

*[Music]*

*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.

*[Music]*

*Patrick Fine:* Hello, listeners. Welcome to *A Deeper Look* podcast. I'm Patrick Fine, CEO at FHI 360, and today I'm joined by Alex Thier, who has just finished a stint as the Director of the Overseas Development Institute, which is the leading think tank dealing with human development issues and policy in the United Kingdom. Alex, welcome to the podcast.

*Alex Thier:* Thank you so much for having me, Patrick. It's a thrill to be here.

*Patrick Fine:* And, I have to say that ODI has had such a huge influence on the thinking of the international development community, not just in the U.K. but worldwide, that it's really exciting to have you with us. So, the theme of this year's podcast is the darker side of development. And, Alex, in addition to working as the Director of ODI, you've also worked at USAID as the Director of Policy. You managed programs in Afghanistan.

You have a long history working in the nonprofit sector. So, you bring a great, multifaceted perspective on development practice and policy, which is why you're such a perfect person to talk about this subject. Now, the first question I have for you is – ODI, it has been a pretty trenchant critic of development practice over the years. What is the perspective today from the U.K. or from – from ODI on the current state of development practice? Is there a darker side?

*Alex Thier:* Well, thank you again so much for having me. I – I feel like I've spent a lot of my career on the dark side, *[laughter]* and what I mean by that is that I have always been drawn, I think, to working on some of the hardest challenges. I've spent a lot of my time particularly in fragile states and working on other really deeply difficult issues and divided societies.

And I live, I think, a life both practically and intellectually constantly thinking about why these things that we do are so challenging and why we so often come up short. I think one of the things that really attracted me to being at ODI and – and

throughout my career has been a honest assessment of what it is that we do and how we can and must do it better, because the issues that we're trying to tackle are so fundamentally important. And today, it seems like that is truer than – than ever.

*Patrick Fine:* Exactly.

*Alex Thier:* When you look at issues like climate, when you look at issues like pandemics, when you look at issues like human displacement, I mean, we are facing – at the same time as we have seen tremendous positive influence and impact on human development, reduction of extreme poverty, we are also seeing some challenges, which do feel truly deep, long-term existential, and development is about trying to address those things.

And, increasingly, it's about addressing our own deficits, as well as those of others.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* And so, I think one of the key things that's so important for us to understand today is that there – there are no more developed and developing countries. We are all developing countries, and our ability to recognize problems and our own contribution to them is fundamental to the practice of development today. And the reason I think that your question is so important is because I think to be an observer and critic of development today means looking fundamentally at where we have gone wrong in the past, where we've treated development as a transfer from rich to poor, and we can't see it that way anymore if we're going to be successful.

*Patrick Fine:* You – you know, when we dealt with the sustainable development goals, one of the things that we highlighted was the principle of universality, that all societies struggle with addressing human development needs.

And I think that, as you point out, that's becoming more and more acute, where you see issues of governance, of rights, of inclusion, of equity. One of my observations about development in general is that there's a misconception that if we only can solve this problem, then we will have reached some end state, and there will be no other human development needs to address, where, in fact, we're on a continuum, where, as we make improvements – say fewer people are living in poverty today than – than 20 years ago. So, as

we make improvements, there are new challenges that are being driven by urbanization, by climate change, by technology. And I agree with your point that looking forward, it looks like those challenges are becoming more formidable, not less.

So, when you look at current development practice in that context, what do you see as some of the paradoxes and dilemmas that we're struggling with?

*Alex Thier:* Well, I have always been focused on what I think is the preeminent dilemma of development. Maybe you could even call it the original sin, and that is that development resources often interfere with the social contract. I think that that's the fundamental dilemma, because development resources can interfere with the mechanisms of accountability that're ultimately fundamentally important to create well-functioning, inclusive societies.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. And part of that critique is that it undermines true democracy.

*Alex Thier:* Absolutely, and we can map out a little bit how this really works in practice. So, the first is that, of course, who is setting development policy? It's often the donors.

