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DAVID WASKOW INTERVIEW

Hi, and welcome to GridTalk. Today we have with us David Waskow who's the Director of International Climate Initiative at the World Resources Institute. The reason I invited you on, David, is because we're reading a lot and hearing a lot about massive spending underway in the United States under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act and the Inflation Reduction Act, pushing tens of billions of dollars out for sustainability and for rebuilding the grid and greater reliance through renewables, and I invited you to join us today to talk about what else is happening around the world to meet up and match these government inspired initiatives so first let me say, David, welcome.

A: And thank you very much, Marty. It's great to be here with you. So, I'm David Waskow. As you said, I lead the International Climate Initiative at WRI. We are principally focused on international climate policy venues and arenas. Some of that has to do with things that are probably familiar to your listeners like the Paris Agreement and the U.N. climate negotiations. We also work in other venues like the G7 and G20 and then there are a number of parts of the international climate puzzle if you

will, that we work on that we see as critical so, under Paris, countries are expected to come forward every five years with a new and stronger set of commitments for their climate action. Those submissions or commitments are known as nationally determined contributions or NDCs so we do a lot of work on that. It's something that really is born out of the national level in many ways in that it is, as the name applies, a nationally-determined set of commitments but it then goes into the international domain so those are the kinds of things that I can elaborate on that, that we are focused on in my team. But WRI does lots of work and the World Resource Institute does lots of work well beyond that. We…

Q: Would that include things like food, land, water, urban issues, correct?

A: Yes, exactly.

Q: So, let me ask you, you have got, according to your website, 1,900 staffers based in places like Brazil, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Mexico, as well as the United States. What intelligence are they picking up now about the current state of the world effort to tackle sustainability and climate change?

A: Well, I think the overall state is a mixed story. I've begun thinking about where we are and what we have in front of

us in terms of a metaphor and this has partly been done in order to, for myself to internalize what I think is hard to internalize. We're both making a lot of progress and have enormous challenges ahead of us and I think it's sometimes hard to keep both of those thoughts in mind at the same time so I've been thinking about where we are in terms of climbing a mountain and that we've gone up quite a ways, in some ways on the mountain and we are actually able to look back and we've climbed over some boulders perhaps and we can look back down into the valley, beautiful view from where we are, looking down into the valley but all that said, when we turn around and look upwards, the summit is quite a ways away; the challenges are significant, it's cloudy up there at the top; the hill is steep, the mountain is steep, and we are going to have to work with our partners climbing the mountain to get to where we want to go and we both have gotten to that point where we can look back into the valley if you look at where renewables are now, if you look at the surge in electric vehicles, all of that is quite clear and we should embrace that while at the same time recognizing that we still are on track for a trajectory of 2½ or perhaps upwards degrees Celsius in warming, so that metaphor; I don't know if helps others but at least it helps me think about where we stand and be able to integrate in my thinking but it's a positive and

the challenges ahead, and I think when you look around the world at my colleagues, that's what they're seeing and that's what they're facing.

Q: So, David, as we marshal our resources for an assault on the summit, what is the role of government and what is the role of organizations like of yours working outside of government and alongside of government? Do you have a sense of the role each is playing?

A: Well, I think there is a wide range of roles that NGOs play and I think all of those roles are actually critically important. We play some of the them, not all of them as WRI. One thing I did want to say is we are truly a global organization. We began in the U.S. and actually some folks coming out of the Carter Administration in the early '80s founded the organization but we've now grown into a global organization in a real sense and have offices in China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, several offices in Africa including our headquarters for the region in Kenya, and still in the U.S. obviously and now also in Europe, so we're working at that kind of breadth and the role we play is multifold I would say. One is that governments are clearly still going to be critical drivers in terms of legislation and regulation, in terms of spending, and how financing is being done. There are a number of ways in which

governments are absolutely pivotal as we know. One of the things we do is to try to direct as best we can, that energy in the right direction and to provide policy advice, and input, and analysis that can help and building the strongest possible policies, and that includes not only individual national governments but with the work I do, we are looking also at how governments can cooperate and collaborate to move the agenda forward, to move the climate agenda forward around the world. So, that's one of our roles is to take that lever, that massive lever that government can provide and help provide the push.

Q: So, let's drill down. You mentioned two countries: Kenya and Ethiopia. What is WRI doing on the energy front in those two countries right now?

