

THE CONVERSATIONS THAT SHAPED THE **ARAB IMPACT SUMMIT**

What we heard over two days in Amman, what has moved since, and where we go next.

alfanar VENTURE PHILANTHROPY



The first day of the Arab Impact Summit at the Landmark Hotel, Amman

WHEN AMANI ABED, founder of Zad Al-Ghad School in Gaza, was invited to present her school's challenges to a room in Amman, she was not looking for an audience. She was seeking a community to drive meaningful change for her students and teachers, and the larger education sector in Palestine.

With her students facing years of learning loss, Amani needed support to develop learning tools, rebuild reading comprehension, and support her teachers in an environment where almost every school has been damaged or destroyed. The ed-tech leaders, pedagogy experts, consultants and donors in the room were ready to offer up their solutions to support.

In the weeks since, that support has mobilised a pedagogy expert to focus on working alongside the school's teachers and consultants to strengthen the school's infrastructure, and a recovery plan for its older students is in the pipeline. We return to Zad Al-Ghad at the end of this piece.

This crowdsolving session, and the work that follows, underline what the Arab Impact Summit was for.

Convened by **Alfanar Venture Philanthropy** and **Anara Impact Capital** on 5-6 October in Amman, the Summit brought more than 650 founders, funders, practitioners, young people and policymakers from across the Arab region. This community came together around a shared conviction that this region has always built its own solutions but has lacked the resources and backing to do so on its own terms.

For Alfanar, which has stood behind more than 220 local organisations in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine since 2004, the Summit was a chance to test that conviction with the people who fund, build and shape this work.

5 Conversations stood out, and for each we set out what we take from them.

01 DEFINING IMPACT ON OUR OWN TERMS

Long before the sector called it impact, communities across the region were building schools, cultivating crops, and sharing knowledge to help each other. That giving was rooted in trust, and often practised quietly. Today, many speakers argued that impact is largely defined by funders, with organisations learning to tell their story in the language that gets them funded.

Social impact advisor Khulood Hindiyeh described a project she implemented where the goal was to create jobs and improve income. Though they met every indicator, Khulood shared:

> ***When I asked the person whose income had improved: has your standard of living improved? Have you moved out of poverty? Has the pressure, the stress, increased? That is the positive and negative impact we don't see in indicators.***

If we miss those questions, we lose sight of what is actually changing in the communities we set out to serve.

ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS

Danah Dajani, Senior Vice President of the Abdulla Al Ghurair Foundation, recalled being asked by an NGO which sectors the foundation wanted it to focus on, and responded by asking **"what sectors are needed?"** She urged donors not to engage if they are only going to sign a cheque, stressing: **"you need to listen, you need to engage, and then you need to be able to co-design with partners on the ground."** When funders start from what communities need, the measures of success are more likely to capture what is changing.

While there was broad consensus on the limitations of current frameworks, speakers differed on the path forward – whether existing models serve us at all, or whether, if locally rooted and adapted from one community to the next, they remain important to understanding change. Mary Nazzal, Barrister, Activist and Founding Member of Impact Jordan, suggested we start from our own values, and then ask which global frameworks can serve them, stating: **"we don't need to import international language to be able to represent our impact story."**

OUR ASSUMPTIONS STAY ASSUMPTIONS UNTIL WE ASK

Alfanar Impact Lead Heba Samy's advice was to ask people who live the change simple questions: What changed? What was difficult or unexpected? What changes mattered most?



Much of the funding reaching enterprises in this region comes with institutional frameworks attached. At Alfanar, our role is to help the enterprises we back meet those requirements while capturing what indicators miss, and to bring that evidence back to funders so that what gets measured moves closer to what matters.

02 RETHINKING THE ROLE OF CAPITAL

With international aid contracting and capital from within the region (from family to Islamic finance) growing in influence, the question posed at the Summit was not whether new capital should fill the gaps left behind, but rather, how systems can be rebuilt and resourcing reimagined.

Participants called for leveraging a wider range of financial instruments, such as:

- Concessional debt and working capital for founders where equity is less practical
- Follow-on funding for enterprises operating at pivotal but underfunded phases of growth
- Guarantees that bring private capital into markets otherwise deemed too risky

Within these conversations, a tension emerged around how to prioritise impact and financial sustainability. Some founders and investors stressed that scale potential and profitability are paramount, with business growth providing scope to fuel greater impact. As Mohamed Dhaouafi, Founder of Cure Bionics, put it, “If you are not viable economically, you cannot do impact.”