Now, hopefully, at its best, donors are doing that together with local leadership and local ownership. But as we know, that's often not the case. Or even when they try hard, it's still compromised, because those ideas and that flow of money and ultimately the decision-making about where to spend and what to spend on do come from donors. And so, you start there. It then moves to the fact that because those who receive that money tend to be more accountable to the people giving the money than to the ultimate recipients, to their own citizens, that then interferes with the fact that that government, those institutions, are meant to be more accountable to their own citizens than they are to some faraway donor. So, there's this second challenge that gets there.

*Patrick Fine:* Just on the first about the donors often setting the agenda – and even if they're sincerely trying to do it in a collaborative manner that they're really the final decision-makers, that's kind of the notion of he who pays the piper calls the tune.

*Alex Thier:* Exactly. *[Laughter]* Having been the head of policy at USAID, I'll give you an example of this, because I think about it a lot. We were

doing a five-year country development strategy with Nigeria, and Nigeria's a critically important partner of the U.S. government, of USAID, and we spent a lot of effort doing analyses and constraints to growth and talking to people at the national level and at the subnational level about what they want, what they see as their path to development. How do they want to partner with us over these five years and ultimately couple of billion dollars that'll go into investment from the U.S. into Nigeria during that time frame? And, we spent basically a year kind of coming up with this and really thinking about it. And then, what happens at the end of that year? We get the budget with our congressional earmarks, and 85 percent of that budget in our first year, 85 percent, was going to go to health.

And, I will tell you that during that yearlong process, we did not conclude with our partners in Nigeria that 85 percent of the spending should go to health.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* Health was important, but it was a much, much smaller part of the overall pie in terms of other things that they wanted to do, like focusing on economic growth, focusing on provincial-level governance, things like that. That's not where we ended up putting our resources.

*Patrick Fine:* That's a great example, and we've seen that example play out not just with U.S. assistance but with many countries' assistance across the world.

*Alex Thier:* Oh, I mean, this is not a United States problem particularly.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* We're the biggest, so it's particularly important, and I think we rightly pay a lot of lip service to the need for ownership, but the reality is that it's everywhere. It's in all the donors. It's in philanthropy. It's in all of the major governments that have aid agencies.

*Patrick Fine:* Right, right.

So, let's go back to that concept of assistance, because it's coming from an external party, undermining the social contract within a country. Can you say some more about that?

*Alex Thier:* Yeah. Well, I mean, fundamentally, I think that what we have learned, and I don't mean we in the development community, but we as a big group of humans ...

*[Crosstalk]*

*Patrick Fine:* Human beings? Yeah. *[Laughs]*

*Alex Thier:* ... over the last couple of centuries that ultimately sustainable development, the path towards justice, the path towards equality is one that is borne on a process where the people have control, they are empowered and that they can hold people who take power and abuse power accountable for what they do.

And, if you don't have those mechanisms, that can work in a couple of ways, right? There's the big ways. People pay taxes, and they demand something in return for them. People get to vote, and they demand something in return for that. People participate in PTAs, in parent-teacher committees, in schools, and they can demand something if things aren't going right. It is that dynamic, and it's a constant test. It's not a goal. You don't get to accountability.

Accountability is a constant process of people being able to see what is happening, to get information about where money is going, how people are behaving, whether they're getting the outcomes that they say they're gonna get from these investments and demanding that people do the right thing or that somebody else takes over.

*Patrick Fine:* So, there's two important points you made about accountability. One is that it's a continuous process, so it doesn't end with one data set, or it doesn't end at one event, that it's a continuous process, and, two, that it is informed by information, that there's gotta be transparency, or there's gotta be access for people who are affected by decisions to information about how the decisions were made and maybe input into those decisions. Now, we live in this information age, where there's big data. There's small data. You can look up stuff on the website.

In poor countries, the penetration of smartphones, where people have access to Google and can Google stuff, is high and growing quickly. Do you think that these changes we're seeing are resulting in people having more good information that they can act on?

