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*Patrick Fine:* Listeners, I recorded this episode with Sam Worthington before the world was turned upside down by the COVID-19 pandemic. So you won't hear us talking about COVID, but you will hear us discussing issues that are central to human development and that will remain central to human development once the world has passed through this pandemic. Enjoy this episode.

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

*Patrick Fine:* It seems that human development challenges are growing more complex with every passing day, and with more complexity, there seems to be an increasing need for finding new ways of working together through partnerships and alliances and coalitions in order to share best practices, to find efficiencies, to learn what didn't work, to improve our standards, and in general, to make progress towards achieving solutions to the challenges we're facing.

I'm Patrick Fine, CEO of FHI 360, and this is *A Deeper Look* podcast. Thanks for joining me today. I'm very pleased to have Sam Worthington, the CEO of InterAction, the largest U.S. alliance of international nonprofit development organizations, as my guest today. Sam is not only the CEO of InterAction, where he's been for over ten years. Prior to that, he was the CEO of Plan USA, one of the important international development organizations in the U.S., doing work across the world. So, he has a deep understanding of the importance of coalitions and partnerships, and a very long history in doing development work.

Last fall, in a *Deeper Look* episode on protecting against sexual exploitation and abuse, we talked about InterAction's CEO pledge, just one example of the influence that Sam and InterAction have had on our community. Sam, thank you for joining me today.

*Sam Worthington:* Thank you for having me.

*Patrick Fine:* So, Sam, the theme of this year's *Deeper Look* podcast is the shape of things to come. So, we're looking at the future, and I'm asking my guests to look into the 2020s and to share with our listeners

what you see as the major trends that will be shaping human development work in the next ten years.

*Sam Worthington:* So, a few trends. Fragile states have become the epicenter of where we see extreme poverty in the world. It's a combination of poor governance, conflict, and others that have both displaced people, and for people within countries, stopped the advances that we've seen under the sustainable development goals. In many ways, this fragility is the Achilles heel of the sustainable development goals.

*Patrick Fine:* Can you say a little bit more about why you see the prominence of fragile states as the Achilles heel in the SDGs?

*Sam Worthington:* If we look at the world, across two generations we have seen massive improvement in human well-being across a whole range of different indicators, from decreases in child mortality, increases in life expectancy, number of girls in schools, decrease in the number of people who are extremely poor and so forth. All of these changes and betterments of human condition have occurred in context where there was some degree of positive state governance occurring, where there is some relationship between community, the state and markets that is functioning and enables interventions to make a difference in people's lives.

The problem with conflict is that conflict both removes the ability of communities to be stable, it results in backwards trends. We see, for example, Syria moving from a middle income country to the locus of much of the displacement of the world. And, it can in essence destroy the well-being of a particular people. We are seeing this, for example, in Venezuela, with that shift.

And, if you have long-term, protracted conflict, as we see in the DRC or other countries, the ability to make development advances that are sustainable is often pushed, and these fragile places of governance, whether it's from the DRC to Haiti or others, progress can be made at the community level, but they are often not sustained at the national level.

*Patrick Fine:* Mm-hmm. And, do you think that the SDGs didn't take account of that, or didn't place enough emphasis on that?

*Sam Worthington:* I mean, the SDGs address it through there's – yes, there's a focus on civil society and governance and the need for governance and the need for peace. But, it's the one place where all the

complexities hitting the SDGs come together, where you don't have the peace that you need, where you don't have the type of governance you need, where you don't have the local institution building that you need.

And, all of these need to happen in an environment where violence might set you back. So, I think it was acknowledged that it was there, but it was in many ways I think politically too tricky to actually have an SDG focused on people in complex emergencies.

*Patrick Fine:* I think that's an important observation, and I also just wonder if back in 2012, 2013, 2014, when the international community was developing the SDGs the preeminence of fragility may not have been as recognized or as obvious as it is now.

*Sam Worthington:* Well, there – I mean, the humanitarian community sort of was already approaching 60 million displaced, and now we're well over 70 million displaced, and the number should be in the hundreds of millions of people impacted by climate. So, there was – it was sort of the division of the humanitarians, you take care of that problem over here. But, as these conflicts spread, we ended up with situations where the broader development enterprise was being impacted, because the – the success under the Millennium Development Goals was largely in areas that were more stable ...

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Sam Worthington:* ... with more capacity. So, you saw the momentum. And so, we ended up facing the toughest areas left, and interestingly, when we designed the SDGs, they were designed by people, by nation-states, and the poorest, most vulnerable, most fragile context did not frame that conversation. It was largely framed by those who were showing progress and knew that they could make progress against a set of goals.

*Patrick Fine:* Yeah. Those are really useful observations. Okay. Fragile states, that's one of the trends that you see that's shaping the next ten years.

