



## Devin Stewart Interviews Unmesh Brahme, Cofounder of the Climate Civics Institute

Unmesh Brahme , Devin T. Stewart

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**DEVIN STEWART:** Hi. I'm Devin Stewart, here at the Carnegie Council in New York City. I'm here talking with Unmesh Brahme. He is the founder of [Climate Civics Institute](#) and also a [Yale World Fellow](#). He's visiting us from India today in New York City.

Unmesh, great to have you here.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** My pleasure, Devin. Glad to be here.

**DEVIN STEWART:** What brings you to New York and the East Coast?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** To come to New York doesn't require a reason. It's a great city. You could pretty much come and go back without doing any work and just moving across the lanes and bylanes. But work in New York is also something which is important.

I have been a World Fellow at Yale, in the fall of 2009. It's a program which creates transformation of leadership for a number of people around the world who are in positions of reaching that next big leadership goal. I completed my World Fellowship at Yale, in New Haven, in December 2009.

The World Fellows Program typically is created in such a way that you get to work with the best of the faculty, students, the centers they have there, which in turn drives a very lateral kind of thinking in the fellows who are there. A real true test of the fellowship program having succeeded is how much different an individual becomes at the end of the program. Not all people take it seriously. I decided to take it seriously. I believe in reciprocity. I believe in sharing and giving.

The inspiration which I got from Yale prepared me to think along certain thought lines, which I already was thinking of when I was back home in India: How does, really, one work on climate change as an issue, in real terms, from the standpoint of affected communities?

So I created the Climate Civics framework, which Yale helped me launch very recently, three days ago, in New Haven. That's why I'm here, for the launch of the Climate Civics Institute.

**DEVIN STEWART:** I had the great pleasure of being on the panel with you and some climate change experts.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely.

**DEVIN STEWART:** How was that received at Yale, the panel?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Very, very intuitively. The reason I use this word is because many people got connected to the concept just by saying the words "climate civics." It started meaning a lot to them right from the time I had been speaking to, for example, you, folks at the State Department, practicing financial experts, people in renewable energy, as well as management academicians, who uplifted the concept to be able to serve as panelists on the panel discussion.

In itself, it is indeed a thought innovation, not because I thought along those lines, but because you don't find today anything happening along the lines of real adaptation in the developing world, real adaptation at the bottom of the pyramid. Ask a simple question—what is the water resilience capacity of one village anywhere in the world which is affected by climate change, rising temperatures?—and we all scratch our heads and figure out if there is an answer to it. There is an answer.

So the kinds of issues which the panel brought up, the kinds of issues, Devin, you spoke about, in terms of how

climate change will force migration in amazingly different directions which we haven't thought about today—it really becomes a kind of stumbling block in how you create good international relations between countries, between cultures. So I think the panel, by their very painting and by their very nature, got connected with the issue of climate civics. I think they all spoke very well, including the State Department Senior Energy Advisor, [Griffin Thompson](#), who had very good things to say.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Absolutely. Let's talk more about your Climate Civics Institute. Do you know where it will be headquartered right now or are you still figuring that out?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** As I said, Yale has been increasingly supportive in helping me and my fellow co-conspirator in terms of creating the Climate Civics Institute, [Tim Jarvis](#), who is also a Yale World Fellow.

**DEVIN STEWART:** He's based in Australia.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** He's based in Australia. I'm based in India. Between the two of us, it's a collaboration, to be able to create the field research bases for climate civics in India and Australia. Both countries share similar problems in terms of land-use patterns, in terms of faulty agricultural practices, in terms of water availability. These are the vectors which actually drive climate civics thinking in terms of how you really create adaptation strategies. In time, we hope to be able to also establish a presence in D.C., because we would like to influence—

**DEVIN STEWART:** Washington, D.C.?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely. We would like to influence how policy happens here. The Climate Civics Institute's mission is simple: To create climate adaptation communities worldwide and feed that lifecycle of experiences into policy innovation, which is where I find a fantastic connection to the work the Carnegie Council does. You are about ethics; you are about innovation and policy. I presume that means that policy is not written in offices. It comes from the grassroots upwards, which is where Climate Civics tries to pitch its *raison d'être* for existence.