*Alex Thier:*

Absolutely, but you outlined very well the two key elements of sort of transition of accountability, that people have to be part of the decision-making process, and they have to have the information to be able to participate in that. And, let me explain, I think, how aid breaks both of those or can have the practice of breaking both of those. So, first of all, as we already talked about, if the decision-making is not in the hands of those who would be held accountable, then you're breaking that. And so, if the decision-making is elsewhere, either because it's being made by donors, or it's being made by people at the local level who aren't accountable to those they serve, that element is broken. The second element gets broken when people don't have access to that information that they need to be able to make those decisions.

There has been a great movement in the last number of years to increase transparency and to make sure that citizens have access to that information. And, I think we've made a lot of improvements. I mean, I worked at USAID on opening up huge troves of data and transparency that certainly weren't there before, both for American citizens and for people around the world who are recipients of that aid. And, at the same time there has been a lot of investment from the aid agencies in trying to increase transparency. I've worked in the last couple of years on a project in Uganda called Know Your Budget, and the whole purpose of that is to show the budget for Uganda, not the USAID budget or the DFID budget – Uganda's budget ...

*Patrick Fine:*

The national budget.

*Alex Thier:*

... the national budget, what that is and how it's broken down into different sectors, whether it's spent on health, education, infrastructure but also how it's broken down subnationally. Where does that money go?

And I went to the Ministry of Finance, and I got a bunch of guys with me, and we set out, and we drove out into the countryside in Uganda, and we went to some schools and some health clinics, where they then are supposed to be able to see, "Well, how much did we get, and what impact has it had?" And the good news is – is

that there's so much room to improve what people see and what they understand. The bad news is putting up a website does not get people in a Ugandan village accountability.

They're barely looking at that website, if at all, let alone, "So, what do I do with that information? How do I use it? How do I advocate around it?" And so, I do think that there's been improvement, but we are still a long ways away from having citizens at the endpoint where they are going to a health clinic, be able to demand what they get. Because when we sat down with these people in the health clinic, it was fascinating. They had up on the wall all the things that they were doing and the money that they got.

*Patrick Fine:* They showed on a poster on the wall the amount of budget that they were receiving from the Ministry of Health.

*Alex Thier:* Exactly. And they showed how many people they were seeing per month and what kinds of cases and so on, and that was great. But they had no idea whether the budget amount was the right amount, whether that was what they were supposed to be getting. And, it was fascinating, because the Ministry of Finance officials didn't even know really how to tell whether what was coming out of the pipe at the end was really what had been planned. And so, I think it was kind of a wakeup experience for everybody.

*Patrick Fine:* Yeah, that's a great example. I'm also concerned. We have made big improvements in aid transparency, so information about how foreign assistance funds are allocated, where they're allocated, how much is – is available for what purposes. But I worry that because of information overload, rather than building accountability and trust, strengthening the social contract, it's starting to break the social contract down.

And now, you see governments purposely providing misleading information to obscure what's actually happening or to serve specific policy purposes. Is that something that you've looked at all?

*Alex Thier:* Well, I think one of the things that we know is that money doesn't tell you much. You know, it's fascinating. The last year, I think it was, Steve Ballmer, one of the heads of Microsoft, started this big similar thing for the United States, Know Your Government, showing where the budget is going everywhere. And so, this is not just a problem for Uganda. It's a problem here. But one of the

principle problems that we have that I think that we've been really trying to work on in the last couple of years is the money does not tell you much. What you want to know is, are you getting outcomes for these resources, and are those outcomes the right outcomes? Are they comparable to what somebody else could get using those same resources? And that is a really complex problem, because it's hard to determine whether the money led to an outcome. That alone is hard enough.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* But then it's harder still to be able to tell to whether that's the outcome that you should have gotten or expected or whether you could do better.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. That notion of really being able to assess impact, whether the outcomes are concurrent with the effort and the resources or justify the effort and resources is one of the big challenges in human development.

*Alex Thier:* Yeah. And – and that's why I think, you know, ultimately – look, there's not a magic solution to this, 'cause there's not actually an answer to that question, because ultimately we will all have our perspectives.

*Patrick Fine:* There's always experimentation, yeah.

*Alex Thier:* And we will make judgments, which brings us full circle. That's why accountability is so important, because it is ultimately not some god of human development who will look from on high ...

