**TRANSCRIPT: EPISODE 6: Aid in an Age of COVID**

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:  
Hello. The COVID pandemic has knocked much of the world sideways. For many people living in richer countries, this is the first time they may have experienced some of the hardships that many people in your countries struggle with on a daily basis. Well, the vaccine rollout is gathering pace, the impact of COVID is set to last, not least so when it comes to developments. The UN recently reported that extreme poverty rose for the first time in 20 years. The report also found that meeting many of the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs, by 2030, such as health and shorten life expectancy, are likely to be missed. At the same time, cash strapped donor nations, may be less willing to spend money on the world's poorest.  
  
DAVID:  
Just look at the UK's aid budget slashed by four billion pounds, that's around eight billion Australian dollars. What then does aid in an age of COVID look like? Do we scrap the SDGs and lower our sights, recognising a new normal of austerity and limited impact? Or are we about to enter a new world of greater empathy and one who shared hardships. Where we see global challenges that affects all of us in new ways. To discuss this, I'm joined by two senior and experienced humanitarians from two of the world's largest international NGOs. Nicole Stanmore is CEO at Habitat for Humanity Australia.  
  
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For the last 10 years, Nicole has held senior positions at the Australian Council of Social Services and at Good Return, an international agency provided microfinance and financial literacy. Nicole is a lawyer by training, has an MBA from Cambridge and is from Santiago in Chile. Peter Walton is the CEO of Care Australia. He has 28 years of international experience and has undertaken assignments in over 50 countries. Peter was based for seven years in Vietnam, working with ChildFund Australia, where he was awarded the Vietnam government's Medal for Peace and Friendship. The highest award offered to foreigners for services towards development and poverty alleviation. Nicole and Peter, thanks for joining us today.  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
Thank you, David.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
Good to be here.  
  
DAVID:  
Peter, perhaps I can start with you. Care works across the world in over 100 countries and is one of the largest international NGOs around. How has the COVID pandemic affected your operations?  
  
PETER WALTON:  
I think if I was to say hugely, it would be the understatement of 2020 and 2021. In fact, I took over as CEO of Care Australia at the beginning of February last year, just before the COVID hit. And you know, it's fascinating because it was the first time in Care's 75 year history that we declared a simultaneous emergency in every country that we operated in. And, you know, I think that, the emergency declaration had multiple aspects because of great uncertainty. There was obviously the the great concern for the communities that we seek to support in over 100 countries. There was great uncertainty given that, you know, this was a pandemic hitting Australia sort of shortly after the bushfires in Australia, and great uncertainty around what that would mean for our own viability.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
So it's impacted every aspect of our work from how we operate here in Australia, but importantly, how we seek to provide the support that's needed in all of the countries that we support. And you know, I've reflected on the most extraordinary first 18 months in the role. And there's a lot of learnings around what COVID has done to the people that we seek to support. So for example, I think early on I made a bit of a slip up, I would say, and that I was giving a media interview and I described COVID as an indiscriminate pathogen. And the point I was trying to make was that it could impact anyone. It doesn't matter who you are, you know, and that we're not going to end COVID until we've ended it for (INAUDIBLE).  
  
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Was talking about vaccine equity and so forth. But, you know, I think over the last 18 months, what we have seen is it absolutely does discriminate, because the people that are already vulnerable are the ones that are hit the worst. Those that are, you know, don't have access to the same level of support are impacted and in a compounding way, economically, health wise. And you know, so this is fundamentally transformed every aspect of our operations everywhere that we operate and is continuing to do so. But at the same time, I think it's also been an opportunity to reconsider the role of organisations like Care, and the type of support that we can provide.  
  
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And I think, if anything, the grounding of an international surge system has been an opportunity to also, quite rightly, I mean, you probably know where I stand on this, David, an opportunity to fundamentally rethink and reform international aid, which I think is a long overdue requirement for the whole sector.  
  
DAVID:  
Thanks, Peter. That's quite a baptism of fire to arrive one month before the pandemic. Do you regret the shift?  
  