A: In Kenya and Ethiopia, we are working on energy a lot on the question of energy access. How do you bring electrified energy to a broader set of the population and do it in ways that are carbon friendly? So, a lot of that is distributed renewables; it's not only Kenya. Before we even got engaged, it's been really a pioneer in terms of distributed renewables and payment systems for those.

Q: So, I mean, do you bring the technology and the suppliers? What role do you play in bring power?

A: Yeah, I mean, our role; WRI has been in the past at least, in many times characterized as a think tank. We actually think of ourselves more of a do tank and so it's about bringing ideas to the table but also putting them into action and we don't want to write reports that sit on a shelf. We actually want to engage in a real and active way so in the case of Kenya for example, we will work with the government to develop the best possible policies for deploying those renewables. At the same time, we are actively involved in supporting communities on the ground and even small businesses on the ground to tackle key challenges so in Kenya for example, restoration, rebuilding eco systems, restoring forests and other landscapes, those are key part of our work and there, we are a little bit more hands on in some ways. We do in fact get down and dirty in the sense that we are working very closely with those who are actually doing the implementation and putting those restored forests in place.

Q: So, for people tracking the combat and the conflict between autocracy and democracy around the world, does it make a difference to you whether you're dealing with a democracy in a healthy functioning society or autocracy, or do you function largely independent of either of those?

A: Well in recent years we've really increased our work on what are called Just Transition issues. The term 'Just

Transition' has evolved a lot in the last five years and many people use it in various ways so a little bit hard to pin down but the essence is that as we go through the climate transition, and this is true both for reducing emissions and for building resilience and adapting to climate impacts, it's critically important to keep questions of equity front and center and that means making sure that if there are harmful effects from the action we're taking that those are mitigated, that we have ways to or we develop ways to address them so for example for fossil fuel-dependent communities or countries that there are ways for them to build their economies in new directions; some of that is a green economy approach. And also, as climate action builds, that we're also making sure that the benefits and the opportunities from that are widely and equitably shared. People should have access to jobs doing renewables, too. They should have access to sustainable transport and that is something that should be not just a goal from a climate perspective but also something that increases mobility for people. So, in the just transition concept and I'm working back to your question, there's also the notion that, and I think it's very right in many ways, that it's critically important to involve communities and stakeholders, key stakeholders in developing climate action but also these Just Transition kind of approaches. If you're

developing new jobs and reskilling programs for example, the community needs to be part of that process. Now that can be harder in a country where there's less space for civil society to operate but I think nonetheless in all cases, there are ways particularly at the community level to make sure that there is engagement and that there is participation even if there's a bit of an overarching political context that may not be as sort of facilitative as that as we may like.

Q: So, one of the things we've been tracking in the United States and on the financial pages is that renewables have equaled if not surpassed fossil fuel generation as coming down in cost so that they're viable alternatives. Now on your website you called out the need for 770,000,000 people worldwide that have lacks of any access to electricity. Are we at the point now that you're seeing around the world on a granular level bringing them solar and wind and storage is a better way to go than fossil?

A: I think we're certainly seeing movement in that direction; it varies from country to country and context to context. We're certainly seeing bursts of renewables in a fair number of countries and I would especially point to India as a success story in a lot of ways; still a lot of ways to go but it's a country with…people don't often realize the level of GDP for

example that is a quarter of the GDP per capita of China and a quarter of the emissions per capita of China as well, so in more comparable in many ways, it's a well-run country and more comparable in many ways to countries that we tend to think of as least-developed countries, then perhaps it's a G20, it's more comparable to those than to its G20 counterparts. Now India does want to play a sort of big role on the renewable stage so they are still a chief part of the G20 climate scene but we've seen; I don't know the latest numbers but the surge, if you look back a decade, the surge in renewables in India is just quite remarkable and there over 100 gigawatts at the moment I believe, and continuing to grow rapidly. I was there in 2014 ahead of the Paris Agreement, did a sort of State Department speaking tour in a bunch of cities around the country and at that point, a lot of folks were still asking isn't this too expensive to do renewables? How can we possibly do it? We're going to have to just stick with coal and nothing else. There's no other way to do anything. You would not have that conversation today in India. It's just not a conversation that's the story anymore. People understand the value of value of them. They understand they can do it in a way that's not going to break the bank and that provides a huge number of benefits so that's a huge change.

There are other countries I could point to that are not at that point yet.