*Patrick Fine:* *[Laughs]*

*Alex Thier:* ... and determine whether we made the right investments. It's individual people around the world who have to judge for their own selves and their own societies whether they're headed in the direction and doing the right thing.

*Patrick Fine:* There's one of the things about the criticism around undermining the social contract and undermining democratic practice that I haven't been able to reconcile. So, I understand the validity of that. I've also worked in countries where I've seen that, even down to the community level, there's more regard and responsiveness to what the perceived desire of the donor is than the government



itself. What I struggle with is we live in a globalized world. So, what is the counterfactual to that? What is the alternative to that? Is it that you don't have international relationships, that – that you don't have external parties, whether they're commercial businesses, whether they're development banks, whether they're bilateral donors that they're just not going to play a role?

While on one hand, I agree that there's a valid critique there, on the other hand, I don't think that you can legitimately say, "If you're investing resources, you shouldn't have a say in how those resources are used," because there's an accountability line to whoever is investing the resources as well. So, how do you reconcile that critique with the fact that we're in a globalized world, where there's going to be all sorts of interactions amongst different players?

*Alex Thier:*

I mean, I don't see this as a binary. I am a great supporter of the power and potential of aid and partnership to do amazing things. For me, it is awareness in terms of understanding where you are causing those problems. It is identifying ways in which you can actually improve those dynamics so that the aid can have the most possible positive impact without having so many negative consequences that you shouldn't have done it. And, I do think that that line exists. It's just that it's very hard to find it, right?

We used to debate Ethiopia endlessly in the U.S. government.

*Patrick Fine:*

*[Laughs]*

*Alex Thier:*

When I was serving particularly in policy and planning, we were going through a particularly bad phase, where the Ethiopian government was engaging in a lot of repressive activities, and at the same time they were seeing some tremendous *[laughs]* positive impacts from the development investments.

*Patrick Fine:*

Economic growth, improved health outcomes.

*Alex Thier:*

And it's – it is the great sort of manifestation of the conundrum that we are talking about, because on one hand you look at it, and you say, "Wow, Ethiopia has incredible potential, amazing people, so much opportunity. We don't wanna stand and turn away and stop investing." And at some point, you also look and say, like, "Man, the people in the government are their own worst enemy, and Ethiopia is not going to get to the place that I think most

Ethiopians want, let alone where others, friends, partners would want it to be with this path of governance." And so, what do you do about that?

I do believe in the idea of conditionality, but for me conditionality – again, it's not a binary like, oh, we got to that line that we set somehow. Cut off all aid, although I do sometimes think you have to do that. But I think what you have to say is, are there ways which we can make sure that our investments are not making things worse?

I started out in my career in Afghanistan, as you mentioned, and one of the first things that I did as a young aid worker was went on a retreat with a whole bunch of people in the aid community on a do-no-harm workshop, understanding how our presence might be making things worse. As bad as things were, imagine that your investments might actually be making things worse rather than better. How do you see the signs for that, and how do you correct it? And that's basically how I've continued throughout my career, because I do think that there are ways to improve against the problems that we're talking about.

*Patrick Fine:* Do you think that as a community, the development community, that that concept of "do no harm" has gained momentum over the years? Or, if you think about where we are now, do you see less emphasis on that?

*Alex Thier:* Well, I actually think, particularly in the last couple of years, we are going in the opposite direction.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* We have entered into an era, where this idea of aid in the national interest is becoming this overriding theme or mantra among many of the big donors. And, I think that in many ways it's pushing us in the wrong direction.

*Patrick Fine:* So, that's taking us towards the darker side. I agree with that. I had a conversation with some policymakers recently here in the U.S. around how to maintain public support for foreign assistance and for international engagement. And their view was very strong that it's gotta be tied to national security interests.