PETER WALTON:  
No, not at all. I mean, I think even recently when something like Afghanistan hits. It's very easy to fell despondent. And when we think about all of the staff here in Australia, all in lockdown. But this is what care does, care is a humanitarian organization and it's at times like this, I think it sort of brings out the best in organisations. And a 30 year career in humanitarian work is probably if I'm not rising to the challenge now, when will I? So, you know, it's not without its challenges. That for sure, but no regrets.  
  
DAVID:  
Sorry it's a bit of a cheeky question. I couldn't resist. But we will dig a bit deeper on some of the things you mentioned, but I'm keen to bring Nicole into the organisation. I can't help notice, well, Nicole is with Habitat for Humanity and both organisations have their headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, so there's really something potent about Atlanta, Georgia, which is which is very nice. But Nicole, you're obviously part of the Habitat for Humanity. You are also very large international NGO working across the world, also in some 70 countries. Do you see a return to some kind of normal after this? Or is there a new normal? And if so, what? And how are you managing to cope in such difficult circumstances?  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
Yeah, I think COVID, it's changed all of us, and some changes are for the better. I mean, if we look closer to home in Australia, the fact that we can work virtually, it's also an advantage for an international NGO. Because before we had to plan all these trips every year to get together with the local offices, and now, you know, we can be in touch through Zoom, through teams and we can do it regularly. So in that sense, it's a real advantage, because we can work more as one. We can have regular meetings. We have a better understanding of what's happening probably of the day today. So that's been a positive. Another positive, I think, is the fact that for many years we've been talking about localisation in international development.  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
And COVID has really accelerated the concept of localization and the need to do something about it. I mean, when COVID hit all, the expats that were working internationally, most of them flew back home. And so who was left? The local staff. And this poses real questions, then in terms of who should decide what the program should be. And you know, being an international organisation, gives us the advantage that, yes, we do have a local presence and local people, but still its headquarters that decides where the money goes, when to pull out and what to do. Although that I have to say that is changing because, you know, there is an acknowledgement that it's the community that knows best.  
  
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But still, you know, if you manage the purse, if you manage the strings, you still have a lot of say in you know where it is allocated. So I think we're all very cognizant that there's more to be done in this area. You know, we need to build the capacity of the partner countries. We need to understand that they also need unrestricted funding to build that capacity. And we know in the sector that's something that we struggle with. You know, it's a lot easier to get money to undertake the programs from donors than to say, Well, actually, we need that money to do training, to pay the rent, to do the right recruitment. You know, all of those things that are required to run a good organization. We also need to make sure we invest in partnerships themselves.  
  
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Again, you know, that's that's difficult to justify with donors. You know, why do we have to pay a partnership person to think about how the partnership should be structured? You know what KPIs we need to put in place? But I think that's really necessary if in the long term, we're really serious about localisation. And and I guess the most important thing is a cultural change, a change in mindset, because there's this bias that the North knows best, that developed countries have all the answers. But that is not true. And I love what's happened in Cambodia in response to COVID, and I'd love to compare it to the US. So I don't know if you know, but Cambodia has actually managed it quite well. They had the Delta strain in April and that really shake them. But they they have this policy of a jab is better than no jab, so any jab will do.  
  
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So basically, they went really hard on vaccinating their people, and (UNKNOWN) now has 80% vaccination rate, which is absolutely outstanding. And all over Cambodia, I think it's like 64%. So the cases are in the hundreds and they've had lockdowns, but they're opening up and they're managing it quite well. And when I think of Cambodia GDP per capita of 2% of what the US is, and I think of all the cases in the US even now, and still that they're not able to get to vaccination levels to anywhere near 70%. I think there's a lot to learn. So, yeah, I just wanted to highlight that in terms of, you know, what our biases are, but maybe what COVID can teach us against those biases.  
  
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And the third thing that I think is different and will remain different in this post-COVID world is innovation, is the ability to innovate because, you know, when habitat was thrown into this COVID world, the first response was like, no, maybe we we don't have anything to do here because it's a health emergency, and we shouldn't do anything. And actually, quickly we realized that, no, we have a lot to do. I mean, I don't know if your listeners know, but habitat is all about creating a safe place to live for people at decent housing, and decent housing also means that you should have access to clean water, water and sanitation. They're absolutely key. And of course, that is completely interlinked with the COVID response.  
  
