tied to sovereignty over destiny in the modern era.

Michelle Del Valle brought a technologist’s lens to environmental sustainability and governance, offering critiques of existing models and proposing locally rooted, data-driven alternatives.

- **Leveraging Environmental Data**

As the founder of FinSat, Michelle discussed with the audience how she utilized satellite data to address pressing global environmental challenges across the solar energy sector. She shared strategies to integrate environmental geospatial analytics into decision-making frameworks for clean energy security and profitability, promoting sustainable solutions for economic and ecological resilience.

- **Challenging Polycentric Frameworks**

Michelle also examined the limitations of applying polycentric governance models to modern challenges. She proposed that while these frameworks offer valuable insights, they must evolve to address the complexities of globalized systems, digital monopolies, and multifaceted stakeholder engagement.

- **Erosion of the Commons**

She analyzed how unchecked privatization and platform monopolies undermine the commons and small businesses, from natural resources to open data. Michelle called for reimagining cooperative and community-driven approaches to promote old-fashioned business, where local community buy-in is necessary to provide value and legacy to the town you live and work in; going global after you’ve successfully served your local community.



Nikhil Kassetty shared insights at the intersection of AI, transparency, and ethical governance, highlighting technology's potential to protect the commons and strengthen civic accountability.

- **AI and Safeguarding the Commons**

Nikhil discussed how AI can be used to protect and manage shared digital and economic resources. He emphasized the importance of leveraging AI-driven analytics and risk modeling to ensure transparency, equity, and sustainability, especially in critical areas like financial inclusion, infrastructure planning, and climate risk mitigation.

- **Technology as a Tool for Accountability**

Nikhil highlighted the role of AI and decentralized platforms like blockchain in promoting transparency, traceability, and trust in public systems. He provided examples of how fintech innovations such as smart contracts and decentralized ledgers—can enhance accountability in managing community funds, subsidies, and resource allocation.

- **Ethical AI Development**

Nikhil stressed that as AI becomes more embedded in financial and civic systems, ethics must be a design requirement, not an afterthought. He advocated for inclusive frameworks that mitigate bias, ensure explainability, and uphold fairness, particularly when AI is applied in decision-making processes that affect access to shared goods and services.

## **Moderator's Commentary**

As the moderator, Ambriel Pouncy led a nuanced discussion, weaving together the panelists' insights on the intersections between natural, digital, and informational commons. The panelists addressed interconnected local and global challenges, such as climate change, the energy transition, labor inequities, and supply chain governance challenges. She framed the conversation through the lens of Elinor Ostrom's principles for polycentric governance, sustainable land development, and equitable access, synthesizing diverse perspectives into actionable strategies.



## Key Questions Included

- How can localized governance models balance the demands of global challenges?
- What role does data sovereignty play in protecting the commons in the age of AI and big data?
- How can we adapt governance frameworks to ensure equitable access and sustainable management of shared resources?

Ambriel emphasized the urgency of collective action and innovative governance to address the growing threats to our common-pool resources. By grounding the discussion in Ostrom's principles, Ambriel emphasized how participatory, decentralized governance can ensure the sustainable and equitable management of common-pool resources. Her suggestions underscored the importance of harmonizing local and global systems to promote equity, accessibility, and resilience in tackling today's most pressing challenges.

## Audience Interaction

The audience raised important questions that deepened the discussion:

- What are the risks of relying on AI to safeguard shared resources?  
Panelists acknowledged the potential for bias and misuse but stressed the importance of ethical AI practices and robust regulatory frameworks.
- How do grassroots movements fit into global governance frameworks?  
Sindile and Michelle both emphasized the importance of empowering local communities through funding, education, and participatory governance.

The session closed with a robust dialogue on actionable steps for fostering collaboration and innovation to protect shared resources.



## Key Takeaways

- **The Commons Are Under Threat**

Privatization, extractivism, and digital monopolies are accelerating the erosion of shared resources, posing significant risks to sustainability, equity, and democracy.

- **Data Sovereignty and Ethical AI Are Crucial**

Ensuring truth in data and adopting ethical AI practices are essential to protecting shared resources and fostering equitable access.

