

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
KEEPING THE 'LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND'
AGENDA ALIVE

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PARTICIPANTS:

Introduction and Moderator:

JOHN McARTHUR
Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development
Director, Center for Sustainable Development
The Brookings Institution

Panel Discussion:

ELIZABETH COUSENS
President and CEO
UN Foundation

HOMI KHARAS
Senior Fellow, Global Economy and Development, Center for Sustainable Development
The Brookings Institution

ALEXIA LATORTUE
Assistant Secretary for International Trade and Development
U.S. Department of the Treasury

SCOTT MacMILLAN
Director of Learning and Innovation
BRAC USA

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ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. McARTHUR: Warm welcome to everyone. I'm John McArthur, director and senior fellow of the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings. And we have both a long-term crucial and I would say short-term timely conversation today.

Back on Sunday, August the 2nd, 2015, all 193 member states of the United Nations agreed to the sustainable development goals. And the first among equals, so to speak, Target 1.1 of those 17 goals was to end extreme poverty by 2030. But there were many dimensions of tackling exclusion that were embedded in those goals. When the diplomats came to final agreement after a few all-nighters to land the plane of a huge global agreement, the phrase that people kept saying over and over again is, we will leave no one behind. And they took it further actually, they said we will move to support the furthest behind first.

That was, if anything, the crucial spirit, the mantra of this sustainable development goals is "Leave No One Behind." Well that idea came from somewhere and it really needs to go somewhere too. And in 2019, well before any of us had heard of COVID or COVID-19 or anything like that, even Homi Kharas and Izumi Ohno and I even published a book, added a volume on "Leave No One Behind." And you need to translate these mantras into specifics. And we talked at the time about specific people in specific places facing specific challenges. And the SDGs could be thought of as the specific development goals, if we really want to take the "Leave No One Behind" seriously.

Well of course due to pandemic and the crisis of the past few years that the world is still grappling with the notion of people getting left behind had not gone away, quite the opposite. It's even elevated, especially in many parts of the world that feel all the more left out by the global challenges, or the all the more left behind by the global challenges, even if there are many rays of hope and many surprises of breakthrough that have come up during this pandemic.

We have a panel today and a discussion to celebrate the legacy of one of the world's great leaders in promoting "Leave No One Behind" in practice over the course of decades. The founder of the world's largest NGO by many accounts, and with an extraordinary track record out of some of the

world's most challenging situations and Scott MacMillan, who worked very closely with that founder. So Scott's going to talk about his work in capturing that story.

But before that we're privileged to have Alexia Latortue join us. Alexia is, you know, a distinguished official with a very important set of roles. She's currently the U.S. assistant secretary for international trade and development at the U.S. Treasury. That's just the latest of her extraordinary accomplishments and contributions. She's the former deputy CEO of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, before her managing director of Corporation Strategy at the European Bank for Reconstruction Development. Had previous senior roles at the Treasury, and prior to that spent many years as deputy CEO of the World Bank's Consultative Group to Assess the Poor. She has spent much of her life professionally working on these issues of tackling the systemic challenge of those who are getting left behind. And I think, as she shared with us before this event, a particularly important spot in your own heart, Alexia, for the work of BRAC and Sir Fazle in taking on these challenges.

So we're honored that you're with us today. And we had a slight adjustment in the schedule from the original plan and Alexia has made an extra effort to be here today, I'll just underscore, and so we're so grateful for that, Alexia.

But I want to hand it over to you to help kick us off with your thoughts. This issue and the perspective you see it in and perhaps some of the work of Sir Fazle before we dive in. Alexia.

MS. LATORTUE: It is my entire pleasure to be part of this panel, John, thank you. And, Scott, thank you for writing a beautiful, beautiful book about a beautiful man. I will share four snippets: "What is poverty?," the cover of the book, "it's a tough world," and "imperfectly awesome."

What is poverty? Well Fazle Abed helped me answer that question in really powerful ways. Yes, of course, assets are important, material goods and services are important. But it is about so much more than that. And Fazle Abed and, Scott, you described this really well in the book, really spoke a lot about non-material aspects of poverty that are actually deeply crippling. He talked about the psychological aspects of poverty, the despair or lack of hope that is often part of a poor person's life.

And to me, maybe I'm wrong, but it seems like the fact that the liberation of the land of

the Bengals, Bangladesh, coincides with Fazle's own philosophy about liberating people from poverty, that the two things happened at the same time is not an accident. And so the focus on understanding oppression and class warfare and how power sometimes puts people down and how it is so important to help people find their own agencies and there's, you know, this beautiful quote about poor people writing their own stories of triumph over adversity. "They only have that pen, not us, it's poor people themselves."

I think it's deeply important to understand for anyone who wants to be serious about working on poverty reduction or working on not leaving anyone behind, that we need to really help activate the confidence that people have in themselves, if only it is allowed to unlock.

