**TRANSCRIPT – EPISODE 1: The Politics of Giving: Philanthropy, Aid and Humanitarian Action in Global Development**

SPEAKER:
Welcome to Thinking on Development, a podcast by the Institute for Global Development at UNSW. Each episode we are joined by new guests to explore some of development's biggest questions.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Welcome to the podcast, The Politics of Giving: Philanthropy, Aid and Humanitarian Action in Global Development. Hello, my name is David Sanderson and I'm from the Institute of Global Development here at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people that are the traditional custodians of the land at UNSW where I happen to be sitting right now. I would like to pay my respects to the elders, both past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who may be joining us today. As I say, the title of the podcast today is The Politics of Giving: Philanthropy and Aids and Action very much in the context of global development. To discuss these issues, I'm joined by three people who really know something about this and have a lot to contribute and have done over the years. The first is Dr Patrick Kilby. Patrick is a senior lecturer at the Australian National University an adjunct associate professor at Western Sydney University.

DAVID SANDERSON:
His recent book, Philanthropic Foundations in International Development, focuses on the influence of philanthropic foundations in global development and on how the global south has engaged with them. And we'll hear more about that. Doctor George Varughese is a senior strategic advisor at the Niti Foundation, a not for profit public interest organization that accompanies Nepali-led public policy reform. He also currently leads Niti projects on reimagining development. He previously worked at the Asia Foundation and the United Nations Development Program, UNDP. And third and absolutely not least Dr Pichamon Yeophantong is an Australian Research Council fellow and senior lecturer in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at UNSW based in Canberra. A China specialist and political scientist, by training. She reads, excuse me, she leads the responsible business lab and also convenes the Asia Pacific Development and Security Research Group. So I think you'll agree with me. We have a lot of experience on this podcast. So, Patrick, I'd like to start by jumping in straight to talk about, to invite you to tell us a bit about your book. Your book, as I say, released this year in 2021.

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Philanthropic Foundations in International Development has just been published. In that, you explore three well-known philanthropic foundations Rockefeller, Gates and Ford, in a high level of detail with a really interesting conclusion at the end. But you start your book by exploring what you termed philanthrocapitalism. Patrick, what is that and why does it matter for development today?

PATRICK KILBY:
In some ways, I think I point out in the book that philanthrocapitalism is a little bit of a reinvention of something that's been around for a long time, going back to Rockefeller and others. The philanthrocapitalism is about the idea that many capitalists I probably won't say most, but certainly many capitalists through a variety of reasons and these reasons are well and truly the basest in the literature, provide money for good works. The critics of philanthrocapitalism see it as a means of advancing their own interests. And some could say that the Gates Foundation work in education in the United States, putting computers into schools, even though the software is provided free, the updates and software at some point purchased by somebody. So it has the support of the, for Microsoft. And the book is a little bit more critical of the whole vaccine initiatives. And there's a whole part of that story about how the pharmaceutical companies, for example, the vaccine manufacturers are really starting to probably have an inordinate influence in vaccine, vaccine development and vaccine distribution.

PATRICK KILBY:
And the current crisis in trying to get enough coronavirus vaccine out and about globally is a manifestation of that. And certainly the issue about not giving intellectual property rights or them not freeing up their intellectual property rights to enable manufacturing to occur in many, many more countries than they already are. So beyond the debates about Pfizer, AstraZeneca, and all that other stuff, the real issue is how that gets out there. So the debate about philanthrocapitalism comes down to whether it's advancing self-interest in a roundabout way or advancing capitalism. Or is some somehow mixture of both. And certainly in the last 50 years, probably, yeah, about 50 years more or less there has been a bigger focus on what they call neoliberalism, small government, small state, etc. But if we go back 100 years to Rockefeller's time, then the Rockefeller Foundation is really complementing the state. And so as much less anti, not anti-state as, you know, into separate to the state, so they were more involved in public health work and other stuff. But there's been a long theme of technology having the answer.

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And the exception to that, and it's probably worth pointing out, as an exception is the Ford Foundation, partly because the third generation, the grandson, Henry Ford the second, took over from his father and grandfather, who died quite close together in the 40s. And he saw the foundation as advancing America, in a sense, and was very much about development, what we call global development, a whole lot more about civil rights in the United States. And even now, it's much more so focused on civil rights, which is quite different to advancing the corporate interests. And in fact, the Ford Motor Company really didn't quite like the Ford Foundation, even though Henry Ford was the chair of one and on the board of the other, because there are all sorts of boycotts of Ford Motor cars through the 50s and 60s in the United States over the civil rights thing.

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So there are exceptions to philanthrocapitalism. There's a whole lot of issues about the influence of big capital, big foundations like Ford, etc., which I argue in the book are disproportionate in a global sense. But philanthrocapitalism is sort of a fuzzy emergence of some things that emerged over the last hundred years.