Others insisted on remaining impact-first: cautioning against the dilution of a company’s mission to fit a specific funding model, and arguing that depth of outcomes is more important than scale.

> *“Different organisations need different kinds of support programmes, different kinds of funding partners and different kinds of funding models.* ***It’s not a one-size-fits-all.***
>
> **Nafez Dakkak**
> **Managing Partner, Anara Impact Capital**

As an organisation providing funding to social enterprises, our view is that impact and viability are not a trade-off, but a sequence. An impact-first mission, for us, is non-negotiable, with the grants we provide able to carry early risk.

We help organisations strengthen both their impact and financial sustainability, so that down the line they are able to access more mature forms of capital with a strong impact foundation in place.

Mohamed Dhaouafi, Founder of Cure Bionics, discussing “Who Gets to Define Impact”



03 WORKING TOGETHER, NOT SIDE-BY-SIDE

From philanthropists to business leaders, from government stakeholders to social entrepreneurs, there was consensus that the region operates in what Susan Brown, Assistant Secretary General of the UNDP, referred to as "side-by-side play". Different actors are working alongside each other on the same challenges, often in the same places, but each on their own trajectory of programmes, priorities and reporting. This results in duplicated efforts and gaps that are never filled – impacting the ability of coordinated work to take root.

Speakers argued for a shift from funding activities to funding systems, and the same logic applies across data and knowledge sharing, mentorship, capability building and policy work. They described building infrastructure for impact that is both regional and relational, underpinned by practices that bring the region's traditions of solidarity and collective self-reliance into how the sector operates.

Crowdsolving can pool knowledge and data so people are not solving the same problem in isolation, co-financing enables multiple partners to take on a different part of the same need, and collectives can give organisations a shared voice with donors and policymakers.



Panellists from left to right: Naila Farouky, CEO, Arab Foundations Forum; May Salameh, MENA Country Director, Corus International; Tala Khlat, Social Impact & Strategic Philanthropy Advisory; Samar Dudin, Regional Director and Head of Programmes, Ruwwad; Nour Nusseibeh, Executive Director, Dalia Association.

COORDINATION IN ACTION

Lebanese Social Enterprise Association (LSE)

The LSE began as a space for enterprises to share their challenges and experiences. It took years, its President Alexandre Salha reflected, to **"build trust between each other and truly become partners in this sector"** – years in which members learned to set aside institutional interests for a shared purpose.

Registered in 2018, LSE now negotiates with donors as a collective, on behalf of its 36 members. For the wider region, its experience shows that this kind of collaboration is built through trust and a willingness to share.

The Summit was convened in this same spirit – to bring the actors who often work side by side into the same room. Yet we recognise that more sustained collaboration is needed to move from conversations to outcomes.

As a result, we will be launching a series of targeted, cross-sector working groups to carry our work together forward.

04 OPERATING WHEN CRISIS IS THE CONDITION

The Summit featured interventions from those building from Palestine to Yemen, from Lebanon to Sudan, with speakers sharing the challenges and learnings that come from operating in some of the region's hardest environments.

Mariam Al Jaajaa, General Manager of the Arab Group for the Protection of Nature (APN), shared an example of farmers in Gaza growing wheat after being told it could not be done. In Sudan, Hanady Abdalla, Operations Manager at 249 Startups, described shifting to matching funds when humanitarian aid proved unsustainable. And in Lebanon, Samer Sfeir, CEO and Co-Founder of ProAbled, described adapting his enterprise model to serve displaced communities while continuing to operate and survive.



Ahmed Sufian Bayram, Founder of Startup Syria on panel "Operating Through Hardships"

Ahmed Sufian Bayram, Founder of Startup Syria, said innovation during the war was driven by survival – with people innovating because "there is no other option available." After the fall of the regime, he called for a move to "opportunity entrepreneurship," where the skills and resilience built during those years can be turned into rebuilding, through "learning from the years of struggle towards progress, rather than waiting and expecting things to change."

What speakers asked was for the room to support them as builders rather than as recipients of aid – through access to networks, markets, and commitments that last beyond a particular crisis. What stood out to us was that the organisations able to respond fastest had the flexibility and freedom to pivot. APN was able to grow food in Gaza because its funding came without conditions, and 249 Startups was able to decentralise its operations and shift to partnerships with the private sector, which was actively reaching out for support.