And it's so clear in this book that Fazle learned this a lot from his family. His mother that he described was a very compassionate, you know, person who had a real interest in the lives of people around her. And his aunt, who spoke to people as though they were the most important person in the room whenever she spoke to people. I think that's a real driver for how we work, not just to how we live.

And that poverty or the poor are not a modelistic group. His interest in surveys to actually understand what different types of poor people wanted and felt after tragedy I think is really important.

And you mentioned, John, the specific development goals. Well some were criticized by those approach and the graduation approach for being a hodgepodge of intervention. People have said the same thing about the sustainable development goals. But actually the holistic approach they bring is what makes the difference. And I remember Dlamini- Zuma, the former chairman of the AU saying, "I don't just want to manage my poverty, you know, poverty of my country. I really want people to be able to fully express themselves and fully live to all their potential." And I think that's very aligned with the approach that Fazle set out for all of us.

Secondly, the cover. Thank you, Scott, for the cover. Two reasons why I love it so much. Number one, that it's Fazle Abed not surrounded by smiling women or children. That's really important to me. You know there's discussion in this book about, you know, wanting to dress like the poor people, to work with the poor people. It's actually an act of vanity about the person doing the work.

And that was never, never Abed's way. And I think that's quite unusual, frankly, and I love that.

I also love the word "science", right? The Science of Ending Global Poverty. You know, he spoke about freeing the managerial skills and learn to show, to put it to good use and to good end. And I think that's really, really important for us to understand the rigor, the discipline it takes if we actually want to be part of the solution. And he brought that science, that discipline to his work. And that was recognized by people like Esther Duflo in terms of the power of the work that Abed helps to drive.

It's a tough world. It's a tough world. In this book it's not just stories of success. There's stories of corruption within the ranks that had to be rooted out. There's stories about how the work that you do can be demonized, whether it's, you know, are you an agent of the CIA or, you know, elaborate forces? What are you trying to do, what are you trying to really change power structures there will be people who come against you. And I think this book shows the reality of how tough it is to do what Fazle did so well in Bangladesh, and what we all strive to do.

My final snippet is it's perfectly awesome. This book does not try to portray Abed as the other worldly person. He is a man I discovered, who loved hard. He loved hard in unprofessional ways for his time, living with a woman, not married. And then, you know, having an arranged marriage. So no one can put Fazle Abed in a box. He read voraciously, the classics, but also *the Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, one of my favorites as well. And he delivered, delivered, delivered.

And the steps, the numbers showed in Bangladesh, still work to do but he has helped to transform the lives of so many people. And, because he's a true human, he's not a Bangladeshi, it's not a Brit educated Bangladeshi, he is a human. He brought his work to places around the world, including --

MR. McARTHUR: Somehow you just got muted, Alexia, sorry.

MS. LATORTUE: Oh, I'm so sorry. I was just ending, and I would just say that I really loved that in Abed's view, to become fully human was also to absolutely root out poverty. Because poverty is not, and I quote him, "ordained by a higher power, as immutable as the sun and the moon." It can, it must, and Abed you led the way, it really, really is possible in our lifetime, to make a vast difference to "Leave No One Behind."

So thank you, Scott, and thank you, Abed.

MR. McARTHUR: Thank you so much, Alexia, a very powerful, very compelling, and very heartfelt, really appreciated.

Can I take the liberty of just moderating, just ask you one quick follow up question? You talked so much about those deep principles. I'm wondering, given the role you sit in today and the interface of so many issues globally that are being taken on, I know the Secretary is even giving a major speech later today on some of these relevant issues. How do you see this carrying into the policy dimensions of the world's debate from where you sit?

MS. LATORTUE: You know I think it's a complex question. And my simple answer is, is when you really, really put people at the center of every decision you try to make. That you remember, why am I doing this, who am I doing this for? And I think if your starting point are the human beings, whether you're working on debt, whether you're working on water, whether you're working on infrastructure, whether you're working on climate, I think you will arrive at much better sustainable solutions.

And Secretary Yellen I think would have loved to spend time with Sir Abed. She is someone who believes in science, the science of economics deeply, and she believes that economics is meant to serve people. And let me tell you, day in and day out, I see that difference from that belief to the policy choices that she helped guide in this building.

MR. McARTHUR: Thank you so much for making that extra effort to be here today, Alexia. We know how much of a commitment you have to these issues, and it's manifested in here today. So huge thanks to you.

On that note, and I know you might have to excuse yourself soon, so thanks. No worries at all.

On that note we do want to switch, and this is, you know, a double-pronged conversation. It's on the "Leave No One Behind" agenda. And we have some of the original spear headers of the policy, international policy framing, that we'll hear from soon.

