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Voice-over: A Deeper Look. Exploring what works and what doesn't in development and the changes we can make together to turn ideas into action.

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Patrick Fine: Hello. And welcome to a new episode of *A Deeper Look* podcast. I'm joined today by Paul O'Brien, the Vice President for Policy and Advocacy at Oxfam America. Paul, welcome to the podcast.

Paul O'Brien: Thanks, Patrick. It's great to be here.

Patrick Fine: This year, *A Deeper Look* is exploring the darker side of development. So, we're talking about the paradoxes and unintended consequences of development efforts – the issues that we, as a development community, often shy away from. Today, Paul and I are going to discuss the topic of a darker side of development as it relates to power dynamics, policy and advocacy. Paul, we have a lot to cover.

Paul O'Brien: Yes, indeed.

Patrick Fine: Listeners, Paul O'Brien is one of the sharpest minds looking at international development. He oversees research, policy, advocacy at Oxfam America, a global organization working to end the injustice of poverty. Oxfam's been one of the most trenchant critics of international development practice for many decades and, since I was a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1980s, have looked up to Oxfam as a voice of authenticity and honesty that doesn't shy away from the debates around what's working, what's not working, are our efforts to do good actually producing good or are they producing other unintended consequences?

So, I'm very excited to have Paul on the podcast today. Let me just say that Paul brings a wealth of experience to his position at Oxfam. He's been an advisor to governments. He's worked in civil society. He's been in the trenches on the front lines of international development for decades. So, he is an informed voice on the issues we'll be discussing today.

Paul, let me start with a simple question. Do you think there's a darker side to development?

Paul O'Brien: Well, yes, I do [*Laughter*] and I love that you're asking the question. I got to know Patrick first when both of us were in Afghanistan, and I think we were asking hard questions then about how to be as useful as possible to local institutions while not becoming victims of a complex political world and, ultimately, serving the people on the ground in Afghanistan who desperately needed that moment of attention to-to deliver long-term results.

Funny enough, Patrick, I got my start in development, and I want to tell you this story quickly. I was hired by a large NGO that had been looking at Mary Anderson's work, which was *Do No Harm*, at the time, and they asked me to look into all of their programs in one country and see if we were doing any harm, any unintended consequences. And, what I found was that every single project was doing some form of harm unintended. And so, they asked me to develop a tool to help them better understand the unintended consequences of their work. And so, my first big project was to write a manual and training process called *The Benefits Harm's Process* in which we better understood, as international NGOs working in complex environments, what was the darker side of our work.

Long story short, after a couple of years of working exclusively on this issue, I came away with three thoughts. We always do harm at some level. That's not the question. It's impossible to introduce precious resources, skill sets, into complex environments which change the power dynamics, which change relationships, which change ...

Patrick Fine: Well, and which just promote change.

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

Patrick Fine: Which is what development is about.

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

Patrick Fine: We're change agents, by definition.

Paul O'Brien: Yes. Yes. So, you disrupt. And every time you disrupt, lots of things happen – both intended and unintended.

Patrick Fine: Right. And positive and negative.

Paul O'Brien: Exactly. And so, then, the equation becomes can we be confident because we've done the work, that the net impact of what we've done is positive for the people we claim to serve?

Patrick Fine: Right.

Paul O'Brien: I came away thinking there's three things we have to do better, at the time – which is one, we make mistakes because we don't know enough about the environment that we're in. Like, we literally may not understand ethnic tensions or that certain groups are gonna profit if we invest or that a certain road is often used by the military and so, if we repair it, something else is gonna happen when we do, or resources are gonna get used in a certain way. So, there's a knowledge gap, often, and it's because we have folks on the ground that may not be deep, they may not know the context, they may not speak the language, or they may not speak the dialect, and so on and so forth. First problem – knowledge. Second problem – analytic. Often, we don't ask ourselves, we don't stop and take the time, "If we introduce precious resources into this context at that moment in time in their season, their weather season or in their military season or in their political season, what might happen as a consequence?" That's the analytic challenge.