*Sam Worthington:* So, then going to the rise of nationalism and sort of an inward-looking mindset, the idea that you need to protect yourself with borders, or that the other outside you is a threat you and so forth. And, what this is doing is both a reduction in a focus on extreme poverty, a willingness to fund official development assistance or

even private giving outside your borders, and it's also creating barriers for forcibly displaced people we were just talking about.

And this model, and whether it's the border between Turkey right now out of Syria, or about Cox's Bazar and the border with Myanmar/Bangladesh, this idea that you need to insulate yourself from the world's problems has in many ways been, unfortunately, modeled in a negative way by Europe and the United States, and this trend of looking and taking care of your own is a problem.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. So, the rise of nationalism and populism.

*Sam Worthington:* And, then the one that's having the – probably the biggest impact, long term is the impact of climate change and what the climate is doing to poverty around the world, and to the advances we've made. And climate, unfortunately, hits those with the least resources, whether in the Sahel, or low-lying cities, and so forth. But, I think climate and the impact of climate on human both displacement, the ability to thrive, the ability to have access to water will be an incredibly powerful and albeit rather negative trend facing us.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. And it's interesting how these three trends that you've identified interact with each other. So, many of the fragile states are places that are being affected disproportionately by climate change. So, think of the Sahel right now.

*Sam Worthington:* Right.

*Patrick Fine:* It's almost like they're being visited by biblical plagues at this time. I read about the locust infestations in Kenya and Somalia, and the – in East Africa. So, climate change is exacerbating state fragility. That exacerbates migration and the displacement of people, which has been fueling the rise of nationalism.

*Sam Worthington:* Right.

*Patrick Fine:* So, you this kind of almost circular interaction of these factors with each other. So, if these are three trends that are going to shape the types of challenges that the world confronts in the 2020s, what are the kinds of responses that you see emerging?

*Sam Worthington:* So, one of them, and this is another trend out there, and, you know, the word we use is localization, and it has both a positive aspect to it and a negative aspect.

The positive one is that there is increased local capacity, whether through governance, through institutions, through knowledge and so forth, in populations, often in the most complex environments around the world, to respond to the problem. So, the development enterprise over the past several generations has worked in the sense of building the ability of local people to take care of their own.

The limitations of localization, it could be used for a logic of, you know, it's our country first. It's our place first. And, it impedes the ability of knowledge to flow across borders or interventions to occur at a global scale. One of the tensions we see in the development community is the relationship between this local capacity and the knowledge that occurs from engaging in development or other interventions around the world.

I look forward to a world where this localization is different, so that in the South Side of Chicago, BRAC is helping with poverty programs. So, it does not have to be the north helping the south, but we need a world where there is a flow of information from different countries. And, I'd argue our job is not to put ourselves out of business. It's rather to strengthen the capacity of local actors and ensure this flow of knowledge across different countries.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. And then, to partner wherever the challenges arise, so that you have an ecosystem where there are professionals who come from all over the world, who can apply their knowledge and experience to solving the challenges. I think that's also a very useful observation.

*Sam Worthington:* And, I think one of the realities is that the international development enterprise has built a global infrastructure that enables individuals to help each other across borders or to transfer knowledge, technology, approaches and so forth. And, the learnings are flowing around the world. So, the solution to the challenges we face as humanity, particularly around the most poor and the most vulnerable, will be found, yes, in local capacity knowledge, but only if it is linked to this global enterprise of trying to improve the human condition.

*Patrick Fine:* Yeah, I think that is a very important observation, and one that often gets lost in the conversation about localization, so I agree completely that if you compare today to 40 years ago, when I started working in Africa, the strength of institutions, the number of people who have deep experience and expertise and knowledge in all sectors, there's just no comparison. And, you now have local institutions of higher education and local institutions of vocational education churning out graduates who are qualified people.

The capacity is there, but this additional point that you mentioned that as capacity is grown, and people have wanted to assert their – their right to apply their own expertise, to draw on their own resources, to use their own local knowledge, that that has also created this dynamic which impedes the transfer of knowledge, which throws up constraints to seeking experience and knowledge and expertise wherever it comes from.

*Sam Worthington:* Business and the private sector has gone global. The nation states – there's an enormous purpose in terms of the well-being of its own people. But, if you look at the well-being of individuals in this century, where we are now, a lot of it is tied to a global economy, is tied to global knowledge, is tied to sharing across cultures and nations, and the development enterprise itself, or even particularly the humanitarian enterprise of helping the most vulnerable, is only possible if we take advantage of all the skills that exist around the world, particularly if we are to take on these major challenges that I've identified.