But we have someone, Scott MacMillian, who spent so much time with Sir Fazle Abed on the work of BRAC inbound with action, a growing number of countries around the world. And Scott himself is now currently the director of learning and innovation for BRAC USA. An accomplished journalist before that, and I can say having read just a portion of the book so far, but having had the chance to dive into it just starting yesterday, an extraordinary writer with an ability to capture so many depths of what Sir Fazle was working on, not just through BRAC but through the historical context in which the organization and he was operating. So it is a book that I find compelling just to dive into.

But before we hear from Scott to talk a bit more about the book, we do have a short video that he'll share and then we'll hand it over to you, Scott. So if you can please bring up the video, and then we'll hear from Scott.

I'm not sure if the sound is working, unfortunately.

MR. MacMILLAN: Indeed there should be sound. And if we can take a moment to try to

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MR. McARTHUR: Well, modern era, technical glitches, we'll give it one more go. Still no sound. Like screen share does not often convey the sound.

FEMALE SPEAKER: It will come on in just a moment. It has a 10 second lag.

MR. McARTHUR: Okay.

(Video played)

MR. McARTHUR: Over to you, Scott.

MR. MacMILLAN: Thank you so much. I'm glad that we took the extra few seconds to get the sound working on that video only because it gave us the opportunity to hear from Abed himself. And quite frankly, you know, I've seen that video a few times now and it still kind of moves me, right? I'm still moved by it.

And I was also moved by Alexia's comments, so heartfelt and so, yeah, to hear people sort of immersing themselves in this project that somebody asked me earlier, how long were you working on this. Well my daughter turned seven in December, and this book, this project, predates her. So, a

long time.

It was the privilege of a lifetime to work on this with Abed, I worked very closely with him for a number of years as his speech writer and his ghost writer. And perhaps the greatest disappointment of course, that he did not live to see it published.

A few things about myself. My name is Scott MacMillan, and I was a freelance journalist. I was traveling in Africa at the time when I first heard about the work of BRAC about 10 years ago. I ended up taking a job at BRAC and had the privilege of working closely with the founder, Abed.

And a few things that I noticed about Abed when I first began sitting with him and hearing stories from the previous eight decades of his life. He wouldn't mind me saying this actually, but he was not particularly good at marketing himself. If you work for a non-profit or especially if you lead a non-profit, I think it's usually a given that you have to promote yourself. And because nobody else is going to do it for you. And yet Abed really was not a self-promoter. He believed in doing the work, keeping your head down, focusing on the task, focusing on the work and letting the work speak for itself.

Alexia made a comment also that resonated with me. She was speaking particularly about the BRAC Graduation Program but this criticism that it's a hodgepodge of different approaches. Well the same could be said for BRAC itself, right? It is not an organization whose work is amenable to an elevator pitch. It works at scale and microfinance. It's one of the world's largest microfinance providers and yet it's not a microfinance institution, it's not an MFI.

It is so much more than that. A million school students at any given time, tens of thousands of schools at its peak. Women's economic empowerment, girls' empowerment in Africa. Don't forget the community healthcare. Oh, yes, the social enterprises. And also there's a university, and there's a bank, etcetera, etcetera. So if you're making that into an elevator pitch, by this time people have kind of tuned out. So that becomes a marketing barrier if you're concerned about marketing and communications.

That said, I learned through my many conversations with Abed that there was a unity to the many approaches that BRAC took to tackling poverty. And that unity is what I tried to sum up in the

title of the book *"Hope over Fate"*. And it is this idea that hope can help, can help break the poverty trap.

It is not a universal solution, it is not a, you know, it is not a panacea, but it is an essential part to the equation, I argue. And I have said this is a biography of a man that I believe was a remarkable man. It is also the story of how he built BRAC. It is the story, it is a detailed study of how change happens. I also like to believe that it is a biography of an idea. And it is this idea that hope can help break the poverty trap. And it has its roots in the 1970s and Abed's work adapting and teaching methodologies of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who was kind of an intellectual superstar of the 1970s. But his star has faded in some circles, never with Abed. Abed would have considered himself a Freirean to the end.

And it links up, as Alexia noted, with current economy research, including from the likes of OBG Energy, Esther Duflo, who won the 2019 Nobel Prize for economics.

And I begin the book, I'm not going to go on for too long, but I do begin the book with an antidote not about Abed but about a woman named Shahida Begum who lives in the Panhandle of Northern Bangladesh where the Brahmaputra River pours in from India. And one of the first things I noticed about Shahida Begum is how confident she was. She yelled at me when she spoke, she was so loud and confident in the way that she spoke. And then she told me a story about what had happened to her in the past, how her husband had died, likely of a heat stroke, and how she had worked at a brickyard before joining one of the first BRAC Graduation Programs. In fact she was part of the original pilot of the original BRAC Graduation Program in 2002.

And she told me a tragic/comic story about a fox that killed one of her goats. The name of the opening chapter is "The Fox that Killed my Goat." Spoiler alert, the goat obviously doesn't do too well in that encounter.