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We talked about hygiene and sanitation practices and having a safe home, I mean, what's the best defense against COVID? Here we are, you know, all isolated at home. So that's one of the most important things to fight this virus. But then we were also able to innovate. There were some new ideas like, you know, why don't we do partnerships with hotels, to house frontline workers that don't have anywhere to go in India after working, you know, 30 hour shifts. Why do we (INAUDIBLE) COVID care centers so people that are living in crowded slums can actually self isolate and protect their next of kin. So these are all innovations that happen very quickly. And I think it's taught us even more than, yes, we work with the community to innovate, but also, you know, we can come up with all these different ideas, all over the network that we can hopefully implement quite quickly.  
  
DAVID:  
And it sounds like one of the innovations could be to have less expats, picking up what you said about people going home and actually less of that. Should we apologize for the last few decades of people charging around from countries around that?  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
Oh, and now you want to put me in trouble now, David, don't you?  
  
DAVID:  
No, I promise, I don't. I'm just curious what you think, because that's the big conversation.  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
Yeah, it is. But just one comment. It's quite interesting because this idea of having more local people, I mean, it's been around for ages. And of course, now I think everybody's taking it more seriously. But it also goes hand in hand with what's happening in the states with the whole MeToo and Black Lives Matter movement, because there's a big movement of diversity and you mention that habitat is headquartered in Atlanta as is care. And they're taking this movement very seriously, and we're seeing now big targets and diversity and inclusion. We're seeing more acknowledgement that the board has to be composed by more diverse people. So, yeah, so I think there are good changes coming to the world.  
  
DAVID:  
Peter.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
I would love to add to that and look, I know this is a podcast, but as Nicole is speaking, you know, I'm nodding furiously, but the comment around, you know, should we not have expats? I like the term locally led, globally connected because we are dealing with transboundary issues. And I think that is really important. But I think we do need to fundamentally change. I think INGOs have to fundamentally change, and we talk about localisation. But I do like to use the term locally led because, you know, the fact of the matter is, the majority of resources are controlled in rich countries, and decision making often isn't led by those most impacted, and those, have the best understanding of what their needs are.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
And so I've illustrated this recently with, you know, when I think back to 2015, a Category five cyclone hit Vanuatu Tropical Cyclone Pam. And at the time, I was with the Red Cross. But I was alarmed that 135 international organisations descended on that country, bypassed local capacity, disrupted the GDP and, you know, all well-intended. But it was the international cavalry coming to town. Many would call it white saviour complex or whatever. Fast forward to 2020. Another Category five cyclone hit Vanuatu. This time, the international system couldn't go because of the quarantine. And guess what? The local response was good. It didn't make the media cycle because of COVID, but the response was good in its fundamental lessons in that, in terms of are we serious about shifting power?  
  
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And at the time, I remember talking to, doing some research afterwards around what would going local really look like. And one quote really resonated with me, which was, at times of disaster, what we need is a locally made canoe, but you send in a battleship. And it's always sort of stuck in my mind around this idea that we know best is an outdated concept. It doesn't matter how charitable or how well-intended it is, but if we're serious about the shifts we need, I think we have to start looking at, you know, how will we change ourselves? And I think the interesting point, which may resonate with some of the listeners, when I joined care was the hot on the heels of the Australian bushfires, catastrophic bushfires.  
  
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And I remember saying to some an audience that I was talking to once. If 135 international organisations landed in Australia and started telling us how to respond, what would we say? But we seem, you know, would probably use colourful language and probably tell them that we've got this. But we seem to think that that's OK. I think we do need a fundamental shift around, you know, how are we actually making sure that we're genuinely getting behind local organisations? And now more than ever, I think it's we've got a chance to actually revisit that and not build back the same, I think take COVID as an opportunity to fundamentally change the sector in which we work.  
  