Q: So, let's talk about India for a little bit longer. There's the will there and there's certainly the population and the demand for power. Who plays the critical role in advising and guiding the evolution of their renewable energy? What role does the U.S. Department of Energy and the State Department play? What role does WRI and other NGOs play? What's the landscape out there that you're playing in?

A: I mean, I certainly think they benefit from inputs and ideas from outside. I do think in India's case, I mean, I really would give a lot of credit to the government itself and there was a corner turned roughly a decade or so ago in terms of the recognition that this was a direction they really could go in and benefit from and so they began rolling out; a lot of it was through auctions. They began rolling out a number of projects and taking bids for those projects and the price got lower and lower for the electricity produced in a way that it was really viable and competitive. The U.S. I think has been helpful in terms of technical advice. We've been I think, helpful in terms of bolstering the overall atmosphere around it and the evidence base around why to do renewables and we also have, I suppose sometimes help to try to make sure that it happens well so for

example, we've done work looking at how do you make sure that low-income workers actually have access to the jobs in the renewable sector? How do you do renewables' installations, major renewable installations in ways that not only can provide jobs locally but also don't impair land and water rights. It's often the case that they're going into areas where small farmers are in and so it's critically important not to do things that are going to be harmful to their land and water rights so all of those kind of things, grid buildout; how do deal with the grid I think also is something where there's been advice and input from the outside, but these things are interesting and the tables turn and I think at the moment just in the U.S., that China probably tell us more about building out our transmission grid than we can tell them.

Q: Well, I was going to ask you that, I mean, you've got 1,900 people out around the world in a variety of circumstances. We tend to think America's leading the charge on everything. What do you seeing happening out there that we can learn from just on your point? Are there examples or do we need to be going out looking more closely at what's happening around the world in terms of the grid transformation and getting more sustainable?

A: Yeah, I mean I think grid transformation; I think energy storage is an area where although things are starting to pick up

quite a lot in the U.S., there's still a lot to learn from others, particularly China. And I think the story with China has a lot of criticism from the U.S. government of China and some of it for good reason about questions around various kinds of rights there, but we also do…it would bear us a lot of good to learn from their model of thinking about this challenge and not everything perfect; they are continuing to build coal capacity, a lot of it which may end up sort of just sitting there, but not helpful to build in any case. It makes it harder to keep building our renewables in the way that you want, but they have over the last couple of decades, really looked at beyond the curve to see where we're going, where one can head globally and the fact that they are the ones who are; do 80% of the world's critical minerals processing is not an accident, they didn't fall into it by chance. They thought ahead in terms of what is this new energy going to look like in terms of with solar, wind, storage, and began to not only accumulate access to the mineral reserves all around the world, but also building up their processing capacity. Now the U.S., from a U.S. perspective, at least mercantile perspective that's not great, and the U.S. definitely needs to build up a lot of its capacity but I think it's the mode of thinking, it's the where are things going to be in 20 years and what are the lessons to take from that, and I'm

not sure that we're quite there yet. I think there's been a lot in the IRA and the infrastructure bill that's help move in that direction and with industrial issues, for example, I know there was a big set of grants recently to do greener low and even zero carbon industrial processing. That's the kind of thing where we've got to leap ahead because others are moving on that front; the Europeans are, the Chinese are. I think India's going to come into that kind of sphere pretty quickly and so unless we have that, doesn't have to be a hugely long-range mission but at least a decade or two, right?

Q: Let me ask you about your collaboration with other organizations. Tell us a little bit about what is the Systems Change Lab that you partnered with the Bezos Earth Fund. What does it do and what are you able to accomplish now, and what do you hope to accomplish with that?

A: Yeah, so the Systems Change Lab is few of the puzzle pieces but one of the key ones is an online platform that's easily accessible if you just type Systems Change Lab in your Google and it's essentially for a set of sectors and we're still building it out fully, but for a set of sectors, you can look at a number of indicators of what needs to happen by 2030 for the world to be on track for 1.5 degrees and how well we're doing against those indicators. It is broken down fairly granularly so