But one thing that struck me is, okay, this very, very confident woman describing her circumstances to me, now she has three acres of land, 12 chickens, two cows, and she keeps on, every time I visit, she seems to be having more and more assets. Now she has a milk cart that she's renting out. She doesn't sound like the woman that, you know, was destitute. I mean extreme destitution, didn't

eat for days. One time when she went to the brickyard to begin working. So where did that confidence come from?

Well logic would tell you that, you know, the material changes in her life have been vast relative to the baseline. So she's more confident now because she rose from poverty. Well actually a lot of research will say that the causality can also run in the opposite direction, right. She received, as part of the Graduation Program, she received regular visits from a BRAC caseworker to work through the problems that she would inevitably encounter on the path out of poverty, to boost her confidence, to give her hope, right? To say, yes, the fox killed your goat. There will be other goats.

Now this is a dangerous, this is a potentially misleading and perhaps even dangerous idea. Because it does risk creating the impression that poverty is somehow self-inflicted and all that Shahida really needed was a good pep talk, change your attitude, lady, and you'll climb up out of poverty. And anybody that understands anything about extreme poverty knows this is plainly not the case.

I've been told not to read from the book because I tend to read too fast, but I do think this is an important point for this audience and I want to capture it. "In the case of Shahida and countless others, despair is well founded. For no matter how hard they work, nothing ever seems to make a difference. Poverty results from factors outside their control, including routine mistreatment by others, oppression, and exploitation, especially for women, are a huge part of the equation. Even so, when material conditions do change via a sudden positive shock, through the gift of a goat for instance, or through livelihood training or a one-time cash transfer. It is likely that psychological factors, including a sense of despair that is rooted in generations of lived experience, will remain an obstacle."

So that is what we mean by hope over fate. So I will end my comments there, and I look forward to continuing this discussion. Thank you so much, John, for hosting this.

MR. McARTHUR: Thank you, Scott. I think I can attest it's a compelling opening narrative to frame any book, and it's, you know, puts so many of the intersecting issues in stark relief. And I think that notion of aspiration is an important one and makes a nice opportunity to switch to our panelists and to introduce them.

We have Elizabeth Cousens, Ambassador Elizabeth Cousens, who is the CEO of the United Nations Foundation, an organization I'm proud to have my own affiliation with over many years. And she was very important for this context in her former role as Deputy Representative of the United States to the United Nations, was a member of the so-called Open Working Group of the General Assembly that actually drafted the sustainable development goals. And took on that notion of "Leave No One Behind" in a way that I hope we'll be able to hear about a bit here in the broader context.

The other panelist we have today is our very own Brookings colleague, Senior Fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development Homi Kharas, who spent many years in a previous life at the World Bank, including as chief economist for East Asia. But also was crucial executive secretary of the high-level panel on the so-called post-2015 Agenda back around 2012 to 2013 when these issues of what should our next round of goals be for, was central. And that is a lot where in this sustainable goal parlance, "Leave No One Behind" really came from. And so Homi might be able to share a little bit about that as we think about how yesterday relates to today and more importantly, tomorrow.

So with that, this context, Elizabeth, we'd love to hear from you on this agenda. So we've got this dual-pronged set of topics today on a remarkable person or remarkable entity, and also a remarkably important problem for the world, and the United Nations is at the center of trying to take it on. Over to you.

MS. COUSENS: Well thank you, John, and I'm really delighted to be with you for this important conversation and to have an opportunity to honor the immense impact of Sir Fazle and his extraordinary organization, BRAC.

So let me start with a point of history. "Leave No One Behind" is at the absolute moral center of the sustainable development goals. And from the very beginning of the concept, the negotiations, and the adoption of the goals, this question of inequity, the gap between rich and poor, between included and excluded, was at the absolutely beating heart of this agenda.

So I want to take us back to remembering where we were in 2012, which is roughly when we started talking about the SDGs. We were three years to the end of that first set of goals, the

Millennium Development Goals, that made irradiating poverty and hunger the top goal. We were celebrating that hundreds of millions of people had been lifted out of extreme poverty in the generation, but we were trying to turn new attention to the challenges of those who were still trapped in it.

And just to give you one data point. At that time, based on World Bank and other data, no low-income conflict effected country was on track to meet a single MDG. So that was a specific challenge for specific people in specific places, to use your terms, who were measurably being left behind.

We were also worried that any successor goals to the MDGs would need to retain a laser-like focus on what people were calling the unfinished business of the MDGs. Which were all about last mile challenges, right, they were about the furthest behind and the most disadvantaged.

And of course in the world there was starting to be really rising concern about rising inequality on many levels. So as you mentioned, I was the U.S. negotiator on the Open Working Group that negotiated the goals. And Leaving No One Behind was absolutely core to what we saw as the mission. And in the politics of the UN it was also a clear priority, right? The inequity between people and between countries.