DAVID SANDERSON:
And then you give the example of Microsoft and the computers, they were doing pretty well before the philanthropy side came in, and I'm just wondering, that clearly the three foundations were founded by three rich white Americans, and there it was. And if I was sitting in southern Africa and I gained from the Gates Foundation's health benefits, I wouldn't really mind or my city is more resilient as a result of Rockefeller's work. Does it really matter if self-interest drives a foundation such as this?

PATRICK KILBY:
The answer is yes and no because the self-interest pushes out public policy. And we get a situation where, for example, with the... Simply because I'm chasing it, because it's very current, is gates and vaccine initiatives, their promotion of vaccines and, you know, getting rid of polio, for example, eradicating it. That means a disproportionate amount of public health spent on vaccination and in not good public health. And as we see with COVID 19, the vaccines will eventually kick in. They're starting to kick in, but whether it's this year or next year when they're fully kicked in is another thing. But at the moment, the only thing that's stopping us getting sick from Covid is really, really good, basic public health stuff. And you could pretty well say that for many, many, many diseases which are around.

PATRICK KILBY:
So I think the issue is not that the foundations are not good but are they skewing our public policy. And I could talk about political science and international development through all the think tanks which are around. Invariably, they were founded by a foundation, Brooking's, for example, Chatham House in the U.K. Ovie. I'm currently doing some work with IFcrew, IFcrew was first founded by Ford Foundation. Now on their websites, they don't really advertise that point. But there's an argument of... It's a form of groupthink where somebody's right in the 30s about foundation funding, being independent of the thinking of the policy of the academe.

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I said, well, you know, when you have so much money coming in and it's hard not to be directed to the thinking of. The foundation itself, it's very hard to be independent, and I have a bit of a debate with somebody The Guardian when I pointed out The Guardian is sponsors a little bit like Gates and he said, oh, no, we're independent. And I went, really? And I said, look at the number of Guardian articles, which are critical. Anyway, sorry, something new.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Not at all. I think that's a good moment to turn to you, George. The three foundations Patrick talks about, as we say, they were, I suppose, top-down to use that very simple and simplistic word as a starting point. And a lot of your work, George, I mean, your extensive experience, expertise in Afghanistan and Nepal and in other countries, as I understand it, you talk about policy reform with an emphasis on local engagement, local ownership, on the reimagines development, if you like, to use that simplistic phrase, more bottom-up, more locally owned. So how does that differ in terms of the quality of work of agency governments, donors? We hear about the Gates and the Rockefeller and the work that they do. Would it look different if the starting point was not from the delivery, if you like, of an OGR and FPRI, the Food Policy Research Institute or others?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
Thanks, David, it's great to be here with Patrick and Pichamon. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this. I come at this from both an academic perspective of understanding, cooperation and collective action, as well as work as a development manager for many years, as well as being in a context of a practitioner in some of the most difficult places to deploy development assistance. Throughout these years, what I've seen is a great deal of frustration and irritation with the way that funding intersects with problem-solving at the local level. And the question around the durability of any resolution of development dilemmas or problems is tied directly to the provenance of the funds. And that's the argument that I make in the work that we're doing at IGT, that we must begin with understanding or upraising context as being shaped not only by local circumstances but also the dimension of funding for resolving any dilemmas in those contexts.

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
But what has happened in the past with many of these large philanthropies, as well as many other aid bureaucracies, if you like, is that they come at it from a context that is not off the local imagination. Right. So, when you look at the work that we are doing now, where we are, what we call a company, problem solvers, the idea really is to be in the context and understand what the problem might be from their perspective, rather than delivering a political economy analysis that goes to a foreign capital, that then gets funded by somebody and then gets deployed again. The point about accompanying locally-led reform is first about problem-solving, or problem framing. And it may not require solving. It may simply require an understanding, a better understanding. And the question of funding follows afterwards, not before.

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So we are not funding looking for a problem. We are a problem looking for funding eventually. But the, you know, the sequencing idea is very critical. And I think it all begins with a contextual appraisal. And if you're funded from without, then the appraisal is quite different than if you are affected by the context directly. So that's to me the difference. But I can elaborate on a follow-up, if you like, David.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Yeah, I guess, yes, I'd like that, but I wanted to ask you first, should we sort of forget the foundations, ask them politely to leave? Or is it the case of educational for us for that apology or is it something else?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
Oh, no, I don't think that's what it is. I'm not someone who advocates for those wanting to give to stop giving or those who wish to assist to stop, stop assisting. The question really is where do you locate yourself as a giver in, with regard to who might be receiving if they need to receive. I think it begins with a position of humility, I think, and that I think has been missing in this whole business. And to Patrick's point earlier on, I also want to say that if there was an understanding that all giving is political, when you look at bilateral and multilateral assistance, why isn't it that philanthropic giving has yet to accept that they're giving is political as well?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
And it's an obvious point, but I think that particular scholarship has been lagging. And I think Patrick's book begins to address this, that all giving, whether it's at small level or big, is extremely political. And if we've developed some scholarship around thinking and working politically, which is built around bilateral and multilateral aid giving why aren't we talking about thinking and working politically in philanthropic giving? Right. And so I think that's a big gap. But we got to get beyond that and understand that everyone needs assistance from everyone else. And you can see this not only in the developing countries but also in the very much settled economies and developed world. But the type of giving, the type of problem, the problematization is quite different if it's viewed from a Southern perspective.