DAVID:  
Well, let's pursue that forward. And further, let's talk about what you're saying about the opportunities. Also because challenge of innovation (INAUDIBLE) on that gauntlet and what life might look like. As we know I mentioned earlier, a lot of the SDGs are very likely to be missed by 2030, which the aid system is largely built itself around. I just looked at two earlier SDG (INAUDIBLE) unemployment. COVID has led to the loss of something like globally 255 million full time jobs. SDG 16 on child labor, which is increased for the first time in two decades. And I could go on. And the point here is not to sort of squash us in terms of a dystopian, awful future, but these are the real challenges. And NGOs not least Care and habitat for Humanity have a tradition of rising to the challenge.  
  
DAVID:  
If it's war or whatever it might be or catastrophes such as this, and I just wonder, I mean, we're lucky to have both of you today, actually CEOs of some of the world's biggest NGOs, which were formulated from the US, and have worked hard not to just be that, I understand that both organisations do that and take it very seriously. But what does this new lifting with COVID world look like? Is it less expats? Well, I just wonder what else it might be. Donor funding is probably going to go down. What else do we do? Do we decide to do less with more? I mean, that's always the challenge, or we decide not to do some things at all, and make hard decisions.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
There's a lot in that, David, I think there's, let me try to tackle that. There's a number of things that spring to mind. Firstly, there was a 40% shortfall in humanitarian funding even before COVID, and so we were struggling to deal with the humanitarian global inbox of 2019. Yet when we fast forward to 2030 to align with the Sustainable Development Goals, we have a planet that's one and a half degrees warmer. We have a billion more people on the planet. We're seeing the increasing frequency and intensity of climate related disasters. Things aren't heading in the right direction in terms of the sheer scale. So we need to start doing things smarter. And one of the things that really strikes me is that despite commitments within donor communities, only 3% of global humanitarian funding gets through to local actors.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
And I think, you know, and where is it used? All with good intent, there's layer upon layer around where the funds are used. So I think there's some fundamental choices around resource allocation, and how we start to shift towards genuinely supporting locally led development activity. I think there is a scope for us moving towards, dealing with complex social problems requires sort of a complexity of solution, and I don't think the skills are held solely in any sector. So there is a fundamental role for innovation around financing instruments, the role of insurance, the role of technology to actually deal with some of these problems in sort of new and creative ways. And that's something that we're fundamentally looking at.  
  
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But the need is going to go up, you know, the SDGs that you just referenced. I mean, the one that's front of mind for me, is around gender equality, because what we've actually seen with COVID is what I would describe as a potential generational reversal in the gains that have been made in recent decades where, you know, you referenced job losses. That's predominantly impacting women more than men. We're seeing violence against women increase, we're seeing, you know, just a flow on effect which where we're seeing a reversal. So I think we've got a challenge to both make sure that that reversal (INAUDIBLE) continue that we protect hard fought for gains, but it has to be done in a fundamentally different way. And I see localisation as being key to that and INGOs willing to change themselves and probably do less things, but better.  
  
DAVID:  
Nicole do you see Habitat for Humanity or any other large NGOs fundamentally changing what they do and how?  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
Well, I think what I'm seeing a lot of and this is pre-COVID, is the fact that NGOs or at least habitat is seeing themselves as as a convener of different sectors, of the corporate sector, of government and the NGO sector. Because we're dealing with such complex problems, we know that, you know, we're not going to solve them on our own. And especially when we think about housing, we believe the private sector has a big role to play. We have the center all over Asia called (UNKNOWN) center which is innovation center, really. And so they run this program called Shelter Tech, where they're trying to find innovations in the construction industry, for example, bamboo that's they've found that it's quite resistant, of course, it's treated a certain way and it's very cheap.  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
So the port can use it for housing, and it withstands climate events quite well. The 3D printing houses, you know, can it be done cheaply, can it be done quickly? We're experimenting with recycled materials. So I think these are all fantastic innovations that hopefully, you know, in our role as an NGO, we can help fund the initial thinking. And then once they can go to scale, they can be profitable enough for private sector agent to take it over. And really, I think, you know, different NGOs will have different niche spaces where they can play depending on what they're trying to achieve. But for me, the key is collaboration, is to bring the different actors together to make sure that, you know, we can go to scale and we can achieve the impact that we're aiming for.  
  