I said, "Look, I understand the link to national security interests, and that's a legitimate link, but there is also a link to our ideals and our values as a nation. And, I fear that we've got the balance wrong, and ultimately it will not serve either our national interests or the interests of our partners and of the international community if we lose sight of the fact that there is a reason for us to be engaged that is really around us being a good actor and contributing to a greater good and to the welfare of the planet." And, when I tried to articulate that point of view, the response I got was, "Yeah, no. No, that's – that's not gonna resonate with anybody." They said, "We don't disagree with that, but, you know, that's not a winning argument, so we're not gonna make that argument."

It worries me, because if we lose sight of the fact that there is a reason for us to engage with the world that is not just our own self-interest but that there's a greater good to be served, I feel like we can lose our way and that we open ourselves up to more and more moving towards the darker side of development.

*Alex Thier:* Absolutely. I think that in a world of America first and Brexit that this idea that we have a small approach to our national interests, that we have a zero-sum approach to our national interests risks misdefining our national interest ...

*Patrick Fine:* Yes, exactly.

*Alex Thier:* ... and – and what aid can do as a part of that. Look, I don't want to give that ground, because I disagree with the idea that there is some small national interest that aid serves.

I believe in a more expansive view that I think you just articulated of what United States national interest means.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* I was part of the team of people who helped to draft the 2015 U.S. national security strategy under President Obama, and we had these debates endlessly in the Situation Room. How do you define the national interest? What does it mean? What are the ways in which we contribute to that? And in the end, that document lays out an idea of national interest, where the national interests of the United States are in a world where there is more democracy and less authoritarianism, where there is more equality and less

extreme poverty not only because of an ideal, although I support those ideals and values, but because it actually benefits us long-term in the world. If we are concerned about the Ebola crisis, both the one that happened several years ago in West Africa and the growing one in the DRC today, and you had people freaking out all over the country, "Just think about people in the United States," that people were gonna get in with Ebola. If that's your concern, then you want better development in the DRC and in Liberia and in Sierra Leone.

*Patrick Fine:* Or look at Central America right now. So, at the beginning of June, the administration announced that it's terminating all assistance to Central America because the countries are not stopping migration. That would be another example where, rather than having the broader view of how to serve both our national interests and the interests of our neighbors, it's a very narrow point of view.

*Alex Thier:* I mean, it's a catastrophic one, because if you think about – the reasons for migration are complex. We know that, but we also know that high levels of violence and lack of economic opportunity are fundamental drivers of migration. And, if those aren't issues that you are willing to work on with your southern neighbors, then you are going to find more problems with your southern neighbors and on your own borders.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* It is absolutely the case that we need to invest in things that benefit us. But, again, it's not just this idea, because, you know, the – the whole migration, quote-unquote, "crisis" has swept Europe as well, and many aid agencies in Europe have started to say that we want to redefine some of the premises of our aid about migration. And, I think that there's a danger there, too, because then it just becomes about this idea of paying people to stop migration as they've just done with Mexico or as the Europeans did with Turkey. And, that's not what you do. You don't build less-porous borders and prevent people from getting to your country so that they get stuck in someone else's country. You have to work on the – the deeper problems.

And the biggest one of all, of course, is climate. Climate knows no boundaries. If you want America to be first, then you better fix the climate, because nobody is gonna be first if climate change continues on the path that we are on.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. And what we've seen over the last five years is a wave of migrants that are really – the – the root cause is climate change. And if you look at, for example, the migration out of the Sahel towards Europe, there's a direct link to the changing climate in those areas and the ability of the countries like Burkina or Mali or Mauritania or Senegal to be able to support the populations that they have and provide some kind of opportunity for people to have the kind of lives that they aspire to.

*Alex Thier:* I mean, it's really stunning when you look at, all around the world, you're getting these spikes of temperatures. If you look at the maps between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn and the likely temperature scenarios over the next 30 years, you have an enormous number of people who live around the Equator and 20 degrees north and south, and those temperatures are going to become not only unbearable just for daily life but certainly have major effects on things like agricultural productivity.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* And so, we are heading towards a world in which temperatures and other climactic events are going to drive people to other places.

*Patrick Fine:* Alex, you've been one of the leading voices promoting the idea of poverty reduction. But what we see now, not just in the U.S. but more broadly across the international development community, is a move away from the language around poverty reduction and having it replaced really with the language around economic growth.