**DEVIN STEWART:** You really hit it on the head there. Our model is to try to create policy in a pluralistic manner, particularly by getting civil society and companies and policymakers all involved.

During the panel last week, I suggested that we try to define climate civics very simply. I don't know if you have had a chance to think about this. You have mentioned a lot already. You have mentioned adaptation, migration, displacement problems. You have mentioned feeding this back into sustainable development. But one of the problems with climate change is that, first of all, it's so complicated. The effects are long-term. A lot of the causes are odorless and invisible.

Is there a way to kind of boil it down? I don't want to put you in a corner and make you come up with a sound bite. But one of the things I tried to suggest during the panel is that climate civics is a way to encourage individuals to think about obligations to other people in terms of the future of the sustainability and being a good climate citizen, and to try to expand that net or those circles of obligation.

It's sort of embarrassing to talk about Facebook, but one of my Facebook friends said to me today—he was commenting on the story in *The New York Times* about the East Coast being in danger of being washed away. This is personal to me, because I was born in Rhode Island. He said something to the effect that that's just the way nature goes. I said back to him, "Look, tell that to some billion people that are projected to be displaced."

In other words, for people who live a comfortable life in the United States—particularly in the United States or Canada, which seem to be the less impacted by climate change so far—how do you get people to think beyond their immediate communities to a bigger picture, where you are taking into account your own actions and what effects they have in the most vulnerable and the least responsible countries?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Now, what I've just said to you is not pithy at all. But it's a suggestion on climate civics. How do you define it? Am I getting on the right track here?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely. Very much so. In fact, I'm delighted you asked a very fundamental question. It's very, very significant.

Let me digress briefly before circumnavigating back to your question. But it's connected, what I'm trying to say. Essentially, you look at the nature of charity today. It's built on guilt and greed. What does it mean? It means that I've been greedy all my life. I'm guilty now because I've been greedy. So I need to do charity.

Do you have a model today for this charitable giving or, to use your language, to create concentric circles of natural obligations, as we live our lives? I don't think we do. Are we honest in saying that corporate social responsibility [CSR] inside of corporations is actually kitchen waste today? The report may look good because it says that CSR is part of DNA, but you actually price it apart and there's a long way to walk.

So, yes, in terms of the language which you used of creating obligations as you go along, climate plays an important role, because it clearly means that you will let go of your intensive resource footprint and share that footprint with somebody who doesn't have access to the resources. How does one do that? Consume less water in a city like Mumbai, but also ensure that those villages thousands of miles away, whose water comes to you via large dams and pipes—it gets back to them in some way.

Are you doing that? You are not doing that. You are actually doing a very different kind of fashionable charitable stuff, sitting in a city like Mumbai, attending events and talking about your pet cause. Sometimes that cause can be completely unrelated to your own impact which you create on the ground, in terms of your livelihood on this lovely planet.

So I think, in terms of climate civics and climate adaptation, I completely buy your point. We have to define what is a reciprocal obligation, not to look at going so deeply into it so as to create a historical conclusion of what should be the timeline in which that obligation should happen, but start today and try and see how you are able to let go of the resources which you are holding so dearly.

Twenty percent of the people consume 80 percent of the resources anywhere in the world—also in India, also in Australia. So what does this mean? This actually means that 80 percent of India's population is not responsible for climate change. Therefore, you need to do that obligation in life and be able to work on projects which restore natural livelihoods, natural habitats, natural water sources, to—the term which I use—communities who are today's temperature variants, because they are on the receiving end of temperature rise.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Unmesh, I have to say that your description reminds me a little bit of Indian Buddhist philosophy—letting go and thinking about cyclical forces. What is the inspiration for your thinking? It sounds like you've thought about this for quite a long time.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes. You have worked a lot in Southeast Asian cultures. I'm amazed at the hold you have on the philosophy and the paradigms which drive these cultures.