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And so I think it's a matter of locating your mind frame and then beginning to think about how might we assist rather than saying, well, I've got a bunch of money and I've got to find a problem with the money. I mean, that's a very simplistic good way to say it. But I think that money is valuable. It just needs to be coursed in a way that is not, that does not, that preserve the dignity and respects the vulnerability of those who might be assisted.

DAVID SANDERSON:
It's always timely talking to you, George, but especially timely, given the announcement two days ago from President Biden of the US, that the armed forces will be pulled out by September the 11th after eight years, something like that, the longest war that's been fought by Americans. And of course, you were head of the Asia Foundation in Afghanistan, a philanthropic outfit doing the work that you were doing. How would you support? How would you have done? How did you actually seek to support local ownership from the perspective actually of being from a foundation?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
Yeah, I mean, just a word of clarification, although I don't represent the Asia Foundation anymore. The Asia Foundation, actually an operational foundation, it raises all the money that it uses. So it doesn't really have an endowment to speak of like Ford and others, but it does have a philanthropic sister organization called Give to Asia that helps course philanthropy to Asia. Yeah, I was there in the years 2004 to 2009. And at the time, we were obviously part of the international assistance sort of mission there. There were several of us. We, Asia Foundation itself was funded by 1819 different bilateral and multilateral agencies. So there were a lot of donor sort of imperatives to sort of pursue and deliver. So in the midst of that, the concern for, well, how do you then respect local dignity? How do you think about those who are left vulnerable by your own work? Were certainly pressing, but there was a certain urgency to also assisting.

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
So, you know, you lose a lot of that sensitivity and empathy, if you like, when the firehose of aid is aimed at this hapless recipient that is a country or a community. That being said, one of the ways that I was able to help was to, to the extent possible, work with Afghan nationals who were, who wished to return to Afghanistan or with Afghan nationals who functioned in those sort of the interstices between state and society, those who would advocate for certain kinds of rights or certain kinds of public goods and services and those in government. And the interesting thing about Afghanistan is, although it is largely seen as Pashtun because of the leadership, there is a very healthy segment of population that is Tajik, Hazara, et cetera, et cetera. So this idea of local must also be equitable in terms of opportunity to participate in aid-giving and deployment through the staffing of your personnel, through the design of your programs, and through sort of the evidence gathering, if you will, about what real needs are for public goods and services across the country, it was very difficult.

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One of the reasons that I started, helped start the survey of the Afghan people way back in 2004 was to be sure that we were able to provide the perceptions of the largest possible sample of Afghans across the country in a country where the census hadn't been done for decades. And so there are some very simple ways to be more respectful. And part of that is making sure you're triangulating the evidence you gather with the people that are affected by your decisions more than let us experts who come in and out, although they have a lot of expertise, they may not have that rootedness in context that is often missing.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Thank you, Andy. You mentioned the need to be respectful. At that point, I'd like to bring in you Pichamon, Patrick's book concludes in the final section, the story of the large philanthropic foundations over the last hundred years is a story of idealism, naivety, self-interest, hegemony and bullying. Patrick also talks about new emerging foundations and the constant shifts and development, India, Tata Foundation and also China recognizing your considerable expertise Pichamon in China. I want to ask you with the growth of China as a donor, I suppose where there's Belt and Road Initiative and other activities, do you say that our engagement evolving in a way that may not be bullying or naivety, or is it something else or something we don't know yet?

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG:
Well, I think that's a very interesting quote that you've picked from Patrick's book, and I actually do think that it still reflects to varying degrees the situation in China, which makes the Chinese case equally interesting when we look at how private philanthropy has grown over the years and how Chinese foundations have come to establish themselves as bigger players within the space as well. I suppose to kind of start off this mini discussion, the Chinese government just, of course, published its kind of its foreign aid white paper, which is titled China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era. So this came out in January 2021. And it's you know, it basically reaffirms in a bid to pacify, but also reassure China's neighbours, both near and far, that China's intentions are benign and that, especially given COVID 19, that China remains very much committed to kind of this broad idea of a common destiny for all humankind. And it's always the case, of course, that we have to take Chinese policy pronouncements with a big grain of salt.