How do you view this shift in the narrative and in our objectives from an objective that is focused on eliminating extreme poverty to an objective that is aimed at promoting economic growth?

*Alex Thier:* Well, I think that we have two challenges with that. One is that I continue to believe fiercely that we can and must end extreme poverty. I think that it is unacceptable for us, wherever you're from, to live in a world where people are not afforded a basic minimum standard of living. I believe that there should be a social floor everywhere, that people should not be hungry and that if we focus on that relentlessly, we can actually really continue to make a very serious dent in it. But, I think that there's a different challenge, which is what you're getting at, which is that the path of

development as it's been described for so long is a path of growth. And that is a path of consumption, ever-greater consumption, of resources.

*Patrick Fine:* By an ever-growing population.

*Alex Thier:* By an ever-growing population. And so, if you look at some of the numbers – I've been doing a piece of work looking, for example, at food consumption and caloric consumption and what it is in wealthier countries, what it is in poorer countries, and, if everybody is going to be equal, how that will change. And, the numbers are quite startling because in order to get everybody to this kind of minimum that is agreed by health experts of 2,000 ...

*Patrick Fine:* Right, it's, like, 2,200 calories.

*Alex Thier:* ... 2,000 to 2,500, depending on who you are, where you are, calories a day consumption, which, A, means that you have to have even more calories available, because, of course, if you're eating something at your house, it takes a lot more to produce that.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. Right.

*Alex Thier:* And that, overall, we would have to – for the existing population, let alone the increases we're about to see – it would mean a 60 percent increase in the number of available calories globally for everybody to be equal on the standards of the U.S. today.

*Patrick Fine:* Wow.

*Alex Thier:* Now, you might say that that's –

*Patrick Fine:* That is startling, really. *[Laughs]*

*Alex Thier:* It is. And you might say, "Well, that's too high a figure," and so on, but the underlying point is that we want people to have that basic minimum of calories in order to be healthy, but we have to understand the global food system, the global transport network, the value chains that are necessary to produce that. And, then let me add one more thing, which is climbing up the protein chain as well, because people don't just want more calories. They want better calories. They want more protein, because that's what makes people healthy, so people are eating higher-protein diets.

Producing protein is vastly more expensive to the planet in terms of water and energy than producing plant-based protein is.

*Alex Thier:* And so, ultimately ...

*Patrick Fine:* Oh, you're talking about the difference between meat and plant ...

*Alex Thier:* Well, so, first it's the difference between overall diets that have a lot of carbohydrates and protein-heavy diets. And then within that, it's the difference between meat-based protein diets and plant-based protein diets. And so, if you start to factor that in, the amount of energy, water, land resources that're necessary to create all those calories is – is enormous. And, the last thing we wanna do is say, "Well, we should let the rich continue to eat as they are and make the poor slow down or not eat as much." So, we have to find a way to be able to do that within the planetary boundaries that clearly exist.

*Patrick Fine:* So, what's your conclusion about how to do that?

*Alex Thier:* Well, it really comes down to a seriousness about what I call the great sustainability transformation, which means that not only in the countries that are the wealthiest do we need to do a lot about reducing the amount that we use of energy and water and those things, because we're way over our own budgets, but we need to really build into the development path of countries that are still in much more of the building phase, a much stronger approach to sustainability. But that has costs, and so, we need to make sure that we are willing to contemplate and put in those upfront costs now, because if we don't, we are going to end up with an agricultural system and an energy system that blows us up out of the water or – or submerges itself.

*[Crosstalk]*

*Patrick Fine:* Well, and that drives – well, and that drives climate change. And if you factor in climate change, then that's going to have a extreme effect on who gets to consume and who doesn't.

*Alex Thier:* That – that's exactly right.

*Patrick Fine:* I mean, all of the strategies of development are based on economic growth and increasing consumption. Does that lead you to conclude that we need to have a different paradigm in terms of

thinking about what society should look like or how we promote well-being in the society?