*Patrick Fine:* Yes. If you think of the development enterprise, and you compare it to the commercial enterprise – in the commercial enterprise, my sense is there's much less sensitivity about the transfer of knowledge and expertise and experience. In fact, nations and competitor companies, they seek that. They seek to find out what the competitive advantage of another organization is and then to replicate it. Whereas in the development enterprise, because it is so bound by the national politics and – and also the geopolitical politics of the world economic order, you see this sensitivity about wanting to only source solutions or only source expertise or other resources locally.

*Sam Worthington:* And, you get to the issue here of the relationship, in the case of civil society, with, sort of global capitalism. And, if we are to shape a, uh, global markets and – and capitalism as it affects local populations in a way that brings a compassionate dimension, in a

way that brings in social public goods that enable the well-being of large numbers of people, that will only happen if there's an interface between a sort of globalized development enterprise, a globalized civil society, and the global nature of the private sector that's evolved around the world, and then the complexity of bringing in governments and so forth. It's understandable that governments push back. They say this is our area, our place. But in many ways, since our purpose is the well-being of humans anywhere, not just a favored elite or a particular group within a country, that we have a responsibility to partner with local groups outside those potential political boundaries.

*Patrick Fine:*

Right. And, the evidence also supports that as the most effective way to increase well-being, because if you look at the countries that have progressed in terms of increasing living standards, improving living standards, meeting the Millennium Development Goals, those are countries that are open to international exchange. They haven't sacrificed their sovereignty, but have reached out, and they have secured or tapped resources and expertise from a global ecosystem instead of just a national one.

*Sam Worthington:*

And, a good example of this would be the focus of development on women, and the role of women in societies, both as part of the economics, but also the social and political dimension of women. And, we know that an overlay of gender and a focus on women within development has a much greater positive long-term impact.

And, there are values that come with that push from the development community. But, there's also enormous data that validates that this is the best way -- if you want to improve the well-being of all peoples across genders or groups, that one must be inclusive of who's involved in improving their own well-being.

*Patrick Fine:*

Right, that it's a prerequisite, that you're not actually going to achieve the objectives of higher living standards and more prosperity unless you include the entire population.

I would add that both as one of the trends that will shape how we approach human development challenges in the future and one of the responses, to see more inclusive approaches that prioritize the status and the equality of women.

What other responses do you see that international development organizations, that governments will be taking to respond to these factors shaping the future?

*Sam Worthington:* I mean, I believe the best inventions of the 20th century, and it'd been around before that, was the role of civil society, and the concept that an individual or a group of individuals can have a say over their own future. And, that concept has spread all over the world, not through a government institution or business and so forth, but simply because a community wants to see a better future for itself, a group of students, a group of entrepreneurs, individuals, a group of women have wanted to have a greater say over their future. And, that willingness of civil society to play a role in the betterment of the human condition, and the recognition in the sustainable development goals and by governments of the critical and central role of civil society is one of the key tools that I believe will make for a more inclusive form of development going forward.

It doesn't mean that you can't have a government or an economic engine that is creating the benefits of individuals in a society, let's say China. But, if you want all parts of a society to benefit or begin to benefit over time, then you must provide those parts and enable those parts of a society to have a voice and say over their future.

*Patrick Fine:* So, I agree with you that if you look at the period say from 1980 to 2010, that was a period of flourishing of civil society. And, I think of my work in Africa. When I first started working in Swaziland in 1980, there were very few civil society organizations. It was a new kind of concept that was being introduced.

Now, civil society organizations are deeply rooted in the society. They're accepted as a normal part of society, and they play a very important role. And, that same evolution has occurred in many, many countries across the world.

But, it feels like there's some backlash against that right now. Do you see that?

*Sam Worthington:* No, there's very much a national backlash against civil society, and there's very much a backlash over its power and influence. And, in many ways, this reflects its strength, because the – the rise of civil society was not just local institutions. It was creation of national platforms like InterAction in some 80 countries around the world,



and those national platforms all talking with each other and influencing a G20, or the shaping of the sustainable development goals, or any large-scale foreign policy in a democracy is now influenced by these civil society actors at multiple levels.

And, you can see the pushback, because why do we want to provide people a voice if development is about the well-being of an elite or national growth, and so forth, and not a broad, inclusive one.

It is easier to push civil society to the side, and we are seeing a pretty strong global backlash. But the strength here of civil society is that it has no center. There is no head of the snake to take off. It simply grows in different places. It is networked globally through the web. It is sort of the autocrat's worst nightmare.

And over time, this wrestling of what type of society we are creating in many ways will unfold, and right now, we are unfortunately in an era where it's heading in the wrong direction.