I'm not so much religion-focused. I would love to, because religion plays an important role in the manner in which you can drive people's emotions. But in my case it has all been a sense of personal and collective empowerment. During my present day job with HSBC back home in India, where I hold charge of the sustainability portfolio, the idea is, how do you bring a collective consciousness to deliver outcomes? They could be any kinds of outcomes, in any field. So I've always been, if we may use that term, a very emotional rationalist. I define the rationality in terms of how the orchestra and the symphony function together.

I do believe that there is a way in which leaders need not be made of self-aggrandizement stuff. They need not reflect the collective glory of people around them. But they can be part of it together.

So that's my thinking.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Was there one experience that drove you to think this way in your career in finance and other places or was it just something over time?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** It started a long time ago. In fact, I remember when I started working, at quite a young age, with Oxfam, the global charity, which also today has offices in India. My job was to see, how do I look at indigenous cultures, look at the values and the knowledge which they have in forestry, look at their livelihoods—

**DEVIN STEWART:** And this was Oxfam in India?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Oxfam in India. And how do you bring those values and the systems to bear upon today's life? I was not keen to romanticize the issue at all. There are some people who say tribal folks should remain as tribal folks because their culture is important. But that's not the case. You need to—

**DEVIN STEWART:** So cultural relativism or—

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely, yes.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Your feeling is, you have a question about this cultural relativism.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** I have a question, because integration is something—or mainstreaming, as some people say—which is not far away. It's happening as we speak. How do you do it ethically, which brings us back to the work which the Carnegie Council is doing? How do you really define ethics in all that you do?

In my case, this thinking is an ongoing process. But I have this interesting habit that I'm sure many people have of trying to read three disconnected sets of paradigms and trying to bring them together.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Three?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Three—maybe two. In my case, it so happened that the most influential book in my formative years was one by [Ivan Illich](#), *Deschooling Society*, where he talks about education as a means to achieving personal goals and community benefits. Schooling in today's context doesn't do that very often. Some institutions do, but that's not the universal rule.

[Paulo Freire](#), the Brazilian author who talked about conscientization of the oppressed.

Who's the third guy? It's a very interesting third guy. This is the guy who wrote [The Jungle Book](#), [Rudyard Kipling](#).

**DEVIN STEWART:** *The Jungle Book*?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely, which actually led me to India's forests to be able to see who lives there, what the connection is between the forest people and livelihoods.

In doing so, I could bring, at least in the virtual frame in my mind, three authors to meet: Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and Rudyard Kipling. I don't think they would have met.

The point is, that is the beginning of the thinking. How do you bring these three intense authors, in three different fields, to be able to create a kind of pedagogy?

**DEVIN STEWART:** So you're synthesizing various points of view?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely, completely so. I believe in synthesis. I'm all for convergence. I know it takes time. I'm not for silos. I know being in a silo is easy. That's how the entire philosophy evolved.

**DEVIN STEWART:** So how did those three guys get along on this panel?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** They were on this panel in my mind. I was always thinking the way they would have thought had they been together. So I think they got along quite well.

**DEVIN STEWART:** So you were in Oxfam and you came up with this sort of synthetic response to people who were saying, "Just leave these people alone, because it's the way they do things, because it's their culture."

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Right.

**DEVIN STEWART:** What happened next? What was the next step of your career?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Of course, during the time I worked in the Indian community development space, my work was with tribal communications, on indigenous forestry, livelihood systems, how to use them as part of the general life spectrum of communities, both in urban and rural India. I also worked with a number of other projects which were supported by the World Bank, Ford Foundation. I worked with a lot of nonprofits in the country, trying to see what it is that they are lacking in terms of the absolute real use of the word "strategy" and how you really get capacity building to drive how these organizations work on the ground with their constituencies.