- **Collaborative Governance Is Essential**

Applying inclusive, polycentric governance models and adapting them to modern challenges can help manage both digital and natural commons effectively.

- **Empowering Communities Is Key**

Ensuring marginalized groups have access to resources and a voice in governance is critical for sustainable and inclusive outcomes.

- **Leadership and Innovation Matter**

Leveraging technology and fostering cross-sector collaboration are vital to addressing the complex threats facing the commons today.

This session reinforced that protecting public goods and shared resources is not only an environmental or digital challenge, but it is also a democratic imperative that requires bold, collective action.





## Session 5

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# Trade, Geopolitics, and the Economic Battle for Sovereignty

This session unpacked the changing geopolitical landscape and how trade policy, global value chains, and regional blocs are reshaping national sovereignty. The discussion highlighted how supply chain resilience, inclusive trade agreements, and sovereign digital infrastructure are essential to preserving democratic decision-making. Panelists emphasized that the unraveling of long-standing trade treaties and the widespread use of tariffs are not isolated events but part of a broader pattern of geopolitical fragmentation. In today's fractured environment, geopolitics has become a volatile minefield, altering the economic calculus for countries and corporations alike.

### Moderator

#### **Navroop Sahdev**

Founder and CEO  
The Digital Economist

### Panelists

#### **Bruce Armstrong Taylor**

Chair (Sustainability)  
The Digital Economist

#### **Daniel Stephens**

Senior Partner  
McKinsey & Company

### Key Contributions from Speakers

Bruce Armstrong Taylor emphasized the foundational role of digital infrastructure in the global economy, describing it as the backbone of digital inclusion and national resilience. He argued that sovereign control over digital systems is becoming a defining feature of economic independence. Without robust digital infrastructure, countries risk dependency not only on foreign platforms but on entire ecosystems governed by external rules and values. Taylor noted that the ability to participate in the digital economy hinges on local capacity, infrastructure ownership, and aligned governance models.



Daniel Stephens offered insights from the manufacturing and industrial sectors, noting a marked shift in how corporate leaders assess geopolitical risk. Where once trade and supply chain strategy were seen as primarily operational concerns, geopolitics is now viewed as a top-tier risk factor. CEOs are rethinking sourcing strategies, market access, and even investment priorities in response to rising tariffs, trade instability, and political uncertainty. He underlined that the new era of industrial policy requires a nuanced understanding of both macroeconomic forces and sector-specific vulnerabilities.

### **Moderator's Commentary**

Navroop guided the conversation toward the macroeconomic stakes of geopolitical realignment, particularly for economies deeply intertwined with global trade like the United States. She emphasized that unilateral trade actions—especially tariffs and the breakdown of long-standing trade agreements—are destabilizing the terms of trade and introducing sustained uncertainty. This session illuminated how domestic policy decisions reverberate across global value chains, ultimately reshaping everything from inflationary pressures to national innovation strategies. She underscored that when paired with tax breaks for the ultra-wealthy and corporations, these shifts represent a profound transfer of wealth and power upward, at the expense of working populations.

### **Key Takeaways**

- **Geopolitics Is Now Central to Economic Strategy**  
Tariffs, trade disputes, and national security considerations are no longer fringe issues—they shape core business and policy decisions.
- **Digital Infrastructure Is Sovereign Infrastructure**  
The ability to build, maintain, and govern digital systems domestically is a critical pillar of national economic resilience.
- **The Consequences Extend Beyond Trade**  
Disrupted supply chains and trade volatility contribute to domestic inflation and wealth inequality, reinforcing systemic imbalances across and within nations.



## Session 6

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# Women's Rights, Diversity, and the Economic Power of Inclusion

This panel focused on the enrichment of women's rights, diversity, and the economic power of inclusion, particularly concerning the gender gap in digital economies and the future of work, how exclusionary policies threaten democracy and economic stability, and funding and scaling initiatives for marginalized communities.

### Moderator

#### **Jean Criss**

Founder and CEO  
Jean Criss Media and  
CRISSCROSS Intimates,  
Senior Executive Fellow at  
*The Digital Economist*.  
A media strategist, tech  
innovator, and author of  
*Hear Me Now*, elevating  
women's voices.