So if you fast forward to today, inequality has obviously gotten unfathomably worse and how can it be that 70 percent of people in high income countries have been vaccinated while only 20 percent in the low-income countries have. Or that the wealthiest 10 percent of the people in the world are responsible for half of global emissions while the bottom 50 percent are responsible for only 12 percent.

And, you know, importantly, our domestic and our global agendas are also just colliding and revealing themselves to be so much more connected than people ever used to think they were. And, you know, the last few years have obviously not been levelers, but they have really shown a bright light about how deeply equity challenges go in absolutely every society. Because remember, the SDGs are universal, and they apply everywhere.

So, you know, I think there's many ways and in the UN context and the UN is working on those sorts of challenges, inequity exclusion and extreme poverty on many levels. I think it's a wider

agenda that goes beyond extreme poverty, though that's the most excruciating and anguishing expression of it.

So just kind of a final observation is I think about the things, the dynamics I've seen develop over the many years of the UN, certainly the politics and dynamics around the negotiation of the SDGs and now thinking about how do we get to 2030 with a reacceleration of that agenda?

The defining challenge, it seems to me for absolutely all of us, and certainly for the UN right now, is exactly what Alexia pointed to. It is about justice, it's about equity, it's about the very close sibling of both of those things, solidarity, and we clearly need to do much better. So I really, you know, I thank Scott for writing a beautiful book, as Alexia said, about a beautiful person trying to do beautiful things in a world that is very troubled because coming closer to that vision and that inspiration is exactly what we need to do right now.

So thank you, John.

MR. McARTHUR: Thank you, Elizabeth, talk about an alpha to an omega synthesis of so much. Very compelling.

Homi, you are too humble to say it, but you are in many ways the godfather of the "Leave No One Behind" concept in many debates and what came to this same topical agenda. How can you help us understand again the story of a remarkable person, but also, as Elizabeth was just referencing, the centerpiece of the global agenda?

MR. KHARAS: So I think if you go back to that time, 2012, where Elizabeth started, there was actually a fair degree of celebration of the progress that had been made on the issues like poverty. And the reduction in poverty had happened in part because of people like Sir Fazle Hasan Abed.

So there was an understanding that this was something that was feasible. But at the same time there was an understanding that behind these average statistics you still had a lot of people and a lot of groups that were not making progress. And actually I remember at the time there was some very striking videos, John, about, well, you know, these old millennium development goals will cost in terms of let's half global poverty.

There were these videos of, you know, Usain Bolt running the hundred meters and stopping after 50 and going okay, well I've got to 50, now what? And it just gave you this sense that we have to finish the job. It can be done, it should be done, and we have to do it.

And so these so-called zero goals, and you were one of the first people who generated this idea of the zero goals, I think really gained prominence. And part of the strength, I think, of the "Leave No One Behind" concept is that it doesn't permit the wiggle room that we had when it was half poverty. Because you could half poverty or improve things in let's say Nigeria, by focusing on the cities and leave out many of the people up in the Northeast. You could do a lot of things in individual countries to improve the lives of some while completely neglecting everyone else.

And I think that was one of the central message that it's not good enough to do that, we really have to think about everyone. And I think that that was, you know, it's come up in every single one of the comments about Fazle Hasan Abed. He never thought about was this person from this community or that community, they were just a person.

So I think that that's, I think he demonstrated both that essence of humanity and also the fact that things could be done and could be done at scale. You know, Bangladesh, I think we have to remember, was widely regarded in development circles as a basket case, which was how Henry Kissinger actually described Bangladesh. The idea that Bangladesh could develop was thought of as being fanciful. And to add to its problems of poverty was the fact that its government was not focused, let me just say, on the lives and well-being of its people.

And yet you have a remarkable story of progress in Bangladesh. And certainly when it comes to individual well-being, all of that progress is attributed to the non-profit sector of which BRAC was a leading example.

So there's this extraordinary image that, yes, you can debate all of these things in the halls of the UN, but if people and individuals just put their minds to it, they can actually accomplish great things. And I think that was also a spirit with which the new sustainable development goals said we don't want to just involve governments in these kinds of agreements, we have to have a whole of society

approach.

I worry right now that we are lacking that. And if I can just share one slide. Things are not going well with progress on the sustainable development goals. We've done some work to say if you project current trends up to 2030, how well will you do? And what you see is that there are only a handful of goals, all in terms of indicators I should say, or targets, four of all of the ones that we measure. This isn't the entire series, but there are only four where we'll get to even halfway to where we said and promised that we would try to go. And in all of the rest it's well below halfway and in some ways even receding. Okay. You can stop sharing, please, Charlotte.

So this notion that we have to actually do things at scale and do things in lots of different places, is absolutely fundamental. And, you know, if you take this number one target, poverty now is absolutely stopped somewhere like 700 million people in extreme poverty, it hasn't changed for a while. COVID was a big setback.