DAVID:  
I suppose there are hard choices about what we don't do, and I mean the UN system, it's an easy target and the intent is not to do that. But do you think there are developmental things in the future or big organizations just shouldn't do? We literally can't afford it. The idea is you can fix it. Maybe we're in the world now you just can't fix it, but you can do the best you can.  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
Yeah. Before I answer that, I do want to give a quote of something I read that actually inspired me positively. You know, as I was looking at the effects of COVID in the economy and thinking about this podcast today, I came across this note from Amartya Sen, as you would know, Amartya Sen from Harvard University, Nobel Prize economist winner. And actually, he has put some researches that show that in the past, crises have foster solidarity with the poor. And he talks about two examples written in the 1940s. He says that actually, life expectancy shot up by seven years thanks to wartime rationing, because everybody got enough to eat. And then the more recent research about Sierra Leone that shows that when they were suffering Ebola from 2013 to 2016, actually, they had the highest development in those years compared to 70 poorer countries.  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
So it made me think, Is there something here? Are we always seeing the worst? You know, could there be some light at the end of the tunnel? Could this crisis, could this pandemic actually incentivize people to do more, not less? And you know, when I think about Habitat 2020, I think when the pandemic hit in March, having all this meetings and it was doom and gloom, it was, Oh, we've got to cut staff, we've got to cut programs, we won't be able to do this, we won't be able to do that. And we ended the year globally in a really good position, both financially and with the impacts we were able to achieve in the different communities. And that was astounding because we really didn't expect that, you know, we were worried that, you know, how are we going to survive this year?  
  
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And yet it was a really good year in all accounts. So I think, you know, when reading this research from Amartya Sen, I think there must be something there. You know, I think it's very easy to get caught up in the doom and gloom. But maybe it's not so bad. And when I think about, you know, the challenges that we're facing climate change and the pandemic, I think everybody knows these are global challenges. We're not going to achieve anything by just vaccinating Australia and not the rest of the world, because we're going to have the delta, the the new one, you know, all these variants and we're not going to solve the problem. So, you know, I think people are aware of that. And again, the virtual tools allow us to collaborate even further and allow us to connect even more.  
  
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And once you connect the hearts and minds of peoples across the world, things happen and people can make a difference. So I don't yeah, I'm not answering your question, David, but I'm kind of putting a positive spin on. Because I want to look at the positive side of this, and I think there are many.  
  
DAVID:  
You're answering the question, I wish I'd asked. Well, anything from Amartya Sen is good news of course. He famously said, of course there's been no famine in a democracy, which is very powerful, really underlining that a lot of disasters are not so natural. Not as natural as you'd think. But Peter, are you hopeful, is it good news as it were right now?  
  
PETER WALTON:  
So look, I agree with Nicole. I'm sort of more glass is half full around, you know, we are at a time of reckoning and I actually think more than at any time in recent decades, there's an opportunity to make some shifts and do things in smarter ways. And Nicole did a quote. Maybe I can completely plagiarise with another quote. So some people may recall that Madeleine Albright, secretary of State in the US years ago. I'm sure she was talking about Silicon Valley, but I'm going to plagiarise it. She said that people nowadays are talking to their governments using 21st century technology. Governments are listening on 20th century technology and responding with 19th century policy.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
I hijacked that because I think, you know, there's something telling in that in terms of how well-intended INGOs have operated a model for years and years and years with good intent. But there's been a number of things Nicole mentioned Black Lives Matter as we've seen growing analysis around the sector. Is it actually perpetuating colonial power structures? And what can we do about that? And then when you add in all of the challenges that we face, there are smarter ways of doing things, and I think we do have an opportunity to really lean into that now and make sure that you know what comes after COVID and after the pandemic better serves humanity. But I think the challenge in that is that, that's not a choice of any individual organization.  
  
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Care Australia, for example, we have made the decision to really focus on the areas that we add the most value in, not try to be a jack of all trades and compete with thousands and thousands of other INGOs in areas where, frankly, some other organisations are better placed than we are. So really focus on what we're good at, but also the the lobbying of government and donors to sort of change the way that they are willing to provide support. We see aid budgets being slashed in many countries. The UK, Australia is at its lowest level in decades.  
  