At that point in time, the term "bottom-of-the pyramid consumer insights" wasn't there in my mind. But it was there in somebody else's mind.

**DEVIN STEWART:** What year was this?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** This was 1999—this must be between 1990 and about 2000. I think towards the earlier part, 2001, of this last ten years, people realized that "hey, there are some people like Unmesh in the world who really have a good understanding of bottom-of-pyramid kinds about inside communities."

I'm trying to answer your question of what did I do next. It's actually quite shocking to most. I got into advertising and marketing.

**DEVIN STEWART:** At Ogilvy?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** At Ogilvy, absolutely—but in a very different way. Ogilvy brought me on to work in their rural marketing team. At that point, I worked with clients like Unilever and the Cadburys of this world, in trying to grow the rural market.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Why would that be shocking?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** In terms of my evolution into that?

**DEVIN STEWART:** What was the critique?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** The critique was, anybody who is in a development sector cannot really get in the commercial sector.

**DEVIN STEWART:** But you're thinking more synthetically.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes, absolutely. I have no issues with that. There are others around me who may offer that critique.

But let me again briefly do a small diversion and tell you what my first Oxford Dictionary said to me, when it was given to me by my father's teacher. I think that has been my real education in terms of the quote which he mentioned in the Oxford Dictionary. It said, "Dear Unmesh: Here is a pleasure you should not lose. This is a hint for its proper use. None of the expressions should ever be loose; your wisdom depends upon the words you choose."

So that has been my driving motivation all along. I believe words can create value, words can create collaboration, words can create wars, words can create peace. It creates everything, in all languages.

Therefore, transitioning to advertising wasn't so difficult. It's all about words—words, images, copy, and whatnot.

**DEVIN STEWART:** So you went into advertising with sort of a grand thinking about the importance of words.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely.

**DEVIN STEWART:** When you left advertising, did you still feel the same way?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely so, completely so. I still feel the same today, as well.

What I used to do in Ogilvy was very interesting. It was the country's first corporate social responsibility practice for banks. We worked with Castrol, British Petroleum, USAID on issues, social marketing campaigns, driving behavior change, using a completely grassroots philosophy. How do you use creative thinking and words and phrases and images to create positive behavior change?

**DEVIN STEWART:** Very interesting. So you can not only use marketing to generate profit, but you can use it to generate social change.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Can you give me a couple of examples?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes. One of the most quoted examples—and I'm sure people at Castrol and British Petroleum must be giving some hiccoughs now, because I'm remembering there for so long—the campaign which was most quoted and which won the most awards for me and Ogilvy during my time there was the one which we ran with farmer communities in drought-stricken India on the issue of water, through a corporate marketing project. I always have this point to me, that charity cannot be sustainable for long. If you don't be an inclusive person or inclusive brand or inclusive process, you're not really going to make an impact on the ground in terms of your constituents, because these constituents, at some point in time, are your customers—maybe tomorrow.

In Castrol's case, their customers were farmers who used Castrol lubricants for their tractors, and who were not buying any Castrol lube for the simple reason that there was no water, there was no farming, there was no tractor. What do you do?

**DEVIN STEWART:** That's a big problem.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** It's a big problem. How do you sell your product?

So we suggested to Castrol, "Listen, forget everything. Forget nice television ads and good print ads. Let's use people as a medium and work on cause-related marketing."

If you look at cause-related marketing as it's practiced, let's say in the U.S. or Europe, it actually takes you to a shelf of a departmental store, where you say, "Buy this yogurt and some amount will go to a charity." That doesn't work in India. People will be completely suspicious of what you're up to.

**DEVIN STEWART:** It's the way Ben & Jerry's ice cream used to be.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes, yes. The reverse is true in India: Show me your work on the cause and then I will buy your product.