All of the big success stories, first in China, then in East Asia, then in South Asia, have essentially come to an end. And we're not moving forward on this agenda. So we need new inspiration, we need to rededicate ourselves I think to this idea. And there's a great concern and worry that things are actually getting worse because we see the constant toll of natural disaster and climate change affecting poor people. And of course the impact of that is most heavy in the tropics where the vast bulk of poor people live. And so even in Bangladesh, despite all of the successes, the impact of climate change is massive and now we see all of these issues in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere.

So I think there's an urgency right now to say, let's not forget about the poor people in this world while we struggle to think about climate change. And my own view is that supposedly Abed Fazole would say, this is not a different agenda, this is the same agenda. We can't tackle the "Leave No One Behind" agenda without integrating it with climate change. And that to me is now one of the great challenges of our time.

Thank you.

MR. McARTHUR: Thanks so much, Homi, our esteem colleague Nicholas Stern has

said, you know, if you don't tackle climate change and poverty you can't do one without the other. And so it is all becoming very much an integrated agenda in the deepest possible way, and of course the people in the world are the ones facing the greatest challenge.

We have about 17 minutes left in this session; we want to end by the top of the hour. And I do want to just share with those in the audience if you have any questions. I believe you can put them in the chat and we'll try to see if we can get a few of them and answer from our distinguished panel.

But I'm going to go to a little bit of a lightening round for feedback if that's okay and ask a few questions. And, Scott, if you're still there I'd love to have you back on the discussion.

But I think this question of what's possible is perhaps a little bit forgotten. And having been through some of these debates, as alluded to at the Millennium Development Goals where I was very involved with the UN when Kofi Annan was secretary general, helped me to get that off the ground, the notion of a multi-pronged approach to tackle extreme poverty. And, yes, the question was which half is okay to leave in poverty. That was a common critique. And as Homi said, there's no half.

But, you know, 15 years ago even there was a debate on what could be done and is this viable or not. And my former colleague, Jeff Sachs, put out this book "The End of Poverty" in 2005, and that was seen as crazy talk at the time. But groups like BRAC with the Ultra-Poor Initiative and many other efforts like the digital cash transfer revolution have shown just how much is possible with people like Esther Duflo and IBG Energy and many others providing compelling evidence around how much can be done.

So I'm curious based on your day job, if you will, at BRAC and head of Learning and Innovation, and the work of the Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative in particular. With all the evidence that has been generated, where do you see the next frontiers of, you know, building the case or making it more broadly implemented that this "Leave No One Behind" agenda can actually be fulfilled, not as a pipedream, but as a practicality?

MR. MacMILLAN: Thank you, John. Well, what's possible? I mean, Homi correctly pointed out, Bangladesh in the 1970s was seen as a basket case and is now seen as almost an exemplar

of what can be achieved, not to say that there isn't extreme poverty prevalent in many parts of Bangladesh. But in terms of basic indicators. What's possible? A lot, right? And Abed showed us this.

I would say the next frontier is really, well speaking specifically about the "Leave No One Behind" agenda, we see a lot of focus now on governments, encouraging governments to spend a little bit more wisely. So in the 1970s, BRAC really, that's when the "Leave No One Behind" really began, that idea really began to resonate with BRAC. Sorry, I said the 1970s, I meant the 1990s. It was going national with many of its mainstream programs, including microfinance. Its scale was getting quite large, ordering on massive. Even as early as the first half of the 1990s it was already called the world's largest NGO by some measures.

And yet it began to realize that there were certain segments of the population that were being left behind by its mainstream programs, including microfinance, including community healthcare, and other, you know, social programs for social integration. Including the most marginalized people in society, not just in an economic but in a social way. There was a category, a substratum, if you will, that was being left behind.

The terminology that was come up with at the time was the ultra-poor. Not just extreme poor, not just poor, not just extreme poor, but ultra-poor, which describes, you know, the woman I mentioned earlier, Shahida Begum.

The focus right now, I think the next frontier is can we harness that same kind of focus that BRAC put into solving that problem, on its own turf. Can we harness that in terms of government programs worldwide?

This is partly a financing issue but the fact the truth is, and I don't want to be the one to say, you know, enough spending, no. There's more to be, you know, we need more financing. But mostly the money is there, it's really a question of how well that money is being invested, whether it's really reaching the poorest and whether it's really being done with the kinds of programing, like Graduation, that is required to graduate people that are otherwise left behind into a sustainable livelihood so their hard work can start finally making a difference.

That is our focus right now and that is our focus specifically with governments worldwide. And we have an initiative called the Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative to try to advocate for that.

MR. McARTHUR: That was very hopeful. I do see we have a couple of questions that have come in. So I'll get to those in a moment, so thank you. And any other audience members who want to submit, please do use the Chat function.

But, Elizabeth, I want to turn to you for a moment if I may. And you and our colleague, Tony Pipa from CSU, recently wrote an op-ed on the importance and relevance of the sustainable development goals in for the United States at home. And as maybe an untapped policy frontier but also the "Leave No One Behind" agenda. I know even Wes Moore is running for Governor of Maryland based on a "Leave No One Behind" campaign, quite explicitly.