*Alex Thier:* Absolutely. I mean, there's a great book Kate Raworth wrote called *Doughnut Economics*, which looks at this idea of translating growth into sustenance within planetary boundaries.

*Patrick Fine:* Mm-hmm.

*Alex Thier:* So, how do we think about how economies produce what we all need without the more singular focus on growth? And, that's a mindset. It's a metric. It's how so many of the systems work, because we don't price in what things really cost. Yes, some of these things will be more expensive, but do we want our oceans full of plastic? No.

*Patrick Fine:* No.

*Alex Thier:* So, we have to price those things in. And when we do that, it's not blowing our economic system out of the water. It's saying that if we want a long-term economic situation that takes care of our environment, that reuses the plastics that we have in our economy, that makes plastics out of better things, that finds alternatives to it, there's plenty of room for profit there. There's plenty of room for innovation and new businesses, but we do have to cost those things in, or we won't survive. And, I don't think that that's revolutionary in the sense that I think it's a lot of stuff that we do, but we have to get much more serious about making sure that we're really building those costs into our approach.

*Patrick Fine:* So, you're fundamentally an optimist, and you can see pathways to make a transition from more harmful practices to less harmful and ultimately sustainable practices.

*Alex Thier:* I'm optimistic about our potential. At the moment, I'm less optimistic about our current path.

*Patrick Fine:* Yes, because I was going to say if you look at the – just in the U.S. at the current politics, it's really about denying that there's a need for change.

*Alex Thier:* Absolutely.



And I think that we continue to make decisions that are not forcing ourselves to confront that reality, and we have to do it. It's not – we cannot wait until it is too late, obviously, because the way change happens on the planetary scale, we can't turn on a dime. We know enough now to know that we need to be doing much better, but the politics currently are not supporting it, and that's true in a lot of places.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*[Music]*

*Patrick Fine:* Let me pivot and ask you a couple of questions that I've been asking this season. It's fun to hear different people's perspective on these questions. The first is, what is something almost no one agrees with you on?

*Alex Thier:* This is such a great question, and I've enjoyed the answers from others on the podcast. I don't know if it's almost no one. I end up disagreeing a lot with people about the fundamental importance of technology in development.

*Patrick Fine:* Oh.

*Alex Thier:* I think that it is overblown. I think that innovation is quite important, but I think that the incredible focus that so many have put on developing new technologies as a path to finding solutions to long-term development problems and equality is – is somewhat misguided.

*Patrick Fine:* Oh, I would say that most people probably do disagree with you on that. Say some more about why you think technology isn't the major actor that it's made out to be.

*Alex Thier:* So, I have spent the last couple of decades looking at what works where and why and where we have positive deviance that there's great success in challenging environments and why we fail. And, I will tell you that the things that I find, whether it's about making peace or addressing inequality or safeguarding planetary resources, those things are dependent on human psychology and collaboration. They are dependent on things that we know how to do, technologies that're available to us already, and that's where we ultimately find the best success. It really comes back to what we've been talking about. It's about accountability. It's about people

putting resources in the right place, and if they don't go right then holding them accountable. And, sure, technology can help, but it is by no means the fundamental thing that prevents us from succeeding on these big challenges.

*Patrick Fine:* That's a really interesting view. I think I put a lot more weight on culture than many people who I talk to, and that view that you're expressing would correspond with that, that there's no culture app [Laughs] yet.

*Alex Thier:* I agree. The great example – I know one of your other guests has talked about this, which is the cook stoves phenomenon, because it is – is such a good embodiment ...

*Patrick Fine:* [Laughs]

*Alex Thier:* ... of this issue. People have been working on the technology of cook stoves forever, and they get better and better, and I worked with this great energy lab at Colorado State University that's done all of this fascinating work on it, and it improves people's lives. There's no question about it, and yet it has never accomplished what the movement has hoped it would accomplish, because ultimately it is about behavior change. It is about people sitting at home, and it is about how they cook and where they cook and where they get their fuel from. And, people are the drivers of development.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alex Thier:* It is not technology, and it is focusing on people that we ultimately find the best successes.