For Alfanar, this underlines why we provide flexible funding alongside hands-on support: in Lebanon and Palestine, this has meant helping organisations through crisis, with the backing to sustain their long-term mission.

> ***What succeeds in Palestine should succeed anywhere**, because organisations there have already learned to work through challenges others haven't yet faced.*
>
> **Baker Bozeyeh**
> **CEO, Flowless**

05 WIDENING ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY

Widening access to opportunity sits at the heart of work across our region. Yet across the Summit, we saw how access alone is not enough, and that what matters most is how solutions are designed, adapted, and measured. Conversations on employment and education offered two clear examples.

A session on closing Jordan's education-to-employment gap, hosted by Jordan River Foundation alongside speakers from the University of Jordan, the Saudi Jordanian Group for Industrial Development, and the Accreditation and Quality Assurance Commission, explored why so many graduates struggle to find work. They shared that employers are increasingly looking for a combination of technical knowledge, practical experience and soft skills, yet a degree alone is often assumed to show job readiness. Closing that gap, they argued, requires bringing employers in as long-term partners to shape curricula, deliver training and open pathways into work.

Furthermore, when employment is measured, success should not be determined by the number of people trained, but by their ability to access decent work. As Sohair Riad, Programme Officer at the Ford Foundation, shared, organisations are often "caught between job counting as a rigid framework – and what it truly means in terms of sustainability, value, equity and inclusion."

In education, speakers cautioned that providing access to technology or content does not automatically translate into meaningful learning. Lebanese Alternative Learning adapted its digital platform Tabshoura after understanding why it wasn't initially being adopted, while Thaki focused on digital literacy, offline learning and students' motivation rather than access alone. In both cases, the answer came through practice, with Thaki Founder Rudayna Abdo describing "designing by building, rather than building by design." The solutions that last are those developed with local teachers, students and communities, built to be both adaptable and sustainable.

For Alfanar, this influences what we count as success: an enterprise that trains a thousand people or reaches a thousand students has opened a door, and the real test, which is one we want to measure with them over time, is whether those people found decent work, are learning, and are still there a year on.

Rudayna Abdo, Founder of Thaki, on panel "Education in Conflict"



ASKING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AND THE COURAGE TO ACT ON THEM

Speakers also challenged us to examine the systems we operate within and whether existing practices perpetuate injustices we set out to address – and what doing things differently requires.

In a discussion on whether philanthropy is ready to fund structural change, Samar Dudin, Regional Director and Head of Programmes at Ruwwad, asked what it means if we become "extremely good at helping people survive injustice" without ever confronting its causes. Confronting them, others stressed, takes a willingness to be uncomfortable.

> *Courage is in short supply, while fear is abundant.* ***If your advocacy does not make you uncomfortable, perhaps you are not doing enough.***
>
> **Joyce Ajlouny**
> **General Secretary**
> **American Friends Service Committee**

For this courage to exist, it must be built into how we work together. Anam Raheem, Communications & Partnerships Manager of BuildPalestine, stated: "Solidarity has to be something that becomes operational, structural, intentional, and usually risky."

Solidarity of that kind means sharing not only resources but decisions over what gets funded, how success is judged, and who sets the terms. This is the conversation we most need to keep having with our partners to build approaches that are rooted in the solutions that serve the interests of the region.

Regional Director and Head of Programmes at Ruwwad, Samar Dudin, on panel "From Resource Partners to Sovereignty Partners"



THE WORK ALREADY UNDERWAY

Much of what was discussed in Amman is not only an aspiration. Some of it was launched at the Summit, some has moved since, and some was already underway and gave the conversations their grounding.

A strong foundation for social entrepreneurship

Social enterprises are already transforming access to education, employment and income across the region, backed by organisations with years of experience. Since 2004, Alfanar has stood behind local organisations in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine. In Yemen, Wathba's Social Innovation Lab is helping young innovators transform local challenges into sustainable ventures, and BuildPalestine has a multi-stage Fellowship programme that nurtures Palestinian social enterprises from early ideas to investment-readiness.