### Panelists

#### **Cathy Latiwa**

Senior Adviser at the UN and  
Founder at Latiwa  
Development Foundation and  
BuildHerAFuture Africa.

#### **Donna Maria Bordeaux**

Founder and President of  
Award-Winning Holistic Healing  
Centers and Co-Founder of To  
Live For.

#### **Mary Ann Pierce**

Founder and CEO of MAP  
Digital.

### Opening Remarks

As we close Women's History Month 2025 in Washington, DC, we are reminded of both the progress made and the challenges that remain in the fight for women's rights. Today, four remarkable women—Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, Amy Coney Barrett, and Ketanji Brown Jackson—serve on the US Supreme Court, bringing critical perspectives that shape our nation's laws and uphold the ideals of justice and equality. Yet recent legal and political shifts, including the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, have underscored the fragile state of key protections, particularly for working-class and minority women.



Amid these complexities, women continue to lead with strength and purpose, especially in later life. With 80 percent of Forbes' 100 Most Powerful Women over the age of fifty and the majority of female business owners belonging to the baby boomer or Gen X generations, it's clear that age only amplifies women's impact. Icons like Jane Goodall and Gloria Steinem remind us that advocacy and leadership have no expiration date. Women's empowerment today is not just about access—it's about agency, voice, and the power to influence meaningful, lasting change across all areas of society.

### **Key Contributions from Speakers**

Cathy Latiwa addressed how diversity and inclusion are reshaping Africa's workforce, particularly in marginalized and underserved communities. She explored how the future of work can bridge existing gaps and emphasize the role of digital entrepreneurship in empowering women economically. She also highlighted key barriers—such as financial and infrastructure limitations—that continue to hinder women's participation. Latiwa reflected on the policies and initiatives that can effectively close the digital skills gap between men and women and how equitable access to technology can unlock transformative change.

- **African Americans and Labor**

This was the theme for Black History Month 2025, which highlighted the significant role that labor, in all its forms, has played in the Black American experience—from enslaved labor to organized labor movements and Black entrepreneurship. The discussion covered how inclusion drives economic growth in Africa by advancing women's rights and how diversity unlocks innovation, productivity, and GDP growth. By bridging the digital gender gap with equitable access to technology, she emphasized the crucial impact that digital skills have on the future of work. Furthermore, diversity in leadership and policymaking strengthens economic resilience.

- **Marginalized communities**

By empowering marginalized communities in Africa, we can invest in scalable, community-driven initiatives that elevate underrepresented voices. This emphasis on action is urgent and collective: real change requires bold action, allyship, and accountability from all sectors. Digital entrepreneurship serves as a pathway for women's economic empowerment in the digital economy.



Donna Maria Bordeaux examined how exclusionary policies pose a threat to democracy and economic stability, framing digital entrepreneurship as a powerful pathway to empower women economically. She delved into the multifaceted barriers to digital inclusion—including infrastructure, technology access, and cultural factors—and underscored the role that digital literacy plays in both the gender gap and the broader digital divide. She also discussed how inclusive leadership and values-based policymaking can build a more equitable digital future.

- **Exclusionary Policy**

While exclusionary policy threatens democracy and economic stability, digital entrepreneurship serves as a pathway for women's economic empowerment. Barriers to inclusion are complex and multi-faceted, with digital literacy playing a critical role in both the digital divide and gender gap. Some of these areas include access to technology, digital literacy, infrastructure, cultural and language barriers, age, and disability. Noble leadership can advocate for policies that promote equitable and expanding access to technology and training, as well as adjust, hiring practices. Noble leadership with women's rights can drive positive change by advocating for resources, investing in education, including literacy programs, promoting inclusivity, flexible work schedules, and fostering community engagement by raising awareness through community events, workshops, seminars, and leveraging partnerships.

- **Digital Inclusive Society**

Through these efforts, we can work toward a more digitally inclusive society for all, enhancing creativity, innovation, and overall organizational performance. Our light, our integrity, and our compassion in action are needed now more than ever before. Integrity has no borders. It emanates from within and is reflected in our actions personally and professionally. The greatest way we can affect change in the world is through our own inner awareness, healing, and elevating our consciousness. Individuals must commit to personal growth and a willingness to align with noble values. We can enrich our shared journey by being strong leaders, supporting women's rights and uplifting people, prosperity, and the planet collectively.