*Patrick Fine:* Do you think that that view within the development community about the importance of technology and about technology as a game-changer comes because we've seen it change our society so fundamentally?

*Alex Thier:* Well, I think it comes from two places. I think, one, it comes from the sense that the development community maybe was not keeping up with the pace of technological change and innovation overall and that we'd better get on top of it. But, I also think it's because, you know, look, we accept in almost all human endeavor a very high degree of failure. Whether it's in marriages or starting a restaurant or batting averages, there's a lot of failure, because most

of what we do often doesn't succeed or doesn't succeed on the first try. And, we often don't apply the same thing to development. We – there's so much pressure not to take risk and to prove outcomes, and I think it's unrealistic, often. And so, I think the people in development are forced to look for things that're gonna be, frankly, solutions that will somehow solve that underlying problem that humans fail a lot. And, I think it's unrealistic.

*Patrick Fine:* I love the comparison of batting averages to the failure rate in development because, think: A really high batting average is hitting the ball three times out of ten.

*Alex Thier:* Yeah. *[Laughs]*

*Patrick Fine:* You know, hitting the ball a quarter of the time gets you into the major leagues. So, if we could have the same standard for our activities that succeeding well a quarter of the time would be viewed as successful ...

*Alex Thier:* Yeah. I mean, I've played baseball, and I've invested in infrastructure in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and I'll tell you that the infrastructure's a lot harder.

*Patrick Fine:* *[Laughs]* So, the second question I have for you is, what's one lesson that you've learned, besides the baseball lesson ...

*Alex Thier:* *[Laughs]*

*Patrick Fine:* ... that you'd like to share with our listeners?

*Alex Thier:* Well, it goes back to actually something you said earlier. Development is a journey. It is not an endpoint. And, because of that, we the people, the ideas, the policies are in constant need of renewal.

I worked recently on fragile states, and the sort of central message of this work is that politics need to be at the center of everything you do in – in fragile states. And, it sounds like such a basic and obvious thing, but the reason that it really rose to the top is because we know that these principles are out there. We know that principles of good donor coordination, of local ownership are at the core of what we do. But, unless you have a new set of leaders and a new set of policies that are constantly reinforcing and

rethinking and redeveloping the language for a new generation of decision-makers, then you're not likely to succeed.

People pointed out when we were doing this that in 2011 in Busan, Korea, there was the New Deal for Fragile States, and it came up with all of these great principles, and people agreed they were really good principles, but that New Deal has largely seemed to have not been successful. And so, instead of saying, "Oh, we figured that out eight years ago. Just go back to that document," that doesn't work for people, because people have to learn things on their own. They have to develop and own the language on their own.

They have to learn from practice on their own, and so the biggest thing that I have learned is that we constantly need to renew what we're doing. Learning is not a static process, where you learn something, you figure out the evidence and then you're done. Learning means actually taking in that information, processing it and applying it to a new context, because context is always new, even in the same country.

*Patrick Fine:* Right, and that ties back to your starting point about the social contract and to a theme that we've heard throughout the podcast this season and in previous seasons as well that politics – local politics – is central to addressing human development needs. And one of the darker sides of development is that we too often neglect, ignore or even deny the role of politics in shaping the actions that we take.

*Alex Thier:* There is nothing more political than development.

*Patrick Fine:* *[Laughs]* Right?

*Alex Thier:* I mean, you look at law. You look at education. You look at governance. All of these things, that is the – the grist of politics everywhere.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. Exactly.

*Alex Thier:* And, then to deny it or not recognize it and not have it fully engaged in what you're doing in development is – is always going to end up with a – a deficit.

*Patrick Fine:*

Alex, thank you so much *[Laughs]* for sharing your perspective with our listeners. Listeners, thank you for tuning in. I invite you once again to share your comments. If you've heard something in this conversation that you agree with or that you disagree with that you wanna challenge, then please let me know.

Stay tuned throughout the rest of the year, because we've got more episodes coming, where we're going to be exploring the darker side of development. Alex, thanks very much.

*Alex Thier:*

Thank you so much, Patrick. It was a real pleasure.

*[Music]*