you can look at specific renewables, you can look at storage, etc., and where we stand similarly in the transport domain. Just a couple of weeks ago we rolled out a component on circular economy. Some of that's recycling but also other more sort of sophisticated if you will, but it's taking action on circular economy so that is a really robust set of data; really interesting. I find it very useful to turn to just to get a sense of where things stand. We also do a complementary report every year called State of Climate Action that's built on the same kind of data but it rolls it up into a publication and discusses some of the implications from it. I think one of the things also that's Systems Change Lab is doing is looking at where the transformations are happening quickly and beginning and thinking about where that can take us so you look at EVs; are we on an S-curve now with EVs and what are the implications of that so, a lot of our indicators in our Climate State of Action report are not on track. Some are headed in the right direction but not on track and a lot of them off track. But we are also seeing I think in some key areas that that kind of S-curve development so that's another part of what it does. What we're hoping is that this does is stimulate policy making and last year in the U.N. climate negotiations, there was a process called the Global Stocktake which in part looked back at stock

taking of where we stand but was also meant to provide a push forward on where we need to go globally. The big debate though a lot of folks followed at GOP28 last year in Dubai was around fossil fuel transition or phaseout. That was actually part of a broader discussion around of where things need to go and we saw not only agreement on the fossil fuel transition piece but also tripling renewables this decade, doubling energy efficiency, accelerating reductions of emissions from transport, doing better on land use; doing significantly better on land use, so those things were built-in and we actually used Systems Change Lab as a framing device in a lot of ways for what those kinds of things need to be, what those goals need to be. We're now turning, building on all of that to the next round of nationally determined contribution, the national commitments under Paris which are due early next year. And so, the question now is, what are governments going to put into those? Partly, we need ambitious emissions targets that are in line with the net-zero goals that a lot of countries have. But we think another critical piece of this right now is to have targets for specific sectors and to take what we've learned from Systems Change Lab about what's going well, what's not going well, to take some of the directions that were set at COP28 also and to build those into those national commitments so that countries have

renewables targets, have EV targets, have other kinds of transport targets and ability targets, have targets on reducing or ending E4 stations so all of that is how we want to see that kind of work ramified at the end of the day.

Q: Okay, so I've learned from some very good literature teachers that when somebody offers up a metaphor, you don't let them go without considering in its full implications so I'm going to egg you back to my last question to the mountain you've discussed. How long will it take us to get to that summit that you eluded to? Are you hopeful we'll get there? And what's the world going to look like when we get to that summit?

A: A fair question, a tough one. I think we do have a major challenge ahead. I do think one of the things we haven't recognized and I'll have to figure a good way to work this into the metaphor, but one of the things I think we haven't fully taken on board if we're looking at 1.5 degrees is and full resilience to climate impacts also as what we're trying to get to at the summit. I think one thing we haven't taken into account is to the degree we need to, is the depth of transformation that we need and I'll just take transport as an example, right, where we are moving quickly on EVs but all the evidence is that we're not only going to have to do EVs at a massive scale, we're also going to have to shift to other modes

of transport than passenger vehicles, single or four-person passenger vehicles, and there are a variety of reasons for that, but we really are going to have to transform how we move around and build denser cities and communities, increases our access to bicycling and safe bicycling, etc. I mean, there are a number of pieces to this puzzle of course. That requires a big transformation that I don't know that we've really in the collective sense taken on board as part of our tasks, so that's just an example but maybe it's that we are not yet aware of how tricky the train is and how we need to come up with some dmaps that are really innovative and do some new and different things that we haven't been really looking at in our past maps.

Q: So, I'm going to press you one more time though. Are you optimistic that we are going to get to where we need to get and what will the world look like when we get there?

A: I mean, there are timing issues. That's one of the challenges of climate change, right, that it's just not a question of a goal that we have that we could meet over some extended period of time. I would say I guess; I mean, this is very personal to me but I don't work in the realm of optimism or pessimism on this. I work in the realm of putting one's foot in front of the other and I really do sort of tackle the challenge of that way and feel that summit is hard to imagine getting to

but I'm not just going to be able to fly up there so I've got to get my map, get my energy bars, strap on my pack, and do what I can to and as innovatively as I can, right, push us along to that goal so maybe that's sidestepping the question but that is how I go about it.

Q: Okay. Thank you so much.

A: And add teamwork by the way. You've got to have friends on that climb with you. It ain't gonna work otherwise.

Q: Okay, okay. Well, we're going to check in with you again to see how that climb is going.

Q: We're talking with David Waskow, David Waskow who's the Director of International Climate Initiatives through the World Resources Institute and you're based in Washington, correct?

A: Yes, I am.

Q: Thank you, David.

A: Oh, thank you. Great conversation. Thank you so much.

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