I'm curious, you know, say that in a non-partisan way just as an observation of, you know, something that's going on and curious. How do you see the relevance of "Leave No One Behind," even in an advanced economy like United States, for us to understand it?

MS. COUSENS: Yeah. No, thank you, John. And this is such a terrific conversation. So I think whether it's in, you know, capital letters or lower-case letters, this idea of leaving no one behind, of kind of a radical inclusion of making sure everybody has opportunities and perceive themselves to have opportunities. So it's both the material opportunities and the perception of it. Is absolutely central not only to a better and fairer future but also to better politics.

So, you know, the U.S. is obviously a very wealthy country. It has so many advantages. But we're not on track to meet the SDGs. Now why are we not on track? It's because of those zero-based goals. It's because of inequality. You know, see we may have a predominately electrified country where predominate number of people have access to clean water and sanitation, but not everybody does. Millions of people don't. You know, we still have communities like Jackson, Mississippi, or Flint, Michigan that can't count on clean water. We have tremendous racial disparities in things like maternal mortality.

So our challenge, and I mean it goes a little bit to the point that Scott just made. Our challenge is about the quality of policies, the integrity of our commitment to actually do something about

those inequities. And then be smart and sustained in our efforts to do it.

And I do think the other dimension of this, and, you know, and this is characteristic of a number of countries around the world today, where there are also perceptions of inequity. They're not all founded on facts, some of them are fact based, some of them aren't fact based. But regardless, that is creating very challenging politics in many places where ideas of compassion, solidarity, inclusion, become very challenging ones to have in a civic space. And that's something we also have to really work on I think in a very deep way.

So to me "Leave No One Behind" has so many different dimensions to it as an idea, a principle, a value set, policies, etcetera, and makes it just so crucial that we really work hard as communities around that challenge.

MR. McARTHUR: Terrific set of points. And I think just as an observer in the U.S. context, you know, even President George W. Bush, you know, a lot of his policies used similar language, you know, "Leave No One Behind," "No Child Left Behind." The concept is beyond partisanship, which is part of its power even in the divided world that we live in where there's so much partisanship and so many countries.

Homi, we have a question from Lindsay Coates, who's familiar to many of us, and of course used to be involved with BRAC as well. But she's asking the panelists, and I think you might have thoughts on this. What do you think are the most effective policy actions by rich countries to "Leave No One Behind?"

And I just want to tag into that. Scott talked a little bit about the role of money. And you are very deep in the global debates on financing and what financing updates are needed to get the world back on track. What do you see the kind of general financing debates or issues that are needed, and how can the advanced economies, so called, be part of the solution?

MR. KHARAS: Thanks, John. So, you know, money of course is important, and I'm actually always struck by how little money would actually be needed if we were to, you know, to address this issue. And I mean the calculations, as you know, that we've done is that the so-called poverty gap,

the amount of money that would allow every single person in the world to achieve some minimum standard of living, defined as the extreme poverty line, amounts to something like \$100 billion. Well \$100 billion in a world which has a GDP of a \$100 trillion, which is our low today, is actually tiny, it's 0.1 percent.

So this is, you know, getting more money is important but I think that I'd like to just go back to what Scott said, it's also a matter of can we actually get the money to the people who need it. And, you know, one of the things we do talk about policies as if sometimes there are these, you know, these things that we can pass in legislatures that will change the lives of people. But for many poor people, they live on the fringes of society, and they're not affected by changes in, you know, laws to the same extent and degree. And the great thing about BRAC, and I think the thing that probably supposedly the person would be most proud of, is to develop and build an organization and a backroom technology so that the money and the approach actually reaches the, in their terminology, the ultra-poor.

But it's the ability to actually get assistance and, not even assistance necessarily, but engagement with those at different levels in society wherever they may be, that is proving to be the hardest issue to tackle. So it's how do we actually build the organizations that can literally reach these kinds of people. And what does it take to do that? Because the logistics of doing that is enormously difficult, and in some places is beyond what current government capabilities are and where we don't necessarily have the same degree of non-profit capacity.

So I would say in answer to that question. We now have lots of studies about effective policies. I think there are lots of things that we think can work in this space. I think it's much harder to say how do we build an organization that can take that to scale in the places where we know right now the biggest depravation still exists.

MR. McARTHUR: Thank you, Homi. And I'm just going to turn us to a final set of quick comments, maybe from Elizabeth and Scott. But I just wanted to share, Haley Durak online, shared a comment. At the organization she works with they try to avoid expressions like poor people or the poor, ultra-poor, and instead talk about people living in poverty. So that the phrasing gives a sense of

empowerment as well. And I think that is a point well noted, well taken, and I know a common issue of, you know, agency as paramount I think this conversation is relating to drive towards.