We don't actually ask ourselves, "We want to achieve *A*, but might *B* happen?" And that's really about taking the time to step back and ask the harder questions. And the third – which is probably the toughest of them all – which is sometimes we do have the knowledge. Sometimes we've done the analysis. Sometimes we know we're going to cause unintended negative consequences. And for other institutional imperatives, we don't take the hard choice. We don't actually have the courage to do what's right because there are just other imperatives there. For example, you may have a situation where to take a certain course of action, which we know to be the right thing, it's going to have a negative military counter impact – it may be ...

Patrick Fine: Wait, a negative military impact?

Paul O'Brien: Yeah. Let's say, for example, we are introducing, this was-this was one of the [*Laughter*] things I looked at when I was in Sudan, we're introducing projects to improve food security on the ground.

That improved food security is actually doing a lot to feed soldiers on the ground. Those soldiers, because they're better fed, are going off and doing more things to more communities that we don't like. If we changed our food security program, and we tried to do it; the UN tried to do it, in order to deal with that, and it-it starts to really hurt the military on the ground, they basically tell us, "Look, guys. You keep that up, and you're out of South Sudan."

Then, we have – it's not a knowledge problem.

Patrick Fine: Hm-hmm.

Paul O'Brien: It's not an analytic problem. It's a courage problem. Are we going to make a change which will actually lead to us having to step out of a program where we think we're doing lots of good for lots of other people? Some of the time, the right answer is, "Well, actually, we shouldn't leave, and we should do whatever the authorities say, because the net benefit of working there is good for people on the ground." But sometimes, it's just our own institutional imperatives. We don't want to leave because our whole business is premised on us staying there.

Patrick Fine: Or, we sincerely believe that being there is doing some good.

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

Patrick Fine: I mean, I see those things get mixed up.

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

Patrick Fine: Where you have different observers inferring different motivations.

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

Patrick Fine: So, you may – and those motivations may actually be mixed up within the organization. So, you may have people on the ground who are there because they're so committed to what they're doing, and they can see the value in what they're doing. They're getting positive feedback from the immediate people they're working with, and they don't see some of the bigger picture you're talking about. And then, at a higher level – or a different level in the organization – you can have somebody who's saying, "Yeah. There's some real

dilemmas here, but we really can't afford not to have this program."

Paul O'Brien: Right.

Patrick Fine: And so, you can get those motivations, they can be sincerely mixed up.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: Or they can just be different interpretations, none of which tell the full story.

Paul O'Brien: No. And ultimately, in the end, there's a judgment call that has to get made.

Patrick Fine: So, I want to break this down. Let's start with a knowledge gap, because that's a frequent criticism I hear. And even the way you framed it, about not really understanding the dynamics on the ground, maybe not having a full awareness of the cultural context, and that, you know, having people who don't speak the language, so, they're not fully clued in to what's happening around them. I think, more and more, that's an obsolete criticism, because what I see from both international NGOs and local NGOs is the people they have on the ground are people from that society, from that region. They're from that culture and they're part of the fabric of the society. So, there may be knowledge gaps, but they're not knowledge gaps because of who's there or because of, you know, a kind of cluelessness.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: They're knowledge gaps because no organization, no person, can know everything.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: So, for sure I would agree that we often have issues around knowledge gaps, but the classic criticism, I don't think, is as valid as it used to be.

Paul O'Brien: I take – I actually take – I take that point. I don't –the international tourist who really doesn't know much – that is increasingly thing in the past.

Patrick Fine: Right.

Paul O'Brien: You can't survive in these complex environments if you've got sort of clueless leadership who's only there for a while. That having been said, I want to introduce two facts. One is I think the currency of what we're trying to get done on the ground has changed somewhat. I'd like to talk about it a little bit more. But I think, increasingly, the currency that we're mostly engaging in is-is more about power and less about money or stuff that we're transferring from places that have a lot of it to places that have less. So, when you start to engage in the currency of power on the ground, the knowledge you need gets more complex. Who has it? Who doesn't? Who gains? Who loses?

There's a higher bar than it used to be. That's the first thing I'd say. The second thing which I think is a constraint, which though I agree with what you're saying in general, in complex context, where you've got a lot of political actors on the ground who are increasingly skeptical about our reasons for being there and the impact of our being there, there's a lot of game playing on the ground with a desire to manipulate international NGOs to serve agendas that are not developmental.