So the reverse cause-related marketing is a philosophy and a practice which I kind of pioneered during my time at Ogilvy. We used Castrol's marketing budget to create water-harvesting demonstration plots, working with a range of not-for-profits in four large states, which were Castrol's market, but also affected by drought. We worked in partnership with governments, with donor agencies, who already had projects on the ground, and actually created a campaign which said to the farmer, "If you use water wisely, if you harvest water which falls, then you will live longer—so much longer that it's comparable to your engine living longer if you use Castrol lubricant."

So Castrol was seen in one role as a brand which reduced friction in people's lives, pretty much like it reduces friction in a tractor's engine. The campaign actually was so delightfully successful.

Let me quickly tell you that we won the Asia-Pacific Brand Marketing Effectiveness Award in Singapore, as well as the PR Week public relations award—the highest honor which one could receive in the Asia-Pacific contest. We didn't have a single press release, because the jury, while commenting on the award, said, "We are aware of the fact that in a country like India, where television reaches a minimum, where newspaper reach is again minimum because of literacy levels and whatnot"—so cognizance can only be created if you create a live campaign with people as the medium.

We are, therefore, saying that this is how advertising and marketing in the future should be—inclusive, not exclusive.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Are there campaigns that you can point to that are following these principles today that you have seen, that are having a positive impact?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes. I think the world has pretty much latched onto the idea of how a causal association is good, rather than a pure product association, which most brands tend to do. If you look that which is seen now coming across on the Indian media scene, you will find, for example, Unilever talking about the fact that children should play. "Dirt on the clothes is good. Use my product," instead of saying, "My product has one, two, three, four, five things, which goes nicely into the washing machine. Clothes come out nice." That's not happening. So the cause metaphor has come to stay.

**DEVIN STEWART:** It's more of an emotional, deeper attachment or association.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely.

**DEVIN STEWART:** I think you and I and some of the panelists last week in New Haven were talking about the buzz over, I think, a new study that suggests that the best way to get people to act ethically and morally in terms of things like sustainability or volunteerism or other things is to play on or to use the feelings that people feel toward their neighbors. Have you been following this?

What I've heard is that if you see your neighbors driving a highly fuel-efficient car, some people might be inspired to compete and they feel this sort of sense of obligation to be as moral as their neighbors.

Unfortunately, I think other people actually end up doing just the opposite.

Have you been following this debate at all?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes. I think it's a valid debate. You can only create influence and, going back to an earlier discussion, cause a positive obligation if you practice a behavior yourself and, in a way, insist that others should follow it. I'm happy to have a world of positive vested interest, instead of negative vested interest. Essentially, I

like the fact that somebody buys a Prius and others try to buy it.

In fact, somebody said to me the other day that the best way you can do sustainability, real good, is to make alternate energy use visible.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Visible. Now, is this happening in India?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Not so much. That's the entire dynamics between new emerging markets like India and markets like the U.S., for example, where the distinctive move is there because of the pressures you see on oil and the fuel economy. India is still emerging. It's still developing. There is GDP growth. People are still fashionable after fossil fuels and not fashionable after alternative energy, which is the sad truth.

But we are getting there, because we have philosophies across cultures in India which talk about how you need to be treading lightly on the earth. So there are people who are putting things into practice. These are of a small scale today. But I see a lot of people following them. Volunteering, for example, in large corporations—and I do a lot of employee volunteering programs for HSBC—clears this feeling among so-called banking-mindset employees—this mindset is all about revenues. For them to be able to now start thinking about community—volunteering helps a lot in trying to show people the right way and do the right practice.

**DEVIN STEWART:** We're almost up to the point where we are today, where you are launching the Climate Civics Institute, in your career. But the last chapter with HSBC I want to learn more about. In your bio it says that you headed up the microfinance initiative at HSBC. Tell us about that.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes. It was indeed a very useful and insightful experience. The reason I say this is because it's not easy to look at doing a business proposition with disenfranchised people and how to really make that happen with ethics in mind. I started a microfinance portfolio for HSBC and have now successfully, in the last two years or so, handed it off. I incubated it; now it's run by the commercial bank. It was purposefully designed this way, because sustainability typically—or any microfinance kind of project—should not be a corner-room practice, because if it's not integrated across the rank and file of the organization, it's not going to survive.