Elizabeth, we've had a couple of questions about, you know, the world using its resources for the wrong things right now. And, you know, military buildup, the 2 percent of GDP target has all sorts of legitimacy now in advanced economies, but the 0.7 percent for ending poverty is still seen as suspect in many quarters. And we have fuel subsidies that could, you know, hugely benefit if they're reallocated to better use.

How do you see the role of the world, kind of especially given your breadth of multilateral experiences, to shift the resources to better things rather than bad things, knowing that there is a pull on the bad right now?

MS. COUSENS: Yeah. No, a few things, a few comments. And I want to pick up one, this theme of confidence that we've been talking about, about people living in poverty needing to have confidence and hope. That is such a broader question right now for absolutely every one of us. I just feel compelled to make this point.

Some of you might have seen the very compelling event during Climate Week this year where Christiana Fagatos, in front of the very large room, said how many of you believe that by mid-century we will have been able to keep our climate to a habitable level? And nobody raised their hands.

So we have a deeper challenge, or just a broad-based challenge of confidence that we can actually do things we know we all can do, we just have some pretty challenging headwinds right now, so I think it's worth, I wanted to register that observation.

And it relates a little to the question you asked me. I think I'm struck by what Homi said, that of course there's need for more money. And it needs to be well spent. But sometimes it's not just a question of money, so where we spend it is also about how we approach policies and investments in general. So this whole point about putting people at the center, about designing, not designing programs for people, having people figure out what they need and then ensuring that they have the tools to get it and putting them very much in the driver's seat. This whole localization agenda that is becoming so

much more prominent I think is a really important part of that story.

The larger challenge, I think I mostly just concur with the question. I mean I think it is having worked on issues of peace and conflict for the first part of my career, it was always very striking to me how no matter how many other policy agendas and efforts you have under way, when you have a crisis, it blows all of that out of the water. So it's not just about the guns that are growth expenditure question which, you know, our colleague rightly raised, it's also about just political distractions. You know, you can't handle that many things at once, it's just striking. It's very hard when you require really top-level political attention, whether it's in a capital or in a multi-lateral institution. There's a bandwidth challenge and we have these really deep, deep challenges that we have to work on over time. And we have to get better at being able to do that and being able to stay the course even when other things distract us.

So I think it's I'm maybe adding dimension to the challenge rather than suggesting a way to overcome it other than the kind of work that people on this call do every day, whether they are advocates, whether they're working in communities, whether they're just members of communities that are trying to do the right thing. And certainly having very high expectations and sustained expectations of our political leaders. Because the only way we're going to get them to do the right thing is if we keep asking for it and making sure that they're held to account. So I think that is part of the larger answer to this very challenging question.

But thank you.

MR. McARTHUR: Thank you, Elizabeth. Scott, your book in many ways prompted this whole conversation we've had such range of insights from Alexia Latortue, from Elizabeth Cousens, from Homi Kharas. And I do want to give the last word to you.

What would you like our audience to take away from this discussion? Do you have something that you would like to leave us with this build up online, this video? And it's a chance I think just to give you the final say.

MR. MacMILLAN: Thank you very much. Well, okay, you put me on the spot. And

Alexia really captured it and I'm actually going to list, I'm going to repeat something she said. And it was a quote from Abed. Towards the end of his life actually he began writing about the science of hope. So the title of book is Fazle Hasan Abed, "Hope Over Fate: Fazle Hasan Abed and the Science of Ending Global Poverty."

He began talking about the science of hope. And this notion of instilling confidence and self-esteem being a pathway out of poverty is not some softhearted, vague notion. There is actually science behind it. There is evidence behind it. We can point to both specific studies and specific types of interventions that can successfully instill hope in people. And sometimes those interventions are even more successful than more traditional, you know, business training, for instance.

It's not, you know, the road is long, it involves giving people the right access to services, healthcare, education, but the quote that sticks with me the most is, which I don't have it off the top of my head, but for generations, people believed that poverty was something ordained by a higher power, as immutable as the sun and the moon. And this is a myth. And Abed's life was putting that myth to rest. Thank you.

MR. McARTHUR: Thank you so much. May we write a new story of how extreme poverty got eliminated in my lifetime, and certainly all of ours.

And thank you all, our extraordinary panelists, everyone online who was able to join today, in voting with your feet and your screens to help re-elevate not just the life's work of an extraordinary person, an extraordinary organization, but also this extraordinary priority for the world to make sure no one indeed gets left behind.

So on behalf of the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings and all our colleagues here, we're so grateful to all of you for joining. But more than anything we're so keen to, you know, see how we can be supportive to help bring this to life. Not just to life, but to action over the days and weeks and months to come.

With that we'll sign off and conclude. And just a huge thanks again to everyone for joining and for all your contributions.

Have a great day.

MR. MacMILLAN: Thank you everybody.

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1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190