In those kinds of context – you and I saw this in Afghanistan – you often need an international there to protect the institution from being manipulated or pressured in a way that if there was a local leader, it's easier to do, because the local forces can basically say to that leader, "We know where you live [*Laughter*] and there's no getting out of here." So, we bring in the international and because these are complex environments, they often can't stay the kind of length and depth you'd want them to stay to really understand local power dynamics. And then you have information gaps. Now, you know, when I was in Afghanistan, we were there for five years. But where you're right is that a lot of the international staff were only there for a year or so on, but they had national staffers in key leadership positions filling the kind of knowledge gaps that you're talking about.

So, we had, I think in Care where I was there, we had six international staff out of a staff of 1,000, 994, and all the senior managers were local leaders ...

Patrick Fine: Right. Right.

Paul O'Brien: ... who really knew their stuff.

Patrick Fine: And I think that where the criticism is more accurate, still is more accurate, is in crisis situations.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: But in more traditional – and stable situations, even if they're in fragile situations, but it's more or less stable – there, I just don't see many expatriates who aren't steeped in the culture and language and region there anymore.

Paul O'Brien: No.

Patrick Fine: I think that's a thing of the past. And here's, but here, I want to add one more thing to knowledge and then I'm gonna ask you more about the currency of power. One of the knowledge gaps that I've experienced working overseas is where you have local leaders who are a part of a educated elite. And they've grown up in the city. They're often the children of government officials and of university professors and the elite of that society. And it's not uncommon, in my experience, for that group to have less knowledge about conditions outside of the capital city or the urban center than some of the expatriates who have been living out in the rural areas for 5 or 10 years ...

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: ... who've immersed themselves in the culture and who have a real personal understanding of the dynamics of community life. And sometimes, they will bring a perspective that is both international, but it's also informed by their experience of having lived out in the poor communities that the officials who are high-ranking officials don't have.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: And that can bring real value to the discussions about what policy should look like.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah. I agree with that. This is the kind of conversation that we're increasingly having certainly at Oxfam, but I think in the developed community. And while I agree with you that it is, and certainly, my experience working in Africa and Asia, the folks who were really listening with humility and deeper understanding and empathy, it wasn't always the case that just because someone is an urban national they actually had a deep understanding of and connection to rural life.

Patrick Fine: Right.

Paul O'Brien: That having been said, I'm living now in a world where checking privilege, checking one's own privilege, understanding the blinders that I certainly have as somebody who checks a lot of the privilege boxes. *[Laughter]* I'm white. I'm male. I'm heterosexual. I have enough money to-to not worry about falling asleep hungry.

All of those things – I'm not set up to listen well. I'm not set up to understand that well. And so, I mean, and honestly, like, what happened at Oxfam last year, you know, where it wasn't a white man exclusively but there were white males – and, for your listeners who don't know, we were involved in a crisis last year wherein responding to an emergency in Haiti – it wasn't last year that it happened; it was uncovered, really, last year. It had happened 2011, and we hadn't done a sufficiently strong investigation of it at the time, even though we had done some work – but finish the story. What had happened was that we'd gone into an emergency in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, and as part of our response of when we were there, some of our staff, including, you know, international expats, were engaged in activities, including with sex workers, which essentially were preying on ...

Patrick Fine: Well, there's sexual exploitation.

Paul O'Brien: Sexual exploitation. And harassment.

Patrick Fine: And abuse.

Paul O'Brien: And abuse.

Patrick Fine: Yeah.

Paul O'Brien: With a population that was incredibly vulnerable and disempowered.

Patrick Fine: Right.

Paul O'Brien: And so, what happened to us and what has happened to our organization in the aftermath of coming to terms and trying to look in the mirror are deep questions around power and privilege and how we show up and where we're coming from ourselves. And so, yeah, while I've met many true servants of development and of poverty who have checked many of the privilege boxes over, by dedicating themselves to communities living in and with communities, there's no pass for anyone, including if you're – happen to be a national of a country, therefore, you are authentically, you know, getting it right. But nor can we ignore the fact that we all come from somewhere and we need to understand that as we try to stay relevant.