Drawing on decades of experience across tech, entrepreneurship, and advocacy, Mary Ann Pierce reflected on how the landscape has evolved for women across platforms. She shared personal observations on exclusionary policies and how they impact democracy and economic stability across her diverse clientele. She also identified successful models for scaling digital literacy and financial inclusion among marginalized women and underscored the importance of women-led innovation in shaping the future economy.



- **Cultural Change**

Despite progress for many women across diverse platforms over time, women in corporate tech meetings are often second-guessed until validated by a male colleague. This underscores persistent gender norms, unconscious bias, microaggressions, and the need for cultural change in corporate environments. The rise of femtech and medtech is a bright spot. Women-led innovation in their long-neglected health care has surged, with platforms, devices, and therapies designed by and for women. Women comprise 65 percent of medical students. Yet it's concerning that male-run companies often secure funding, highlighting a gap between innovation and investment equity.

- **Diversity and Leadership**

Therefore, we must have more women and cultural diversity in public health leadership as well as in funding organizations: family offices, venture, and private equity to ensure the benefits of these neglected innovations reach all women and are run by women innovators who will accrue wealth creation. By far, American women have the economic power to build a better world. During this great transformation of wealth, it is estimated that women will inherit 70 percent of \$82T+. Now we must shift our mindset from being consumers to transforming into creators and investors in the future economy. Building platforms, like Ireland's AwakenAngels, enables women to fund women founders globally.

## **Moderator's Commentary**

Women's rights continue to evolve globally, with both progress and setbacks depending on region, culture, and political climate. While more women are gaining access to education, leadership roles, and legal protections, issues such as gender-based violence, wage inequality, and limited reproductive rights remain widespread. In many places, efforts are underway to ensure women are fully included in shaping the future of work, governance, and social policy.

In Africa, women's rights show a mixed picture: countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia have made significant strides in women's political representation and education, but challenges like poverty, gender-based violence, and limited access to health care still heavily impact millions of women. Grassroots movements and policy reforms are making a difference, but deeper systemic change is still needed.



In the US workplace, the current administration's emphasis on deregulation is viewed by some as undermining labor protections, including safeguards against sexual harassment and discrimination. While this administration promotes policies like paid parental leave for federal employees, broader national policies on childcare, equal pay, and workplace equity remain largely unaddressed. This has raised concerns about whether women, particularly mothers and caregivers, are being adequately supported in the evolving workforce—especially as remote work and automation shift traditional job structures.

Looking ahead, continued influence in American politics could mean further legal and cultural shifts that affect women's autonomy and economic participation. Policies driven by more conservative values could limit progress on diversity and inclusion initiatives in both public institutions and private businesses. However, the backlash to these changes has also fueled activism, pushing more women into leadership, organizing, and advocacy roles. In this way, these policies have not only shaped current challenges but may also galvanize future reforms and more.

In closing, our dialogue with the leadership panel has shed light on the urgent and complex challenges surrounding diversity and women's rights in today's rapidly evolving world. From the gender gap in digital economies to the far-reaching effects of exclusionary policies, it's clear that the future of work must be inclusive and equitable. By embracing collaborative, empowering initiatives—especially for marginalized communities—we move closer to creating sustainable change. Let this conversation be a catalyst for continued action, deeper understanding, and stronger commitment to equity and inclusion for all.

## Key Takeaways

- Progress on women's rights is uneven globally, with advancements in education and political representation in some regions contrasted by persistent challenges such as gender-based violence, wage inequality, and limited reproductive rights in others.
- Policy reforms and grassroots activism are essential to drive systemic change; inclusive approaches that address workplace equity, childcare, and protection against discrimination are critical for supporting women, especially as the workforce evolves with remote work and automation.
- Advancing women's rights and diversity is fundamental to the event's broader mission of building inclusive, resilient economies and fostering equitable participation in governance, ensuring that the benefits of economic and social transformation reach all communities.