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG:
But nonetheless, it is interesting how China's contribution to the international development landscape has shifted and has changed and transformed over time as well. Domestically, within China, like the country or a Chinese society, does have a standing cultural tradition of giving, especially philanthropic giving. And it is interesting how over the years the sector itself has become increasingly professionalized. And so what we saw, what we've seen from 2000 onwards really is this continuing rise not only in the number of Chinese billionaires but also in private philanthropy. And so over the course of 2020, we saw the country's big tech companies like Tencent or Alibaba coming out and making pledges in excess of 100 million dollars to the COVID 19 cause, establishing also global funds to help combat the pandemic and to help boost the global public sector, sorry, global public health sector. And this is, again, it's promising, but of course, it also comes with challenges. What I think George was talking about in terms of philanthropic giving, also having a political dimension is certainly true in the Chinese context.

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And it's certainly something that needs and deserves greater research, especially at a time when these Chinese companies, both private and state-owned, are, of course, sometimes accused of being agents of the Chinese state. Right. That, you know, all of this philanthropic giving, especially during Covid, is very much linked to Beijing's ongoing soft power drive in order to again reassure its neighbours of its benign intentions. I've also heard from, kind of from my contacts on the ground across Southeast Asia that there has also been this growth in local Chinese NGOs trying to go global and trying to expand their operations overseas, sometimes under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative, which unfortunately gives rise again to some suspicion as to whether or not these initiatives are genuinely driven by the NGO itself or whether they are, again, acting as proxies of the Chinese state. So I think in the Chinese example, we see that question of politicization, of donations, aid, humanitarian assistance comes through really strongly. But that's not to say that every act of Chinese charity or philanthropic giving is necessarily a reflection of the Chinese state's influence and power.

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And I think it's really important that we don't throw the baby out with the bathwater right when it comes to assessing the intentions of these foundations. I think there is a very strong sense that for Chinese companies to thrive, they do need to return their investments, their profits to society, whether that be within Chinese society or overseas. And this is where I think we're seeing this gradual shift in understanding where historically or traditionally Chinese corporations and foundations tended to really focus on just immediate social needs and meeting those immediate social needs. But where they're now trying to align themselves more with the international language of poverty reduction and longer-term engagement. So there is some degree of learning there. And I don't think we can only say that these foundations or charities or acts of philanthropic giving are simply dictated by the Chinese state.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Sounds like you're hopeful Pichamon that the bullying and naivety and self-interest of some foundations we have been discussing may not be the case when it comes to Chinese foundations.

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG:
Well, I'm actually someone who's known for being terribly pessimistic and suspicious of everything. So I'm trying to change my stripes, so to speak, after COVID 19. But, yes, I do think there is there is some hope and positivity to be found there. I still think that, you know, what Patrick found in the case of American foundations also is true for Chinese foundations. There are political relationships, interests, self-motivated interests there that really has informed how these foundations behave and how these companies behave. So we can't say that they're giving philanthropy just simply because they're philanthropic. But at the same time, I think the one point that was made to me a while back was that it's better that they're doing something than nothing at all. And certainly for a country like China that still officially depicts itself as a developing country, for it to be pursuing the kind of the whole self, self-giving, self, self cooperation discourse, of course, one can view it with some degree of suspicion. But at the same time, I do think it's a positive development as well.

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG:
There's certainly a need, as George was pointing out, for an understanding of the local context and is what really struck... what George said about how donors come from a context that is not of the local vision, really struck a chord with me because, of course, as we all know, historically, the space has been dominated by Western NGOs and philanthropic foundations to actually have non-Western entities now playing a bigger role in this field is perhaps something that we need to welcome, even if we continue to proceed with a degree of caution.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Absolutely. And that new donor landscape, which has, you know, shifted in the last few years, way more than it probably has the first 40 or 50 years post-war. I think is probably a shock to a lot of people. You mentioned about trying not to be bleak and pessimistic, and I totally agree with you there. But when you think about what's happening at the moment, or what may happen is hard to be optimistic and I count myself as somebody who tries to, as I'm sure we all are in this call.

DAVID SANDERSON:
I'd like for the second half of this conversation to think about where we are right now and the future. And Patrick, you mentioned vaccines earlier on. We're recording this in 2021 in April, where there's some vaccine rollouts. There's a second big wave. 200,000 cases in India today, one day alone recorded, just terrible, terrible things. We're very fortunate in Australia. We're fortunate, but I don't think we take it for granted where the rest of the world is struggling. Covid, as we know, has had a terrible impact, obviously, in terms of loss of life and damage and effects. And, of course, those poorest and most vulnerable are those knocked over with lack of savings or access to health care. That's stuff we know. It just looked like, well, the evidence is that SDGs will be adversely impacted. Meeting the SDGs by 2030 will go down. We're seeing famine recur. I mean, the war is part of that story. But the underlying impacts of Covid obviously is damaging and also increasing poverty.