Crowdsolving for access to education in Gaza

In the weeks since, the conversations that began in that session have continued well beyond it, with Amani now connected to ed-tech providers, education experts, and finance and strategy consultants who are each bringing their expertise to the school's needs. Among them, a pedagogy expert has reviewed all of the school's assessments and spent time with its teachers to understand where support is most needed, and continues to work closely with Amani to strengthen the school's foundations. Building on this groundwork, the next phase will focus on students in grades 4 to 9, whose severe learning losses will require a full plan for comprehension and literacy, additional learning hours, and a strengthened curriculum that uses learning sprints to accelerate progress. While this is only the beginning of a longer journey, it offers an early illustration of **what crowdsolving can make possible when practitioners from across the region commit to standing behind a local leader**, and we look forward to sharing how the work with the school, its teachers and its students continues to unfold.

Regional impact investment

After USAID funding ended, Corus International launched its own impact investment arm to keep backing the people its programmes had supported, with MENA Country Director May Salameh sharing **"it's not about the project anymore. It's our responsibility, as philanthropy, to sustain them for growth."** Regional venture funds are planning to widen their reach, with Rasha Manna, Partner at F6 Ventures, sharing that their current fund covers "Levant minus Syria plus Iraq", and an ambition for the next fund to hopefully include Syria. Anara Impact Capital's launch this year marked the first impact fund for the region.

Knowledge sharing and data

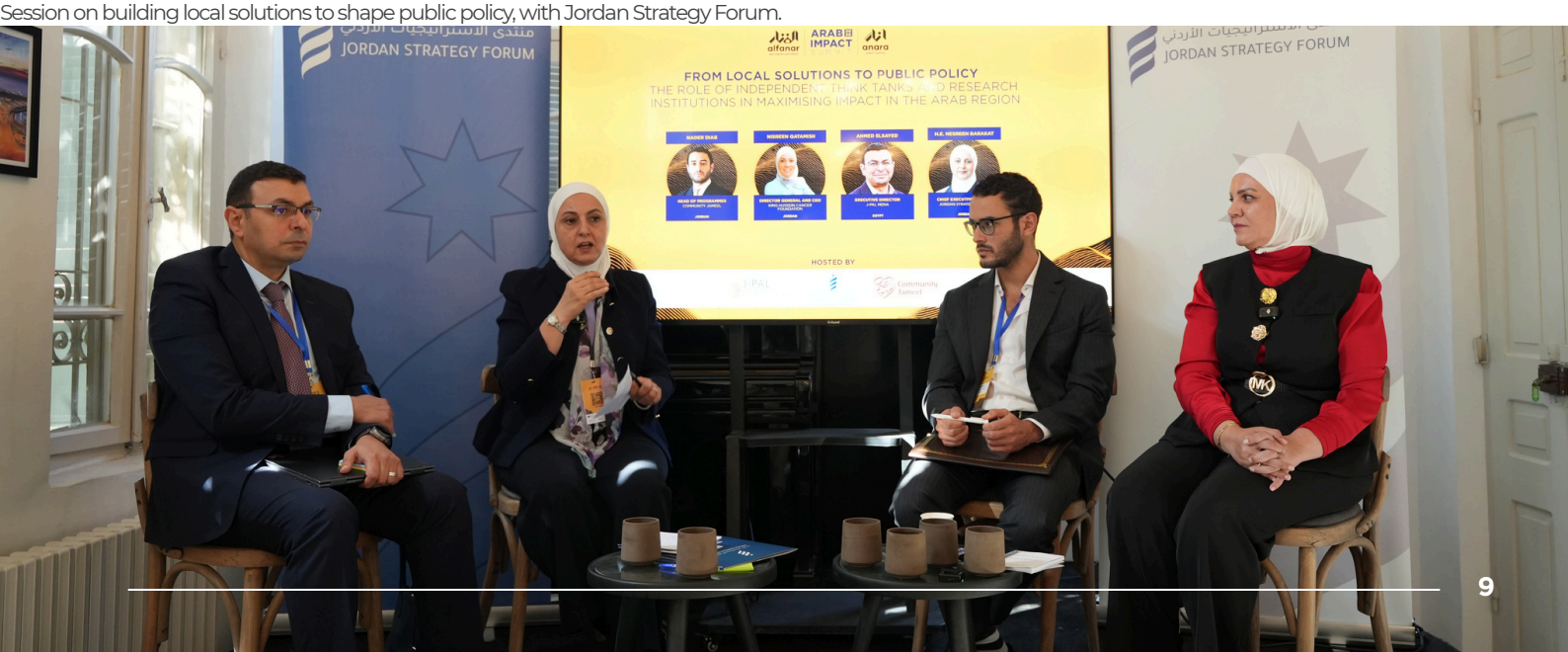
While the region has few independent think tanks, a working session at the Summit, convened by Jordan Strategy Forum and J-PAL, brought lessons on how to build one – **calling for more Arab-to-Arab research on shared challenges such as education, employment and AI**, backed by long-term partnerships with research institutions rather than one-off studies. The Arab Foundations Forum explored its potential to act as a regional hub for knowledge sharing, connecting funders with the organisations they support, reducing duplicated effort, and producing joint case studies that make the region's impact more visible.

