



Geopolitical power shifts: The new challenge for progress towards global sustainability



Misum Forum 2025 Speakers



Prof. Tim Besley,
London School of
Economics



Prof. Dean Karlan,
Northwestern
University



Prof. Daniel Nyberg,
University of
Queensland



Johanna Lissinger
Peitz
Ministry of Climate
and Enterprise



Vanessa Butani
Volvo Cars



Ulrika Modéer
Red Cross

Misum Forum 2025 Key Themes

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SUSTAINABILITY

Professor Tim Besley's keynote "Beyond Technocracy: The Political Economy of Sustainability," examined why global climate action remains limited despite broad awareness. He critiqued the technocratic view that experts alone can drive change, emphasizing instead that effective climate policy must work through politics by aligning incentives, building legitimacy, and strengthening institutions. Besley highlighted why progress stalls—weak political will, fragmented governance, and limited state capacity—and stressed the need to integrate environmental responsibility into the social contract between citizens and the state. He noted that public concern often competes with economic priorities and that political polarization further complicates action. Ultimately, he called for both stronger international coordination and grassroots engagement to rebuild trust, enhance state capacity, and make sustainability a core democratic goal.

THE ROLE OF EVIDENCE IN FOREIGN AID

Professor Dean Karlan's address emphasized that cost-effectiveness must remain central as aid budgets face pressure from fiscal constraints, rising nationalism, and political "transactionalism." He outlined four levels where evidence should shape aid: strategy, design, implementation and evaluation. His four mantras for better aid include acknowledging trade-offs, demanding high-quality evidence, distinguishing between using and generating evidence, and building strong local partnerships. Despite challenges like weak data and institutional limits, he argued that collaboration and evidence-driven learning are key. The future of aid, he concluded, depends on smarter spending, deeper partnerships, and collective global learning.

ON THE DE-DEMOCRATIZATION OF CLIMATE CHANGE POLITICS

Professor Daniel Nyberg's address argued that the energy transition is failing politically as much as technologically—renewables are expanding alongside fossil fuels, not replacing them. He linked this failure to declining trust and a shift from participatory to "audience democracy," where citizens watch but don't engage. In this void, fossil-fuel corporations act as "surrogate representatives," shaping policy and public opinion through lobbying and media campaigns that mimic popular support. Nyberg warned this de-democratizes climate politics, leaving decisions to elites. He concluded that real decarbonization requires reclaiming democracy and restoring citizens' role in environmental decision-making.

Misum Forum 2025 Key Takeaways

- Politics and institutions are crucial for sustainability and effective aid. Climate action and foreign aid face structural challenges that go beyond technology or funding. Real progress depends on aligning political incentives, rebuilding trust, strengthening state capacity, and integrating environmental and cost-effective practices into governance.
- Global cooperation is under pressure – but local and private action can drive change. Geopolitical tensions, economic insecurity, and populism strain multilateral efforts. Yet innovation from the private sector, targeted national initiatives, and agile small states show that progress remains possible through collaboration.
- Citizen engagement matters. Democracy risks being weakened in climate politics by corporate influence and low participation. Sustainable transitions need public trust, active involvement, and shared narratives that highlight both collective and local benefits.