Patrick Fine: So, I completely agree with you, and I think the way you phrased that is a good example of a kind of humility that people working on human development challenges need to bring to the work that they do. And you stand out as a person who is self-aware and tries to bring the humility, that perspective, to the work you do. The issue you've raised about sexual exploitation and abuse, which came to the forefront part because of scandal at Oxfam that you've just described, is a good example of the darker side of development.

So, that's one of the darker sides of development that nobody talked about for me, almost my entire career. Sometimes, at a country level, you might be aware of some incident that was dealt with at that country level, but in terms of the development community really acknowledging that these predatory practices that were occurring not just in Haiti, not just with Oxfam, but across many organization and many countries, and that it was something that the community hadn't really come to grips with in a meaningful way ...

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: ... I think is a real example of one of the darker sides that was exposed. And, I think we need to acknowledge the role that Oxfam has played in exposing it and in taking responsibility for it and not trying to hide it. And, that's led to, I think, a real transformative moment where organizations have reviewed their own policies. They've reviewed their practices and worked together, both individually and together, to put in place the safeguards to address that darker side of development and that darker side of-of human nature.

Paul O'Brien: Hm-hmm. Hm-hmm. Well, yeah. Thanks, Patrick. We are on a journey to try and do our part to uncover this darker side of development.

It is going to be a journey. There's never going to be a point where any organization can look at itself and say, "We are no longer at risk of any of these things." What, personally, it's made me realize, if I can connect this to my current preoccupation with power ...

Patrick Fine: Yeah.

Paul O'Brien: ... in a, in a way – and this isn't in – in no way is it to excuse it, but, as I've tried to better understand it, when you are a development organization, which has the ability to introduce resources that are life-changing into resource-starved environments, when you come from another place and you're able to literally, as you said earlier, development is, by definition, change, and you're able to walk into a context – no one voted for you, no one gave you that mandate – and say, "We would like to change this environment. In fact, often, we'd like to change you from maybe having less power to having more power" or whatever, that presumption, that presumption is so filled with questions around power. Like, who gave you that power? And, how do you exercise it responsibly? That it is, it's not inevitable that you're going to run into questions of power abuse, but it should cause you to ask the question, you know, "What if this goes wrong?"

And so, I think that's ...

Patrick Fine: Actually, I think it might be inevitable that [*Laughter*] that you're, it's definitely inevitable that you're going to confront the possibility

of abuse of power, either deliberate abuse or just, you know, misguided.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: And, as you say that, it makes me think about in the financial world, we have internal controls and auditing built into the system to guard against abuse of power and corrupt practices.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: And, I don't know if on the social side, we have the same kind of internal controls, if we thought about it this systematically.

Paul O'Brien: Okay. I love that-that observation, but I'm gonna give you a more complicated response to it [*crosstalk*] than I think you were bargaining for.

[*Laughter*]

Okay? 'Cause I want to get this broader argument out there. I think there is a set of checks and balances that's supposed to be working now that are all about actually drawing from the financing world. And, we've gone through a really big pivot between the way we used to think about that in the Millennium Development Goals environment and the Sustainable Development Goals environment. And if I could tell you a little story ...

Patrick Fine: Sure.

Paul O'Brien: ... because I've been thinking about this a little. Okay. Here's a Millennium Development Goal story that I certainly find amusing. One of the key authors of the Millennium Development Goals, Mark Malloch Brown, now Lord Mark Malloch Brown, was walking along a corridor with the seven Millennium Development Goals in his hand on the way over to the printer. And, he bumped into the head of the environmental program for the UN, and he let out a curse word and said, "Oh, I forgot the environment."
[*Laughter*] He ran back to his little group of probably mostly white men sitting in the basement of the UN, and they quickly came up with an eighth goal, which was the first sustainable development goal, and that is how the Millennium Development Goals went from seven to eight.

Then, they announced it to the world. That was the only consultation that happened on that. They announced it to the world. 192 nations signed on to the Millennium Development Goals and then, the financing for all that happened in like, what happened then was we had to finance these goals that were cooked up basically by a few individuals working collaboratively together, well-meaning, visionary individuals.