Microfinance was interesting because I could actually bring communities, bring microfinance practitioners into the hallowed halls of HSBC, who shared their life stories, shared their experiences of how they have really managed to transform people's lives from abject poverty to a decent standard of living, including breaking down caste/class barriers. The woman of the household became more powerful, because she would own now, she could become an entrepreneur.

So that was transformational. And HSBC allowed me to kind of clear this transformation inside the organization so that they could eventually see the light of the day and practice microfinance. We had the foresight in the entire HSBC network worldwide to start microfinance. Now it's also global policy for HSBC.

**DEVIN STEWART:** When was that, when it started?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** This was about four and a half years ago.

**DEVIN STEWART:** How is it doing today? Do you think it will stick around?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes, it will stick around. It's doing very well. The portfolio is giving good returns. During the peak of the financial crisis, when Wall Street collapsed—I typically end up saying this—Brick Street was all right. A "brick street" is a lateral street. It's quite lateral. It's quite natural. It works with communities. Our microfinance portfolio today services over 300,000 people, and it's doing good.

**DEVIN STEWART:** How do you respond to some criticism about microfinance? Some people say it's not fair to get these people trapped in the debt cycle and things like that. Sometimes the marketing is sort of misleading. Do you have any response to any of the criticism?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes. I think the criticism can be valid at a futuristic point. Let me clarify what I mean by that. Poor communities were anyway in a death trap. The term "bonded labor" is known to all of us, wherein people for generations have been paying some loan they took during their grandfather's time. They are not even sure what is principal, what is interest.

What microfinance has done is actually linked communities in need of credit to the mainstream regulated market, as defined by the government of a particular country. Yes, the cost of providing microfinance to people on the ground is still high, because the cost of funds is high. You must have read about microfinance, that these are sometimes daily, sometimes weekly repayments, because the poor own in small parcels of money, and therefore have to repay in small parcels of money. And it's a cash economy. Someone goes and physically collects the

money and puts it back into the bank, into the microfinance distribution. Therefore, the cost of funds is high. With technology intervention, it will go down gradually. I don't think, therefore, there is much merit in trying to overly criticize microfinance.

Yes, if you look at microfinance and private equity and microfinance being the panacea in terms of standard and sometimes escalated terms for investors and so on and so forth, you may run into problems, because those guys may just look at the terms and not at the social impact. Today you are getting into a situation which is a bit bubbly, in some cases, in India, wherein a family is saddled with four, five, six, seven microfinance loans, pretty much like a credit card.

When you have six, seven credit cards, you don't know what to do, so you repay one borrowing from the other and so on and so forth.

That is an area which one has to be aware of. That is where the ethical dimension comes into the picture. My point is this: People in countries like India have access to purchasing power, which allows them to buy things. If you don't have that purchasing power, microfinance will not succeed. How do you create that purchasing power? You basically need to help people own their livelihoods really efficiently so they can continue to be a consumer of anything, including microfinance.

**DEVIN STEWART:** So there's a role for microfinance, but there's also a role for donations, aid, and government work as well.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** There is, yes.

**DEVIN STEWART:** So you see it as part of an overarching, grander strategy.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Sure, a more hybrid model, I would say.

**DEVIN STEWART:** That was, actually, one of the consensus points of a panel that I participated in at NYU just about a week or two ago on what's called "philanthrocapitalism."

But your title at HSBC was and is senior vice president, Corporate Sustainability, HSBC India. What does that mean? What does sustainability mean to you? Is it the same thing as what it means to finance people?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Yes. Banks like HSBC and a few others have really shown positive strides in the manner in which they are addressing proactively issues around society, around the environment, with a clear understanding that they are doing this because, one, it's good to do so, and it affects their customers.