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And if that wasn't enough at the same time, climate change is among us in this country alone, Australia, which is a lucky country, as many people say, by 2100, if the temperature goes up by three degrees, some say a quarter of a million properties along the coastal part of Australia will be gone. And Australia is a rich country. So think of other countries where the impacts of climate change. So there's Covid, the SDGs and climate change, what do we do with that? What is the scope for the future when donors are actually reducing their funding from the UK, the British donor? Now, with the Foreign Office, they've reduced by some five billion pounds. Something like that. Is something like that. And that's money not going to Yemen, not going elsewhere. What do we do in this landscape? Do we hope the foundations will listen most of what you're saying, George, or should we go in other directions? George, maybe you can kick us off. You've been a donor. You're closely involved with activities. How do we do more with less?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
Well, it's no secret anymore, David, that during this last one year, there have been some revelations that have really been, it should have been obvious before, but now very clear that progress can be made without experts on the ground in many areas of need. That's been very clear. And I keep telling some friends that my, the organization I'm with, Niti foundation, actually attracted more funds during the pandemic than it did before that. And the reason is because this is a clear demonstration via the pandemic effect that local organizations now had this chance to prove their worth to those who would give for developmental causes. And I think one of the measurable metrics of this is at the lower cost of achieving the same, if not better result using local organizations. And, you know, of course, a lot of people have written about local ownership and having local organizations somehow be the face of international giving, et cetera. But it's never really been put in practice, partly because of the path of dependency and the sort of narrow, self-serving nature of international aid organizations and bureaucracies.

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
But I think the pandemic has brought us to a new place from which we will not go back, because the lesson is obvious. And you'd be silly to ignore the lesson that in many things local organizations can do better than international. And now we would need to understand better and somehow clarify and explain to others what those might be. For example, back to understanding context better, right. back to building relationships and accompanying problem solvers, back to managing risk. I always talk about how risk is viewed by international givers versus local practitioners. To us, risk is something that can be managed, because we understand that a huge portion of the risk is ambiguity and not uncertainty. And so when someone inserts deliberately uncertainty into a situation, I regard that as an ambiguous situation that can be coped with whereas someone comes from outside and looks and they say, oh, my God, it's too risky. We don't want to give. What happens then is that particular developmental dilemma or goal gets compromised in its understanding. Right. Or in its framing.

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So I think one of that is to be able to begin to develop the habit of working with local organizations, develop a way to assess them that is not based on some idea of value for money, but value for risk, ability, value for political astuteness, value or accompaniment and mentoring or peer to peer, rather than expert or local. And these are metrics that have not really been developed by assessors of aid. And as you will be asking later on in the section, I suppose, where we've been talking about the relevance of SDGs, for example. I mean, these were developed for a particular purpose. We must begin to look at some of them and wonder if they could be further elaborated. For this post-pandemic world. And that would involve a more sincere, self-critical assessment of what did we mean by localization before the pandemic versus now.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Do you think the SDGs should be recast in the light of?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
Yeah, I think that's a great question. I was wondering if we were going to talk about that. You know, I really do believe, I mean, I've never been known as a fan of these big slogan type goals. Right. But I mean, there is a reason... There is something to bring group action around. And those could be things like the MDGs before and the SDGs now. Let us all work toward something. And I think they're very useful for that kind of a sort of a call to action but on the ground are those really need to be translated. And the reporting part of it is quite onerous anyway but what about the actionability of it and how do you make it? How do you begin with an authenticity towards problem framing that is of the local rather than of the SDG? I mean, that's where a conversation needs to take place, where I don't think poverty itself, I don't think things like rights and equality can be looked at from a, from an earlier perspective.

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
I think we have to bring in some new imagination, the vocabulary, the grammar that we used to relate to someone else who may be in a different place in life, in wellness, in well-being and us, I mean, has to be understood and spoken off in a way that's more mindful, including being respectful and being dignified and so I think we really have to be self-critical in that respect, David and I think looking at these goals from that perspective would be useful, I think.

DAVID SANDERSON:
And is that, is it part of the idea that SDGs are not locally owned. They're a bit of a top-down affair. Is that part of the story here?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
Well, I don't know. I never participated in any of them, but again, I mean, those who were involved in these, I think were very well-meaning and wanting to be able to report back and the community of nations needed to point in a certain direction and work. But certainly, member nations deployed domestic efforts to contribute towards these goals. So you couldn't say that they are not locally owned from a nation-state perspective. But again, I don't sit on that side of the fence. I sit on the other side where I feel that many problems of so-called problems of development are scaled up representations of individual community, household-level dilemmas.