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So I think there's something around, not just how we spend money in the same ways, but how do we actually start to solve the problems with different solutions, be that different forms of partnership or indeed genuinely getting behind local organisations, including not drip feeding them through project funding, but really getting behind building up their institutional strength. Having committed multi-year funding so that we do genuinely work towards being less and less needed in terms of that complementary role that we can play.  
  
DAVID:  
Absolutely. And the aid system over the decades is always reinvented, been innovative and works in some of the most intensely complicated areas on planet Earth and delivered results, and that often goes underreported. And it's just true. Let me just ask you, maybe I can start with you, Nicole. So let's imagine it's 2030 and it's all gone very well. Actually, the recovery, the rest take that as you like. What did we take advantage of to get to a better place?  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
Innovation, I mean, I think we're living in an amazing time in humanity, where there's so much innovation everywhere you look. It really is incredible. I mean, people are coming to grasp with the global problems that we have. And that, again, is something that didn't happen before and because we're all so interconnected. So there is an understanding and there's also now the tools to address those issues. And you know, here, I'm going to go very local again just to explain why I'm thinking about the world the way I'm doing it. And you know, my kids go to school here in Sydney, and the challenge is they have a school (INAUDIBLE) design, a house that's environmentally friendly. You know, what are you going to do about climate change? How do you think about poverty? What are the jobs that you can do in the world?  
  
NICOLE STANMORE:  
My daughter recently had to look at a video and comment on the imbalances of power in the music video, and she's 14. So I mean, we are creating very aware citizens, very woke, as if we want to call them that way. And this is happening all over the world. I mean, it's true. You know, in some communities, the internet is not there. These are the communities that we work with and they don't have the advantage of thinking this way. But you know, there is another percent of the population that is thinking this way. They're not just thinking, you know, what am I going to study to make money? They're thinking, What am I going to study to contribute, to solve the problems in the world?  
  
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And so I have great hope that by connecting these minds and these hearts that are thinking about these problems and because we're in a global world, and them understanding the issues that other countries are facing, we will come up with solutions and habitat has a big volunteering program. And I just want to mention that. I mean, we work with like a million and a half volunteers every year and in development. I know sometimes this is frowned upon because like, you know, again, you know what, the white people going from rich countries to the poor countries, what are there to do, really? I mean, here, you know, we've been discussing localisation, but I think it is important not because of the work they do for the communities, but because of the work they can do when they come back home.  
  
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Because by giving them the opportunity to volunteer, where again showing them the issues that are happening in the world, and hopefully they'll come back to the UK, to Australia, wherever they are, and they'll be an advocate for change in terms of their own work they can do, and in terms of the advocacy they can do with government.  
  
DAVID:  
Wonderful. That idea, we often forget that when people come back. And actually what they do with this, it's a very potent observation to make. Thank you. Peter, same question to you. We're looking back and saying what went well.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
So I think the concept of, you know, locally led but globally connected and where the pieces fit together in a more complementary way. I think there's huge opportunity and I think there is the role for innovative partnerships, really to solve some of the complex issues that we have. There are lots of examples emerging now about the use of cash, the use of insurance products for disaster response. Certainly even looking at legislative change that makes housing, land and property or disaster legislation much easier in terms of providing assistance. I think there's just a plethora of great opportunities and you know, there's a great film that won a lot of awards recently 2040, which was about climate change. So if you just took the solutions that we already know existed and actually applied them would solve a lot of the complex problems.  
  
PETER WALTON:  
I think the same can be said about this sector. You know, there's a lot of great things out there. It's around mobilizing that support to make the right choices. And I think that means, you know, being open to different forms of collaboration, getting over any sense of terminal uniqueness and really embracing so that that intergenerational leadership that Nicole just spoke about. And then I do truly have hope that, you know, this is a pivotal moment now, and we can look back with pride. You know, I think we shouldn't accept the world where women or children in Asia Pacific are 14 times more likely to die or be injured at times of disaster. But this is what we see. We've got an opportunity to do things. (CROSSTALK).  
  
DAVID:  
Thank you especially for being so positive. (CROSSTALK) some may say very dark things, but actually you're basing it on reality and what could be. So thank you very, very much for such an interesting conversation. Nicole Stanmore and Peter Walton thank you again. Thank you for listening.