Customers will get affected by rising sea levels. Businesses will get impacted if temperatures change. Supply chains of the world's largest companies and smallest companies will get impacted if the entire process of climate intervenes in the supply chains. You have, fundamentally, a destructive situation on the ground when you have wars happening in countries and you have, for example, separatist movements happening in countries. That affects corporate life, and so on and so forth.

So HSBC does believe that the element of risk is there if you don't practice sustainability well. An element of customer-centricity is also something which allows sustainability, therefore, to become important to HSBC.

I believe in that. My viewpoint is—this is what I said earlier—that sustainability should be part of an organization's way to breathe and way to live. It need not be something which is done as an adjunct or done outside of the core competency.

I believe in a financial institution doing financial inclusion. I believe in a pharmaceutical company working on health. I wouldn't bat an eyelid if a particular company whose core competency is not education, information, and knowledge does not support schools in a particular country. That's fine. But typically you end up, in the global development arena, with, "Help us get an education. Help this particular person to get literacy." But if you are a corporation who is not in that space, it's all right if you don't do it, because it's not your core competency.

So I do believe that there is a complete plethora of activities which have to be linked to core competency, which you can drive as a sustainability platform. For example, in HSBC, Future First is a large project which we launched to support street children and children around the world, because we believe that access to education creates access to an economically healthful lifestyle. So we looked at people, communities, children beyond the pale and made that as our project.

Future First has been designed in India, it runs as a global program, supported by the HSBC global education trust out of the U.K., and it's in over 45 countries where HSBC has a presence. All of our employees are Future First

coordinators. They do their banking job and they also have the community.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Who do you see as being the real leading institutions on climate change?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Many. I find, of course, the work of the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) extremely useful, because it gives you sets of data year on year and allows you to therefore make a reasonable scientific understanding.

**DEVIN STEWART:** That's the data. How about action?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** In terms of action, I find the institute in India, [the Energy and Resources Institute](#), TERI, doing some excellent work, in the manner in which you really create good adaptation and mitigation knowledge, studies, and business connections, connections with corporations, how they can change—and, more importantly, how we can work with the government. Fortunately, the Indian government has a national action plan for climate change, which is, according to them, a very good plan. It talks about common and differentiated responsibility by putting targets in place.

In terms of adhering to the targets, you do require organizations like TERI to work with corporations, like HSBC and many others, to be able to drive a public-private partnership.

**DEVIN STEWART:** What is India's greatest concern and worry when it comes to climate change?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Which is the concern of the Climate Civics Institute: How do you really look at all those disenfranchised communities at the bottom of the pyramid, which is typically 60 to 70 percent of a country's population? How do you really create a stage for them to be able to have a voice in climate affairs? That's the biggest concern.

Therefore, what we have been trying to say in terms of common and differentiated responsibilities is, try and look at people who are getting affected by climate change who haven't really contributed to it. That's the entire dialogue which the so-called South is trying to battle out with the North.

**DEVIN STEWART:** So it's really the convergence of empowering or giving a voice to the most vulnerable and the people with the least amount of resources and also coping with the various effects of climate change, including drought, floods, hurricanes, and tsunami.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely, yes.

**DEVIN STEWART:** It reminds me of a talk I heard yesterday, with a very famous China scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations. She was talking to our Korea-Japan Study Group, and she said that is precisely what China—probably the biggest issue is the convergence of those two forces, the enormous population of poor, and particularly the huge gap between the rich and poor, in China, and at the same time, you have these sort of exacerbating forces in nature.

What do you see as the Climate Civics Institute's first goal? What would you make you feel like you have achieved some kind of success in the short term?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Good question. The world has to be focused, though it has to cover a wider terrain, because the issues are complicated. We have building blocks in place which initially look at lifecycles of vulnerable communities, as we are sitting here today. What are those lifecycles? Because it's a different lifecycle. These are not normal lifecycles. There is a lack of water. There is lack of resilience capacity. There are health issues because of the rising temperatures. There are issues of land productivity. There are so many issues which affect the household, affect the community.