## Session 7

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# Building a Global Coalition for Human-Centered Governance

This session focused on how to build and sustain human-centered governance coalitions that are ethically grounded, fiscally strategic, and socially inclusive. Participants discussed what it means to design systems in which technological innovation upholds multiple public values and where civic participation and economic justice are not separate efforts but mutually reinforcing.

### Moderator

#### **Jose Luis Carvalho**

Executive Director  
Center of Excellence, The  
Digital Economist

### Panelists

#### **Imen Ameer**

Senior Fellow (Policy)  
The Digital Economist

#### **Mickie Chandra**

Senior Fellow (Applied AI)  
The Digital Economist

### Key Contributions from Speakers

Imen Ameer presented a structured framework for understanding human-centered governance, emphasizing its dual role in reinforcing democratic legitimacy and economic resilience. She outlined four key contributions:

#### **1. People First, Structure Rebalanced**

Human-centered governance, she stressed, is not a rejection of structure or hierarchy but a demand that process and power be aligned with dignity and agency. Governments must embed participatory design in institutional workflows.

#### **2. Trust as a Social Asset**

Ameer emphasized that trust is not symbolic; it is systemically produced through inclusion, transparency, and civic voice. She drew examples from participatory platforms in Kenya that have improved not only outcomes but also legitimacy.



### **3. Economic Co-Benefits**

Referencing data from the IMF and World Bank, Dr. Ameer argued that transparent governance correlates with higher productivity, reduced corruption, and improved public sector investment returns. She highlighted how inclusive systems increase state capacity and civic compliance.

### **4. Technology for Augmentation, Not Replacement**

She framed AI and automation as tools that must extend human capability, not displace it. This requires strong safeguards, ethics-by-design, and skills adaptation policies that empower people to remain central in evolving institutions.

### **Moderator's Exchange (Jose)**

As moderator, Jose posed critical questions about operationalizing these models:

- How do we avoid techno-solutionism while still innovating?
- What role do regional and cross-sector coalitions play in embedding accountability?

He emphasized that governance must be both ethical and performant and that systems built on trust are more resilient, more adaptable, and more fiscally sound.

Mickie Chandra expanded the lens to education as a governance foundation. She spoke about how curricula, teacher training, and community schools can serve as levers for building inclusive and ethical societies. She called for governance strategies that are intergenerational and locally grounded, particularly in the Global North.

Policy and governance stakeholders undoubtedly play a large role in technology adoption. But technology is a double-edged sword. The case has been made that the incentives to develop and adopt human-centered technology rely increasingly on a different, larger, underlying group of stakeholders—those individuals whose responsibility it is to protect and educate our children and youth while harnessing the benefits of technology. Coalitions at the local level have become increasingly powerful arbiters in dialogue that involves navigating technology use at home and school.



## Key Takeaways

- We have reached a critical point in our relationship with technology. As artificial intelligence permeates all aspects of our digital lives, we feel the risks very acutely and collectively when the interaction between our devices and personal safety and security runs afoul.
- Families and educators must become aware of the advantages and disadvantages of digital life as it evolves.
- Technology is a double-edged sword and calls for more transparency and constant evaluation of how well it serves individuals. Take the example of the pandemic. Governments and policymakers reacted swiftly, and technology bridged the gaps where individuals remained at a distance for an extended period. We stayed connected through technology and advances in that field, but the human costs were unimagined by most. The fallout of that historical event continues to be felt by our school communities.
- Some of the negative ramifications include difficulties faced by our most vulnerable population, our children in our school communities. The loss in learning, focus, and socialization at a critical time in the developing mind cannot truly be calculated in economic terms.
- Though many community groups—coalitions—are organizing to counter the negative effects, there must be a long-term view of how these groups will rise to the challenges and call for leadership for long-term human-centered economic growth.

## Audience Interaction

- Participants asked how to apply this model to education technology and health AI systems. Imen responded that ethical implementation begins at the design phase, with users, civil society, and regulators involved from the outset, not after deployment.
- A question on future skill sets prompted Imen to highlight digital literacy, civic reasoning, and participatory problem-solving as core to workforce transformation under human-centered governance.