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
And we don't really understand which is which until we place ourselves in that context. And so the humility is about letting go about lofty statements and sort of slogans that might bring money to the table, but do not automatically confer durability to resolution. And I'm concerned about that. The durability of resolution. Durability of resolution is something that I think inherently derives from a local engagement. And by local, I don't mean to exclude people who are from outside or spend time locally. I just mean that... I think we have to move, we have to shift our location in our imagination of what a development dilemma or a sustainable development goal might be. In that sense, you get what I mean.

DAVID SANDERSON:
I do. And Durability of resolution you mentioned. And Patrick, I want to ask you, having looked at these foundations for the last hundred years, maybe future casting for the next 50 or so or even the next 30 or 20 or 10, do you think there will be a durability of resolution when it comes to any of the foundations that you discussed and looked at so closely or any ones that you're thinking of in your concluding section from other countries?

PATRICK KILBY:
The durability, I love the durability of resolution, and I'll have to cite you in that George. Now, the emerging of the global south foundations, just, literally just before this, I was talking to my PhD student in Calcutta and she's looking at foundations in India. Now, the Tata Trust have been around pre-Rockefeller, 1870. So they've been around the world. But it seems all the big Indian corporate families now have their own trust doing stuff. And it's all a bit hit and miss. Now, the Tata is that a hundred years to sort of entrench themselves. So it was an interesting question. And Jack Ma and Alibaba in China, he's had his wings clipped the other day, well, the other week, simply because he pushed the government a bit hard.

PATRICK KILBY:
So I think that's part of it. I also think the language has to change. I agree with George, with the local. And the other point is, is the way we frame government and its foundations. And Pichamon's point about China, the government, and see now it irritates me a little bit in the West we're referred to the Chinese Communist Party rather than the Chinese government. And they're a little bit different. We don't talk about the US Republican Party or the Democrat Party is running the government. So I think it's important that we have language which is inclusive, recognize the states and the role they have, but try to avoid that demonizing them simply because they're more complicated than we ever imagined. And the second point is to understand the local.

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And having spent quite a bit of time in India on and off over the last 30 years, one thing I noticed that the local often gets cut off sort of at the district level, sort of at district level NGO. In India unlike Bangladesh has fewer national NGOs as well, the district level NGOs. But how they engage with their own communities, I find, can be as problematic as a resident NGO engaging with their southern partner. So the whole partnership, Southern ownership, which certainly does give, kind of it does help. This research I'm doing in Nepal, George, I was going to come to Nepal and do some focus groups there whether the stuff is working or not. Now has to be completely made local. We'll have to have Zoom conversations with the people who will do the interviews, which is great. Absolutely fantastic. So it's evolving, but I think we have to make sure that we're always interrogating the local with what we're talking about. Does the local include the community? And the community is not homogenous.

It's made up of all sorts of interests, some of which are benign, some of which are less benign, some of which are generous, some of which are less generous.

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So part of that reimagining for the future. And it's so quiet, I don't think we'll have a post-Covid world. We'll have a world where covid is like the flu. But will always be there. So I think that's probably the thing we have to think about.

DAVID SANDERSON:
George? Do you want to come back in?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
Yes, I did. Sorry to use up the bandwidth here. I just wanted to also I fully agree, Patrick, on what you were saying. And I'm certainly not an evangelist of local versus somehow expert or get rid of the foreigner business. But I guess I want to strip away the hubris around all of this and get real. You know, and part of getting real is to be critically self-reflective about the work. And I've been fortunate to be a part of the Western, if you like, or the global north education and giving machine, as well as being of the south. And it's a very privileged position where trying out some new ideas in Nepal has been very invigorating. I would just say that if giving is political and philanthropic giving, then must be political, how much attention is being paid to the ability, the capacity, the capability of those givers to engage with public policy in the countries where they wish to assist?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
And I do agree that a lot of these foundations have former government officials as their heads and various or leading the efforts. But don't forget, they come from that hubris ridden laden background again. And that's the mission that I think is worth sort of embarking upon, is to find within your local settings, if you will, people who are willing, whether they are charitable givers or philanthropic givers. And my country is more charitable rather than philanthropic per se, who understand what a broadening of private interest is a very important part of being a citizen. So this new idea of citizenship, where we build on traditional patterns of giving as charity to more modern notions of giving as part of your role as a citizen from the private sector point of view is extremely valuable. And I'm not talking about corporate social responsibility. I'm talking about seeing public interest beyond CSR.

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And that has been a huge challenge for us here, where, I mean, the foundation we started 10 years ago continues to rely on funding that we raise opportunistically. And they're not all, they are not for the major part from the private sector from the Nepali private sector, although that's how we started. And the challenge really is it's so hard to get them to agree that their bottom line eventually is affected by the broader political economy of policymaking that surrounds them as a private sector. And I think it's a very complicated story. And working with local wealthy individuals and organizations to get them to understand their location in public interest is also a challenge going forward.