We have started a process of creating a network of research field bases in Asia, particularly India and Australia, where we will work with existing not-for-profits with access to communities who are their constituencies, and try to see how we can build these lifecycles to drive policy design. Can I say for a region, for 10,000 villages, for two small cities, for one big city, what is it that is the resilience mechanism? Which is what will be the first success, in terms of trying to see what the lifecycle is of this community and household, what the policy disconnect is which we see today, and how you plug that by intersection of ethics and adaptive behavior for these communities.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Very interesting. That sounds very thought-out. What do you see as the key obstacle in getting the big picture relevant to the village or the town level? Some people have said it's corruption that really prevents that from happening. What do you see as your biggest obstacle?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** I don't see an obstacle, to the extent to which one would think there would be one. Not-for-

profits, in India at least, and communities are realizing that there is something happening in the temperatures around them and something is terribly wrong. The droughts are more intense. Crops are failing frequently.

**DEVIN STEWART:** So people are feeling it.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** People are feeling it. So I don't see an issue there.

I see the constant thrust on mitigation as, in a way, trying to deflect attention from adaptation. Mitigation is manageable by people who have the money. Adaptation is required for people who don't have the money. It's as simple as that. Today you and I can go and buy a solar heater from the market. I can buy that. I can't say the same—it's very interesting. You give people small sample sachets, because they can afford it. Then you give them microfinance because they can afford it. You also tell them to buy renewable energy because they can afford it. So at the end of the day, the net saving for the rural household is zero, because the market is successful. But the family isn't.

I think that's where Climate Civics is trying to play a role.

Let me also say a very important point. I also do believe that the Climate Civics Institute going forward will create financial models. By finance, I mean beyond charity. How do you look at microfinance helping create water and livelihood reservoirs, which will build resilience capacities?

But you will ask me, Devin, where will the repayment capacity come from? It will come from the fact that a good water-harvesting mechanism, starting with the rich, coming down to the valley level, will create an economy around water which will allow people to do better farming, have multiple crops, and therefore have a cash flow, so in the future cash flow is bankable. You need to be able to look upon water as an asset class and not as something which is God-given and you need, therefore, to be only looking at charity in terms of how you do water resource management.

That's just one example.

**DEVIN STEWART:** It's interesting. It's what our old friend, the economist [Jomo K.S.](#), described as integrating development and climate change adaptation—I think he said something like "developmentalizing" climate change, so it's one and the same.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Before we go today, Unmesh, how do you see Carnegie helping you and working with the project going ahead?

**UNMESH BRAHME:** Absolutely, fundamentally, in terms of the thought innovation, in terms of how we put that thought innovation into practice. Carnegie's work is in ethics in every sphere. It also uses ethics—and correct me if I'm wrong—in trying to define a new paradigm in international relations, which means you're not afraid to say what is right on behalf of the majority of the world's population.

The Climate Civics Institute says the same thing, with a specific focus on climate and how various issues fall under the climate umbrella.

I see plenty of scope in terms of developing this agenda together, trying to see how we look upon various elements of climate adaptation and water, climate adaptation and migration, climate adaptation and any intensification of a problem which you see in people's lives—also in the areas of what the obligation quotient is, if we really have to say that climate-affected and climate-usurious communities are now equal, because the obligation has happened.

So I do see us go forward in working together on projects, working together on thought innovation, working together on policy briefs, which I hope you and I will be able to share together in D.C.

**DEVIN STEWART:** I look forward to it, Unmesh. Thank you so much for visiting us.

**UNMESH BRAHME:** My pleasure, Devin. Thank you for having me.

**DEVIN STEWART:** Talk to you soon. Thanks.

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