## Key Takeaways

- Human-centered governance must be structural and operational, not rhetorical.
- Trust and transparency are drivers of both economic performance and social resilience.
- Coalitions such as the DPGA, Smart Africa, and OGP offer scalable models for rights-aligned innovation.
- Technology must augment human capacity, not replace it, and be governed accordingly.





## Session 8

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### Health-Care Access and Sovereignty

This session focused on the intersection of public health, digital sovereignty, and equitable service delivery. Speakers examined how data governance, fiscal policy, and multilateral financing models shape health-care access in both crisis and recovery contexts. The conversation highlighted disparities in infrastructure, trust in private health institutions, and the risks of tech-driven health exclusion. Case studies from Kenya, India, and Latin America demonstrated that inclusive health systems require both national investment and people-centered design.

#### Moderator

**Yoshita Sharma**

Technical Program Manager  
Microsoft

#### Panelists

**Shannon Kennedy**

CEO  
Sekhmet Advisors

**Dr. Sindhu Bhaskar**

Chairman and CEO  
EST Global Inc.

**Laurel Cipriani**

Vice President  
Clinical Applications at Premise Health

#### Key Contributions from Speakers

Shannon Kennedy highlighted the systemic challenges facing the US health-care system, emphasizing how federalism, while enabling innovation and local autonomy, has also contributed to fragmentation, inefficiencies, and inequities. The division of responsibilities between federal and state governments has led to inconsistent policies, uneven access to care, and administrative complexity that burdens both patients and providers.

She pointed out that the system is largely problem-oriented rather than wellness-focused, prioritizing treatment over prevention. This reactive approach not only increases health-care costs but also adds emotional and financial stress for patients.



Shannon argued that bureaucratic and administrative inefficiencies—not a lack of funding—are at the heart of the issue. She stressed that simply increasing financial investment won't solve the problem unless the allocation and utilization of resources are improved. Federalism, in its current form, often hinders the efficient distribution of these resources.

As a solution, Shannon proposed looking to the Blue Zones—regions known for exceptional longevity and health—as a model. These communities prioritize preventive care, healthy lifestyles, strong social connections, and purpose-driven living. She suggested that adopting similar principles could shift the US health-care system toward a more sustainable, wellness-centered model.

To discuss the impact of AI on health-care systems, Dr. Sindhu Bhaskar was asked how AI has been impacting health care based on his experience and work. He discussed how technology and health care have moved together to create a higher level of health care. AI, both generative and agentic, IOT devices, robotics are all taking care of human beings and creating personal/individual health care regimes wherein wearables help a lot. But still, there is asymmetry in the development, as there is a wide disparity between urban and rural health care.

He also discussed his own product at EST Global, RAH ERC 100. The product has a telemedicine facility and diagnostics, wherein different types of medical tests can be carried out. Results will be available to the doctors who can prescribe medication. The kiosk has an automatic pill-dispenser system. This whole kiosk uses AI, robotic cameras, and various IOT devices to give the result, which is a good example of the application of robotics and AI.

He further stated that health care cannot be an isolated incident. It has to be part of the greater ecosystem. Since EST is an impact platform, the emphasis is to make it available to people who do not have such a facility.

Laurel Cipriani advocated for balancing Medicare/Medicaid budget constraints not through program cuts or limiting eligibility but by strengthening initiatives to combat fraud and abuse (citing significant improper payments), reducing administrative costs via technology, and investing in preventive care to achieve long-term savings.

Laurel highlighted that declining trust in private health-care insurers stems from practices like restrictive prior authorizations (citing an alleged 90 percent error rate in one insurer's denial algorithm), the burdensome appeals process for vulnerable patients, and the frustrating rising costs for essential services like dental, hearing, and behavioral health, despite their proven impact on overall well-being and future costs.



She proposed rebuilding trust in private insurers through enhanced transparency and patient-centric reforms, including clearer health plan information in understandable language; real-time cost estimators; simplified billing; controlled costs through negotiated prices; education for patients so that they can aid in identifying fraud, waste, and abuse; and more straightforward appeals processes.