DAVID SANDERSON:
And we should say, George, you're joining us from Nepal. I'm sure our listeners already gathered that and the rest of us are in Australia right now to say. Pichamon, what, from what you are hearing? What's your take on the conversation so far?

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG:
Can I say, listening to all three of you has inspired me to air my frustrations now? I think I mean, I agree with everything that's been said. I think the issue whenever I speak with local grassroots organizations in Southeast Asia, their major complaint always remains that they do not yet feel complete ownership of the activities that get fun-, that get funded by external donors or international NGOs. And I feel like we've had this conversation for the past decade or more, and yet it doesn't seem to be translating still. So my question to all of you is, is what's missing in terms of translating all of this into actual practice? Why are we... why is there still a need for us to emphasize the importance of local engagement, of local ownership, but also of using inclusive language? When whenever you read a foundation's mission or if you read an NGOs mission, it always says precisely that. Right? That we're working with local partners, that we're trying to empower them or, you know, the now, the word that no one uses or tries not to use so much these days, build local capacity and all that.

But I mean, what's actually missing from this puzzle?

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG:
My other frustration is going back to the question of politicization and how the political features and all of this. What I've also heard and again, coming from my own experiences working in Southeast Asia. Is how in particular the, what's the word, the conflict, the tensions between the U.S. and China have also spilled over into this realm as well. And I've heard from contacts on the ground in Southeast Asia, sometimes half complaining about how some U.S. organizations and foundations are now using, you know, philanthropic foundations as a means and their funding as a means to counter China's perceived influence within the region. And how as a result, that means that the programming comes very much from the top-down, even though it speaks to the, you know, the usual local grievances that get aired. And yet, in terms of actual practice, it remains very much a top-down process.

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And yet, because of the kind of overarching geopolitical context, this doesn't really get questioned in the same way that, you know, local, if domestic political interest within a country were to feature in programming that would get questioned or picked up immediately. But when it comes to geopolitical interests and motivations, that seems to be something that's kind of left unsaid and not as explicitly problematize. So I suppose this is perhaps a question to Patrick as well, whether you've been seeing that emerging as a trend. And then my final frustration, if I may, really centres on trust issues. And I think this is true in terms of local relationships with governments, but also relationships between governments and local communities or organizations with external donors or foreign donors and including foundations and charities. And I suppose it's for me in the post-Covid world, it might... The question I keep going back to is, is how can we repair the trust deficit that has emerged?

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I think as a result of the inadequacies of preexisting programming, but also in light of how a lot of the funding now seems to be flowing yet again into shorter-term objectives instead of longer-term development objectives. So I'll stop there, but. Yes. Again, you've unleashed the pessimism within me.

DAVID SANDERSON:
But you touch on the reality always, and I think we'd all agree it's been way over 10 years and at least 30, 40 probably since the whole Britain then kicked off the whole thing we call development. Certainly, the last 30 years I've been aware of is the same questions. I've never, ever met a donor or an aid person or anybody else working in this ecosystem who has not said anything other than we need more local ownership. I've never met somebody who said what we need is less local ownership. That's the nirvana on the ground. We're touching on the lack of assets and the weaknesses of that in this whole thing.

DAVID SANDERSON:
I'm conscious of time and I don't want to sidestep what you said, but I'm going to identify Patrick as having the answer to this, which is very much a relief for George. And really to think about the next 10 years or the next eight years that say arbitrarily up until the SDG ends, do we have an opportunity to get better at this or are we doomed to repeat those failures where it's essentially a sort of other nations tell others what to do, and we're in that cycle. Can we break that? Patrick?

PATRICK KILBY:
I'm sorry, I don't... I'm not an optimist because I'm currently a historian, and so I spend my time wading through records, going back 100 years, going back 50 years, I write a history of how kids are helping these failing NGOs. So the debates. Actually, things were much better in the 60s when Kennedy had these... What was the program for peace or something? And the Development Assistance Committee was much more talking about partnerships, etc. And then that completely fell away, completely fell away with Reagan and Thatcher. That whole, then the West really reasserted itself. And when the Berlin Wall came down and that there was a finish of that.

PATRICK KILBY:
I think China reasserting itself, I use the word reasserting itself quite deliberately, is important. Whatever, yes, it was... It waxes and wanes, but I think that's important. It'll hopefully have countries have more sensible conversations with partners about foreign aid, except China, in my view, is probably starting to replicate some of the not so great examples set by some of the Western donors over the past 50 years or so, because the whole issue of power in those relationships emerged but because there's competition among donors, people can shop around. The World Bank's structural adjustment conditions eventually vanished now. And nobody, well, virtually nobody in Asia will take a support line from the IMF after what they did in the Asian economic crisis in the mid-90s. So, the southern countries, at least at the national level, are starting to speak up more but also, they're more authoritarian if I don't want to make too big a generalization, which actually makes it harder for people in those communities.