Patrick Fine: Right.

Paul O'Brien: But that's how they were born. With that ...

Patrick Fine: But they were effective.

Paul O'Brien: Oh, my gosh, they were effective. But the fight – but here's the here's the darker side of that period, right? This was a group of well-meaning, incredibly powerful people and institutions who said, "We've got to unlock the charitable instincts of the world." And that's about power, by the way. Charity is about you don't have to give but you should give.

And so, they got all these countries to sign on. The charitable instincts of all these governments went up. We started to see much greater investments. Everybody started to, in the governments, to get towards Naught.⁷ The NGO sector just blossomed, 'cause there was all this charitable money.

People were writing articles. I read one recently called "Power Shift – How Governments and Corporations" – this was in *Foreign Affairs* – "Governments and Corporations are No Longer Relevant Because NGOs Rule the World." That was one ...

[Crosstalk]

Patrick Fine: I missed that one.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

[Laughter]

So, we were all, and it was, a lot of it was this-this sort of – it was charity on testosterone, on steroids. Everybody was giving and

giving was, and, by the way, we made a lot of difference. I mean, we did a lot of great stuff. In my work, that's when we met was ...

Patrick Fine: Right.

Paul O'Brien: ... it was part of this whole charitable thing. So, that's that story. And a lot of it is about hopefully mostly the responsible use of power, but sometimes, maybe a little lack of scrutiny around, "Well, hold on a second. Is charity really gonna solve all our problems?" Okay.

So, that's the MDGs. Good story. The sustainable development comes along, but there was no Mark Malloch Brown this time, okay? *[Laughter]* There was, there was a bunch of developing country governments who said, "Well, hold on. If we're gonna have the kind of sustainable development goals we really want, we're gonna have one on industrialization. We're-we're gonna have one on ...

Patrick Fine: Infrastructure and ...

Paul O'Brien: ... infrastructure and electricity.

[Laughter]

The stuff we want, right?" Then, there was, the MDG crowd were still there. All of us who were saying, "Well, hold on. We're haven't finished the job on poverty, health, education ...

Patrick Fine: Gender.

Paul O'Brien: ... women's rights, gender – right – so, let's make sure they're all in there." And then, there was a bunch of think tank folks and sort of global actors who were actually thinking hard about, "Well, what are the big structural things like inequality and climate change and governance?" So, all these folks came together, and it was a two-year, knockdown, drag-out negotiation. But what was very different was nobody was walking across the UN with one sheet saying, "Oh, I must remember to include a – " I mean, there was so much consultation, it nearly did all our heads in. But the important part of that is that-that what was going on in terms of power was no one set of actors gets to decide anymore.

Because what was the core theory at the heart of the sustainable development goals is it's not gonna be fixed by charity anymore. It's not gonna be fixed by a-a transfer of aid from one society to another. What's gonna actually help societies to sustainably develop themselves is when governments, corporations and other powerful institutions create the space in which people can lift themselves from poverty, create the rules and incentives and resources.

But the only way they're gonna do that, and this is where I'm getting to my power point , the only way governments are actually gonna act in the interest of people and corporations are gonna act in the interest of anyone but their shareholders is if they're held accountable. 'Cause they won't self-correct. And so, it became, it basically was a masquerade for fundamental liberal democratic theory. Powerful institutions can create the space for people to lift themselves from poverty, but only if civil society and citizens can hold them accountable.

So, we went from a conversation about transferring stuff, which was the MDGs, to a conversation about how to make institutions work for everybody, which is a conversation about power. And what we've got to do over the coming years is to – and this is why your earlier comment is so important – we've got to be much more honest about power and why governments work or choose to work for their people, or become authoritarian, nationalists, populists and exclusionary. And how we create space for power is gonna, in the outside world, is gonna be the key to development.

And the reason I say all that is, if we're supposed to be out there in the world changing how governments work, changing how corporations work, changing how institutions work, and we've got our own power problems with sexual exploitation and abuse and all this stuff, how do we actually learn from our own problems to become more fluent on the ...

Patrick Fine: And more legitimate.

Paul O'Brien: ... and legitimate and relevant and credible ...