Thaura AI, which Syrian Co-Founder Said Chihabi described as the "ethical AI alternative of the world," was built after he and his brother saw major tech companies supplying technology to the Israeli military. Trained on its own constitution to answer the questions other chatbots avoid, and built by a team of two with no investors, it reached 100,000 users in its first two months – **proof that the region can build its own technology.** Impact Europe and Impact Intelligence also launched the Arab Impact Monitor at the Summit, a free public knowledge base mapping the region's impact ecosystem.

Networks for policy and collaboration

The Arab Foundations Forum (AFF) marked 20 years at the Summit, having grown from 22 to 60 member foundations committed to sharing their networks and expertise. Impact Jordan is bringing together the country's impact actors around a shared, locally grounded approach to impact, while the Lebanese Social Enterprise Association now negotiates with donors on behalf of its 36 members. **On the horizon is the design of an Arab Impact Network,** by a consortium of partners under the Impact Together programme, that is poised to integrate efforts in the region and provide a space for impact collectives to align and scale efforts for sustainable impact and the mobilisation of impact capital in the region.

Session on building local solutions to shape public policy, with Jordan Strategy Forum.



Local evidence becoming policy

Evidence generated in the region is beginning to shape public systems and travel across borders. Bab Amal, the Sawiris Foundation's Egyptian adaptation of a proven anti-poverty model, was tested with nearly 3,500 families in Upper Egypt by Cairo-based J-PAL MENA, which found that even a half-cost version lifted incomes, food security and women's employment. On the strength of that evidence, **Egypt's Ministry of Social Solidarity has adopted it as its national model for economic empowerment**, aiming to reach 100,000 households by 2028, while Jordan's Mafraq governorate has already adapted parts of the model.

Climate and food sovereignty strategies

Across the region, climate commitments and food sovereignty are increasingly being addressed on the region's own terms. The Arab Group for the Protection of Nature is planting olive trees in 52 frontline villages in South Lebanon, advocating to protect Jordan's agricultural land, and working towards an i**ntegrated Arab strategy for food sovereignty**. The Arab Foundations Forum, which began its climate work in 2017 with no prior background in the field, announced the first philanthropy-for-climate commitment from the Arab region at COP in Baku.

Bringing humanitarian and development work closer together

At the Summit, Susan Brown, Assistant Secretary General of the UNDP, committed to "development from day one" of a crisis. Whether in a disaster or protracted conflict, this means **investing from the outset in jobs and market creation** rather than food delivery alone, alongside access to finance, infrastructure repair, debris removal and stronger local institutions, so that communities are set "on a path where you don't end up with long-term humanitarian dependency."

Session hosted by Arab Foundations Forum at the Arab Impact Summit





Carrying our collective work forward

We are committed to creating spaces for our community to continue to work through the key questions and topics that emerged from the Summit. We look forward to sharing opportunities for engagement through targeted working circles for practitioners, resources and convenings that will enable us to build on the Summit's momentum and carry our collective work forward.

If you are interested in joining a working circle, register your interest and we will get in touch as they take shape. Sessions we are exploring include:

- **Measuring what matters:** co-designing outcome measures within the community
- **Capital that fits:** concessional, follow-on and guarantee instruments for enterprises at underfunded stages
- **Crowdsolving for education in crisis:** building on the work with Zad Al-Ghad school
- **Coordination and the Arab Impact Network**

When Amani Abed came to Amman, she asked for action and the room answered. The test of this Summit is whether that becomes how this region works, not the exception.

Register your interest