*Patrick Fine:*

Well, I read a recent analysis that suggested that the kind of vision of civil society that you just articulated is more of a Western concept, and that it's built into many of the international development structures, like into the World Bank, the multilateral development institutions, the UN institutions, which require consultation with civil society, which prioritize and include civil society stakeholders when they're developing their plans of work, but that with the rise of a new set of actors that are financing development activities – China, India, Brazil and – and others – that there's a new orientation that is now coming in, and at the same time these new actors are rising, Europe and the U.S. are receding. The Breton Woods institutions look weaker than they have in the past. And, that the rise of the new institutions, they don't require consultation with civil society. They don't prioritize or even recognize the role of civil society.

*Sam Worthington:*

I mean, there's a clear rebalance of global powers between the West, China and other actors, and we're moving into an era of multiple nationally interested states looking out for their interests. That rebalancing has tipped the conversation away from the West in many ways. But, the concept of civil society is no longer a Western concept.

I've spent the last seven or eight years, whether it's been on the

board of CIVICUS or Forus – these are global entities spanning 70 or 80 countries, largely dominated by the global south, with tens of thousands of local institutions that are civil society institutions.

*Patrick Fine:* Mm-hmm.

*Sam Worthington:* They are not dependent on the West for their existence. They come out of their societies. They're not even tied to particular development projects. But, that movement is not going to go away because of the rebalancing of the nation-state power dynamics. It is coming outside of the Westphalian order in some ways and is rooted in a belief of individuals in all societies of some form of self-determination.

Now, let's not overstate this. Clearly, this is limited by power dynamics within a country. The legal and regulatory environment closing civil society has gone up significantly, and there is an ability to close and shut down civil society groups around the world. But, I do see this ability of individuals to have a say over their development enterprise no matter where they live, that they can have some say over their future. And, that belief of wanting some say over your future is not going to go away. It is as powerful and preminent in the human condition as our desire to create markets.

*Patrick Fine:* That's a great observation. And, it takes me immediately back to our conversation about displaced people and the fact that they're in these constrained environments, that they're in a capped environment, I think is how you put it, but that their hope to be able to shape their own futures is not something that can be extinguished. It's part of the human condition.

I think that taking that insight and thinking how do we use that as a design principle or an operating principle can be very instructive to us as we think about the challenges in the future and how to address them.

So, in thinking about the future, you're the head of InterAction. InterAction is an association of hundreds of civil society organizations. What do you think the future is going to look like for civil society organizations, for international NGOs or for local NGOs? What kind of adaptations do you see your members making in order to respond to these trends that we've been talking about?

*Sam Worthington:* Yeah, Patrick, you put your finger on it, because the key word here is adaptation, and it's a recognition that who you are today is not what you're going to be if you are to be relevant tomorrow. It's about different structures. It's about blending for-profit and nonprofit modes of operating. It's about diversified funding. It's about being global and local at the same time. And it's responding to massive trends.

And, I'll give you an example. So, if you take climate, and if you do the overlay of climate change on the people-centered activities of the development enterprise, how are we supposed to change, or how do we adapt to be climate friendly or carbon neutral? What is the change in the types of programs that we do? How do we change our advocacy? Because it's not just the environmental groups whose voice need to be heard around us.

And ultimately, if we know that this challenge of climate is going to be one of the biggest existential problems for human beings, can we change our approaches, our institutions, our ways of working, our values, our missions in such a way that we can actually try to make a difference in combating it?

*Patrick Fine:* The last question I'd like to ask you is – you've talked about some of the big factors you see shaping the next ten years. The fragility of states, climate change, the rise of nationalism, the role of women, all of which interact with each other. You've talked about some of the responses. Localization is one, civil society, and then this beautiful concept about people's aspiration to shape their future. As you look at the 2020s, do you look at the challenges ahead and our ability to confront and overcome those challenges with a sense of optimism or with a sense of pessimism?

*Sam Worthington:* The danger of being someone in my sixties, and you sort of present me with that glass of water that's half full, is I am still the sort of naïve person who goes, how can you add a drop? How can you fill it further?

Yes, there are trends that push against us. But, even if you go into the most complex environments, and whether it's war zones or refugee camps or very difficult height of the AIDS pandemic around the world, even in those circumstances, you will always find human beings who are at their best, individuals who are trying to change the situation that they are in, and individuals who are

acting to improve the human condition and succeed in doing so.

And part of our challenge is a decision on what do we focus on. Do we focus on what is breaking things, or do we focus on the building? And that focus on the hope of building something, and perhaps it's a naïve hope, but to me, that's what makes me do what I do.

*Patrick Fine:* Sam Worthington, thank you very much for joining me today.

*Sam Worthington:* Thank you very much.

*Patrick Fine:* Listeners, thank you for tuning in for this fascinating conversation with Sam Worthington, CEO of InterAction. We'd love to hear what you think about the trends that are going to shape the future and the way the international community or your own organization is going to respond to those factors in the years ahead. Share your comments, share this episode with your colleagues and others in the development community, and tune in next month for another *Deeper Look*.

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