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So in the next 10 years, there's a shift in power. The shift in power is to the global south, in my view. But actually, in the global south, some will be quite more dominant than with their neighbours, than others. And we're going to see a complex checkerboard of interest. The concern I have where I'm completely not optimistic at all is at the local-local level where strong states are going to really make life more difficult for local voices and start to direct what those things are and they start to have policies. Just a simple example is, is China's agenda policy move to actually to encourage women to be at home more than what they were. So you end up with a whole lot of things like that happening. So the whole thing ebbs and flows. I'm one of those cyclical historians. Well, technology may improve. Politics and society is forever doomed to repeating itself.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Well, and then... Thank you. And George, have we passed the argument, therefore, for other traditional donors, not that importance there? The funding is going down on some of them, at least in China is in the ascendancy, and maybe it's more authoritarian governments we need to watch out. Is this an old argument or what do we do?

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
Gosh, I'm not very qualified to comment on those particular sub-questions, but I do want to applaud Patrick's sort of emphasis on history, which I think has largely been missing from problem framing in development. People treat it very tangentially and superficially. So for you to stress that, I think it's very important and bring that back along with a couple of other disciplines that we've been missing in development. David, you know, one can get depressed very quickly and rather easily if you look at these kinds of challenges. I think that predatory behaviour or rapacious sort of attitudes towards smaller nations or smaller countries is very much on the rise. And, you know, if you get into that kind of a conversation, I only see a despair on the horizon. But if you are on a day-to-day basis, living in countries like Nepal, we have found over the last 30, 40 years that local problem-solving has actually been the only recourse of people. And so whether or not on top of it you impose democracies or any other sort of governance mechanism, in the end, the people are left to fend for themselves.

GEORGE VARUGHESE:
The question is, if you wanted to help a country like Nepal, would you focus on the regime at the top or would you look at how you could enable self-governance or self-governing sort of tendencies, or local problem solving, and not from this localization agenda perspective, but from the perspective that that is actually what has worked in a country that has such immense physiographic variation and a heterogeneous sort of populations. You know, you simply can't orchestrate national progress from a distant capital. You're better off recognizing that very quickly. And I have found that in the three, four years since we've become a federal republic, the country's own policymakers have sort of reluctantly realized that but the donors to the country have not. And it's astonishing to me that after having viewed the general lack of durability in their assistance over the last 50 years, donors are still continuing to engage with this model of a unitary, centralized public administration system.

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Whereas the pandemic, the Terai floods, the earthquake and the forest fires recently all have shown that local governments are required to almost be immediately accountable to their public. So why not open up this legal, little box and look at, well, how can we better enable problem-solving at a sub-national level in countries like Nepal? Now, that won't get to this big question, how will China continue to prosecute its aid-giving in the Pacific, for example? For Australia, that's really important. But for Nepal, we caught between India and China. So it's a complex issue. But I think that the more clearly we can articulate our self-interest, the more coherent our position towards other countries would be.

DAVID SANDERSON:
Absolutely. And Pichamon, a final word to you. Have we helped your frustrations? Are you optimally pessimistic or optimally optimistic for the next eight years?

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG:
I feel cautiously optimistic, let's put it that way. I think, again, I can only agree with what Patrick and George have already said. I personally also don't subscribe to a teleological view of history or of progress, really. And I do feel like there is, there are certainly are a lot of challenges that lie ahead. That being said, I do think that we can't underestimate the agency that smaller countries play or that people that are often called the weak can also play in terms of leveraging resources and getting change to happen. I also think when speaking of countries like China, yes, there is a clear authoritarian bent there. But at the same time, with Chinese, with the Chinese state, as well as Chinese charities, NGOs, foundations trying to go global, I think there is an opportunity for a two-way learning process to happen there. And the more that Chinese state and non-state actors engage with the local context in other countries, the more they have begun to learn what the local context looks like, but also what local needs look like as well.

And so I think there is a real opportunity there for us to celebrate the type, that type of learning that's taking place.

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG:
So, again, even though I still don't see progress as a fait accompli for our world, I do think that there are kind of trends that are happening that we need to kind of focus on and try to build on as positive examples of how we can do better and how we can make development better.

DAVID SANDERSON:
It's always wonderful to end a podcast like this when we're talking of such subjects with the phrase cautious optimism, and I, I share that also. The challenges are real, but humanity has risen to that challenge throughout history. I'd like to thank our three contributors, Patrick Kilby from the Australian National University, George Varughese from the Niti Foundation, and Pichamon Yeophantong from UNSW. Please look out for our subsequent podcast and thank you very much and goodbye.