Patrick Fine: Right.

Paul O'Brien: ... in a world which is increasingly talking and thinking about power? That's where, I think, the conversation is now.

Patrick Fine: Actually, as you say that, it makes me reflect on how long that has been at the heart of the conversation, even if it hasn't been recognized. And, it brings me back to an Oxfam publication that I read in 1984 or so.

[Laughter]

And it framed development as the challenges of poverty and power. And it made the point that those challenges are as, compelling whether you're in the UK or you're in Africa.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: And I had just come from Africa to Boston, where I was running a community school that was dealing with the issues of poverty and power. And so, I was able to see the connection of how the issues I was dealing with in urban Boston were essentially the same. They, I mean, they were dressed up differently ...

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: ... but, at their heart, they were the same as many of the issues I'd been dealing with in rural Africa. Now, I like the way you framed this challenge as the currency of development is going to be power much more than it's going to be money and stuff. Now, it still looks to me like we speak in the language of money and stuff.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: So, I agree with the notion, but I'm not sure what the currency converter is gonna look like.

Paul O'Brien: That's beautiful.

[Laughter]

I'll tell you the risk on that currency converter. It's one thing to talk in the language of money and stuff if you know that ultimately, the difference you want to make is not really sufficiently measured in that way. That's, but, needs to be about whether people live with

dignity, choice, and the ability to get for themselves whatever it is that will lift themselves from poverty. It's one thing to use the currency but not be fooled by it. It's another to thing to use the currency of stuff and to think that the conversation stops there. That's when we're fooling ourselves.

And I, here's the reason I say that. I think the game is up on this in terms of skeptical, national governments letting foreign NGOs walk around their societies talking about power and how we're gonna build movements and a lot of what we're gonna do is hold them accountable. They're like, "I'm sorry. You're not here to do that."

Patrick Fine: Right. Who are you to ...

Paul O'Brien: Who are you? So, they're increasingly doing what they, as in a Darwinian way, you'd expect them to do, which is restrict our ability to try and do that. If we, in order to stay there and to do the work with women, girls and communities, and young men and boys as well, in order to be able to stay there and empower people to lift themselves from poverty, we have to maybe not use a political language, not overtly say we're there to take power away from the government. Okay. Because, in the end of the day, the net benefit of us being there – fine.

But if we are there and we're actually trying to change things on the ground and we don't even know that our work is about power and, at some level, politics, then we're fooling ourselves.

Patrick Fine: So, this is a recurrent theme on the *Deeper Look* podcast, which is the theme of it comes down to politics. It comes down to political choices.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: And whether those are democratic choices that empower people, that involve people – where people have a voice – or whether they're choices that are made by either national institutions or international institutions on behalf of people that may want it or not.

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

Patrick Fine: You started by saying we have a knowledge gap, we have an analysis gap, and then, sometimes even if we have the knowledge and analysis, we don't do the right thing.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: And the reason we don't do the right thing, or don't have the courage to do the right thing, in my judgment, is that is because we run into the politics of the matter.

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

Patrick Fine: And the politics of the matter may be that, well, if you're gonna operate here, then we don't want you talking about human rights abuses.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: If you're gonna operate here, then we don't want you challenging the choices that we're making, whether those choices promote human development or not.

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

Patrick Fine: So, it does come down to politics and one of the recurring themes on the podcast has been that too often, international NGOs and the development community writ large pretends like it's a neutral actor.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: But you can't be neutral.

Paul O'Brien: No. I'm totally with you. You can't. Not if the agenda is to redistribute power from those who have too much to those who don't have enough. You could put it in terms of resources. You can't be neutral in that way. Development, particularly development, as opposed to humanitarian work, but particularly – I mean, I would argue both, but particularly development – to think of it as neutral is to miss the point. Can I – yeah?

Patrick Fine: Well, I was gonna say, "But then, that brings up the question of how does a development actor, whether they're a national actor or

an international actor, how do they interact with that political system in a legitimate way?