She called for systemic changes by private insurers, regulators, and policymakers, such as revisiting the prior authorization process (potentially using AI to certify “trusted providers”), ensuring sufficient provider networks, and expanding comprehensive coverage to include high-impact areas like dental, vision, hearing, behavioral health, and wellness offerings to improve health outcomes and ultimately reduce long-term expenditure.

### **Moderator’s Commentary**

- Yoshita opened the session by introducing all three speakers and their current designations and responsibilities.
- She proceeded by inviting Shannon to reflect on the current state of the US health-care system, asking why it is considered broken, how it evolved into its present form, why the model is unsustainable, and what changes might be expected in the future.
- Turning to Dr. Sindhu, Yoshita explored the integration of AI and robotics in health care, focusing on how federal and state policies can support this transition and help overcome resistance to emerging technologies in the industry.
- In discussion with Laurel, Yoshita addressed the challenge of balancing budget constraints with the need for comprehensive Medicare and Medicaid coverage, highlighting the tension between fiscal responsibility and equitable access.
- Yoshita also raised the issue of declining public trust in private health insurance organizations, asking Laurel to explore the causes of this distrust and suggest ways to rebuild confidence through transparency and reform.
- During the audience interaction, Yoshita also expressed her thoughts about how preventive practices from ancient cultures like Yoga and Ayurveda from India should be incorporated into people’s lifestyles.
- The questions targeted to the three speakers focused on the aspects of policymaking, private insurance, financing, and budgeting of health-care systems and the application of emerging technologies and their adoption across states and countries.



## **Audience Interaction**

The audience enquired about certain models we could take inspiration from for a better health-care system. Blue Zones is a great case study for this. Additionally, for preventive lifestyles, countries with ancient wellness practices and household dietary practices, case in point India, should be adopted by health-care consumers to start practicing preventative measures in addition to regular medicine.

## **Key Takeaways**

- The health-care system needs to transition from being problem-based to well-based and prevention-based for long-term sustainability and positive impacts for patients.
- Education across various verticals—including technologies, health care, federal and state policies—is the solution to building a holistic health-care system.
- Patients need to be aware of their rights and have sovereignty over their data to ensure their comfort level and trust in their health-care system. Private insurance providers need to ensure transparency in the services they provide and increase awareness among patients to make the best use of their services.
- The health-care system needs to be fair towards patients in need, supported by Medicare and Medicaid, and have their claims approved when needed. Policies for private health-care insurance need to be regularized to manage funds, keeping the patients' well-being in mind.
- Summarizing the thoughts of the panelists, as we highlight the systemic health-care challenges, we should also understand and acknowledge the need for improvement in health-care policies at both the state and federal levels, and the potential of emerging technologies for the growth of the health-care industry. We also need to balance the budgets through efficiency and rebuilding trust in private insurance via enhanced transparency and comprehensive, patient-centered coverage.



## Conclusion

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### Where Do We Go from Here? A Call to Action

The final session synthesized the insights of the conference and invited attendees to move from dialogue to action. Participants shared personal and institutional commitments to coalition-building, inclusive governance, and ethical innovation.

Building on the foundational call to reimagine democracy as a living, adaptive process, and echoing the urgency to defend rights in a rapidly changing and digitized world, this session, moderated by Jose and Navroop, emphasized the importance of alignment between policy, practice, and values across sectors, to advance equity beyond conversation.

Participants reflected on the cross-sector strategies discussed throughout the day: from the importance of ethical technology governance and inclusive economic systems to the need for participatory models that place people at the center of decision-making.

The closing message was clear: defending democracy requires bold, collective work that centers human dignity. Economic prosperity redistributes power and sustains systems built to serve. And so is the invitation for everyone to join *The Digital Economist* community, bringing projects and ideas, and becoming embedded as fellows and collaborators.



## About

The Digital Economist, based out of Washington D.C. is an ecosystem of 40,000+ executives and senior leaders dedicated to creating the future we want to see: where digital technologies serve humanity and life. We work closely with governments and multi-stakeholder organizations to change the game: how we create and measure value. With a clear focus on high-impact projects, we serve as partners of key global players in co-building the future through scientific research, strategic advisory and venture build out. We are industry-agnostic as most high-impact projects touch many different industries. Our portfolio ranges from energy transition to ethics in emerging technology.

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