Paul O'Brien:

So, let me be a bit provocative, and I, I'm gonna introduce it – a live debate I'm having with my fellow Oxfam colleagues on this front because I think there's a danger of us drinking our own Kool-Aid here. So, in Oxfam, we use a language of power that talks about four types of power. There's power as control, which is the ability to dictate the resources or even mindsets and actions of others. If you have it, somebody else doesn't. There's power within that often, with the work we do, is trying to enhance the power that a person who feels powerless has, so, trying to grow their power within.

There's power with, which is the power that can grow when groups of people work together to seek a common goal. And then, there's power to, which is power within and power with only matter if a group or an individual decides to take action – the power to act. So, there's power with, within, to, and over. Here's my view. I think for, for years, our sector and certainly Oxfam, has been too focused on power with, within, and to, and not enough on power over. Whereas the Putins of this world, and even the more benign Kagamis of this world, they, they know that the game is really about power over. Either I have power over my society or somebody else does. And so, here's the way the game actually works. Politicians who are sophisticated about power will let you do the other three.

"Oh, they're doing women's empowerment workshops. That's great. Oh, yeah, they're bringing people together for a capacity building. That's great. Oh, they're-they're walking in a peaceful march down the street and taking their power to – that's great."

They will let you do that right up to the point where you're actually challenging their power over, which is their ability to dictate how we live or what resources we have or what futures we have. You threaten their power over, and they will get very hostile very quickly. So, what I think is happening in development now is that the game is up. Everybody knows that it's about politics. They're gonna let us play, play politics in their countries. They'll let us do capacity building workshops on empowerment unless and until we actually threaten their real power, which is power over.

At that point, things are gonna get messy. And, if we don't have the vocabulary to understand, "They're making this distinction, so we better, too" the one thing that I would urge us – we should be in the game of trying to get power over. I think that was fundamentally what Lincoln was talking about when he said, "Government of the people by the people." That was power over. That wasn't, "Let's all get together and then [*Laughter*] have a workshop."

[*Laughter*]

That was, "Let's control our world." So, Jefferson said the same thing when he said, "We've gotta redistribute power away from these unaccountable elites." We've got to get back to a conversation about power which is much more brutal and much more truthful, because that's the kind of power that politicians talk about.

Patrick Fine: Yeah. That's such a great point. And I want to say something provocative. So, I agree with the categorization of different powers and I completely agree with the general critique. But, one question is if you look at some of the examples of power over that you gave, like Rwanda ...

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: ... that's pretty effective use of power in raising people out of poverty.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: And creating ...

Paul O'Brien: On the health side it's effective, for example.

Patrick Fine: Well, not just health.

Paul O'Brien: And economically.

Patrick Fine: Economically. In terms of living standards.

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

- Patrick Fine:* That – China would be another example where living standard's gone way up ...
- Paul O'Brien:* Yeah.
- Patrick Fine:* ... because this use of power over. Or even to your Mark Malloch Brown example ...
- Paul O'Brien:* Yes, yes.
- Patrick Fine:* ... the MDGs, arguably, were quite effective in mobilizing action that resulted in more people having access to clean drinking water and more people being food secure.
- Paul O'Brien:* Yes.
- Patrick Fine:* And a number of outcomes that actually improved people's lives, probably, I mean, in my observation, is that they were more effective than we're seeing the SDGs be.
- Paul O'Brien:* Yeah.
- Patrick Fine:* And the SDGs were more of a power with exercise as opposed to a power over exercise, so ...
- Paul O'Brien:* Huh. Interesting.
- Patrick Fine:* So, if what you're focused on is outcomes and you want outcomes that are improving people's living standards, what's the tradeoff between power over that is effective in achieving the outcome ...
- Paul O'Brien:* Yes.
- Patrick Fine:* ... and then, these other powers that may be more collaborative or more decentralized in how they share power but not actually achieving the outcomes.
- Paul O'Brien:* Yes. I love that question. My shorthand for it, and I'll give you one hopefully interesting example, is that those other forms of power are often the best ways to make sure that power over is used responsibly.

And so, here's one example with a little dilemma that Oxfam has. So, we are quite well known these days for our concerns about the power that comes with extreme wealth. We are very concerned that so much wealth sits in the hands of too few people. It is a deep problem for us that one percent of Jeff Bezos' wealth is the same as the entire health budget of Ethiopia.

Patrick Fine: Well, and I was going to say when you were talking about power over ...

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: ... that it's not just political power holders.

Paul O'Brien: Right?

Patrick Fine: It's also the economic power holders.

Paul O'Brien: Exactly. And-and let's, I mean, we could spend a lot of time talking about how economic power becomes political power, right?

Patrick Fine: Right.

Paul O'Brien: So, one of our most generous grand tours benefactors is Bill Gates. He, year in/year out, supports Oxfam's work and yet, year in/year out, usually around Davos, we highlight the amount of wealth that Bill Gates has and that our world is challenged by the fact that so much power sits in one individual's hands.

Patrick Fine: Just as an aside, did you see the article about Bill Gates growing wealth?

Paul O'Brien: Yes.

[Laughter]

He can't give it away fast enough.

Patrick Fine: He can't give it away fast enough.

Paul O'Brien: I know. He's, and so, therefore, he gains more and more power. He, I mean, I am very grateful that he wakes up every day choosing – and I use that word intentionally – to make the world a

better place in so many ways. Because if he wanted to, he could tank the currency of nations.

Patrick Fine: Not only that, but he's a great example of somebody who is really questioning how do you tackle these challenges ...

Paul O'Brien: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: ... with a kind of humility that you often don't see from the people who have power over?

Paul O'Brien: Yeah. No. Exactly. I think that's a really important insight. Power over is not a bad thing in itself. It is just the currency we need to be talking about.

Our world is gonna be improved by people using power over in a good way. But it's also gonna be harmed by people using it in a bad way. And what we need is a vocabulary to see the difference.

[Music]

Patrick Fine: All right. What a fantastic conversation we've had. Thanks for highlighting this different categorization of power, how we use it, and how it relates to both positive development outcomes and the darker side of development. To wrap up the episode, I'm going to ask you the same questions I've asked everyone who's joined me for an episode of *A Deeper Look* this year. The first is, what is something almost no one agrees with you on?

Paul O'Brien: That real power is zero sum.

Patrick Fine: Explain that a little.

Paul O'Brien: So, I believe the most important forms of power and the way we've been talking about are finite. If one person holds it, somebody else can't. And that is a deeply uncomfortable thing in the ...

[Crosstalk]

Patrick Fine: Concept. Right.

- Paul O'Brien:* ... concept. And it's, it is so antithetical to the way we try to show up every day as development actors to make a bigger pie that everyone can enjoy.
- Patrick Fine:* Right. And to find win/win solutions.
- Paul O'Brien:* Yes. Win/win [*Laughter*] is the death knell, I mean, it is the way to survive, and it is the death knell of serious conversations around finite power.
- Patrick Fine:* So, that would be a good example of that kind of vocabulary that you're saying we need to develop – is to be able to describe the uses of power in ways that are finite.
- Paul O'Brien:* Yes. And accept, perhaps, and I have to accept and many of my great colleagues at Oxfam have helped me to accept, that there are other ways of talking about power that aren't finite that are deeply important to our work.
- Patrick Fine:* Second question is what's one lesson you've learned that you'd like to share with our listeners?
- Paul O'Brien:* That all of this is a journey. There is no – and that sounds like a platitude, but if I've learned anything over particularly last couple of years – that humility requires an acceptance of the constant imperfection of trying to, to rebalance our world to be more fair. It's what inspires me to stay in it. I'm excited for the journey ahead. But we are deeply flawed as a set of institutions, but we're, at our best days, capable of admitting that and willing to take another step forward on the journey.
- Patrick Fine:* Paul, thanks so much for a really thought-provoking conversation.
- Paul O'Brien:* Thanks for having me. It was fun, Patrick.
- Patrick Fine:* And listeners, thank you for tuning in. I'd like to know what you think about today's conversation. I'd love to hear your views about how power is used and the different types of power – the brighter sides and the darker sides. So, I invite you, please share comments and feedback with us. Leave a review for the podcast. Share it with your friends.

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I want to thank our producers, Katherine Wise and Joshua Woodson, and stay tuned for the next episode of *A Deeper Look*, *[Music begins]* where we'll be looking at another aspect of the darker side of development.