

“We Are Going to Solve the Climate Crisis, Have No Fears”

Guest Speaker **SWETA CHAKRABORTY**

"If you're not willing to step out of your comfort zone, you're not going to be ready for the challenges ahead."

Nik Gowing

Welcome to the Thinking the Unthinkable podcast, our latest leadership conversation. Hello, I'm Nik Gowing. We Don't Have Time, that underlines the urgency of what has to be done to have any chance of easing the climate, nature and biodiversity emergencies. We Don't Have Time is also the name for an influential, feisty, no-nonsense global climate platform that is determined to persuade all of us to achieve significant progress at speed.

We don't have time doesn't compromise on its messaging or its ambitions. They're sharply focused and relentless to democratize knowledge about climate solutions. So let's hear about progress and also where the obstacles are still.

Joining me from Washington, DC is Sweta Chakraborty, the chief executive, who if I may say Sweta is the epitome of the feistiness that I mentioned. And I need to underline that our conversation will bring you the role that the fact that you are behavioral scientists.

In other words, you have science to help explain how we the public react to what we're confronting and the options for what we do now. First question though for you is, what is We Don't Have Time? It's an unusual name.

Sweta Chakraborty

Yes, well, thank you so much for having me and for that introduction. We don't have time is behavioral science in itself. It's encapsulated in the name because it connotes urgency. And we know from behavioral science that we have to cut through this very saturated information landscape that's reaching the billions of people on this planet on a daily basis. How do we get their attention about something that's really important that really resonates that they really need to think about to protect themselves, their families and their communities against?

Which is climate change and its many impacts. Climate change shows up as health issues. It shows up as food security issues, as water access issues. And so it is imperative that we take that information that's relevant and reach audiences, right? So with the name like we don't have time, it creates that urgency and it suggests that there's risks that needs to attention to be paid to. And then ultimately it follows up with action. It says, we don't have time so.

We must do this. Here's something you can do. Here's a team you can join. Here's a group you can get involved in. Here's a campaign you can sign and lend your name to.

And that combination of cutting through information through fear and urgency, and then following up with tangible action steps and hope, that is when we see a groundswell of movement, of perception change, of people starting to care, people starting to get engaged, and ultimately policy change at the local level, at the regional level, at the multilateral level, because we need all of that if we're going to truly overcome the climate crisis.

Nik Gowing

Now we've agreed in advance that we're going to keep this simple, we're going to make it devoid of jargon, make it accessible, so people who are not geeks actually can understand the kind of things we're saying, how long have we got? It is a huge question. Do people, the public, really get it?

Sweta Chakraborty

We really don't have time to repeat the name again. We had this window that the leading scientists in the climate space have said are critical to, is critical to observe. So the Potsdam Institute and many scientists that your audiences will be familiar with in the United States, like Catherine Hayhoe, Michael Mann at University of Pennsylvania, there is consensus that we need to act on climate and the window for action is really quickly closing. So we need to lead with that.

If we over-correct, I'm okay with that because there's so many examples in history where we did not put enough investment resources, time, energy, attention to solving some climate adaptation, climate mitigation and resiliency efforts. And ultimately it was too little. For example, the Rotterdam gates in Rotterdam Netherlands was a billion dollar effort in the early 1990s. And ultimately the gates are too little for the amount of sea level rise and storm surge, that the world, that area of the world is experiencing now because of climate change.

So let's get ahead of it. Let's, over correct if and when we need to. So we don't see another, another flooding event in New York city following a hurricane Sandy. There's so many examples of this. So we need to look at the science, look at the worst case scenarios and recognize that we have this critical window between now and the end of the decade, 2030 to really put in serious investment, which will be cheaper now than it will be if we wait and try to recover after the inevitable climate impacts hit us.

Nik Gowing

But how do you convince people of that Sweta? Because you said very clearly we're playing catch-up. We're running uphill. There's too much polarization. There's tribalism. But at the same time, you say that pessimism is overblown.

Sweta Chakraborty

It's really hard to do Nik. And this is ultimately where I contribute my work to the climate action community. We need social scientists and behavioral scientists to be part of these solutions because we have the technology. We have incredible ingenuity. And this is where I'm not pessimistic. Human beings are incredible in their ability to problem solve and the technology and

the solutions, the ideas that become reality, the ability to mobilize. We've seen this again throughout history.

And I know we can do it, but what we're missing is the social science support. By that, mean understanding human behavior, understanding human cognition, and ensuring that the technologies reach commercial viability by bringing people on board, by getting people excited, by changing perception, perceptions around risk so it aligns to the reality of the risk. And then ultimately getting those that have been elected into power to put the policies and legislation in place that also support some of these technologies reaching commercial viability.

I'm talking about geoengineering solutions. They're in the pipeline, they're far off, but they're there and we need public support for that. We need public support for nuclear solutions. We need public support for cellular agriculture, right? Creating alternatives to animal proteins and the process to get them from farm to fork. There's so much interesting, exciting technology in our pipeline and already available.

And we need to understand how the brain processes these types of innovations and accepts them. So that is a long answer to your question, which I promised I wasn't going to do. But the way that we really get people on board is to understand that they are part of the solution and that there are, there is an exciting way to share this information that resonates with different audiences that gets them excited about it and wanting to get, become part of the solution and contribute to that solution, and it's understanding their brains.

Nik Gowing

Let me try and penetrate that a bit further because you say in one of your central themes, don't make people feel bad. In other words, make people feel there's some way forward. How do you do that? You're a scientist, but actually you've got to deal with vast numbers of people who haven't the first clue what your solutions are.

Sweta Chakraborty

Right. So understanding how people think is ultimately what we're missing in solving climate. Right. So that has been what's been the piece that I have been kind of talking about for the last 15 years of my career is humans are ultimately the same. And it doesn't seem like that in the United States and parts of the world where we're fighting each other over silly issues and silly identities that ultimately don't matter because humans fundamentally bleed red.

Fundamentally, if you just strip off the surface, we all are pretty much exactly the same as a species. And that couldn't be truer for how we process information and how we process risk. Human beings are influenced by the same cognitive triggers, whether they're in the United States or they're in an island nation in the Pacific. We all collectively view risk in a certain way. So if something is seemingly going to affect children or the elderly, we prescribe more risk to it.

If something is unfamiliar to us, like some of the technologies I was mentioning, like nuclear, for example, or cellular agriculture, we perceive higher risk associated with these because they're not familiar. And humans very, very predictably overreact to certain risks because they're sensational and underreact to certain risks because they are attenuated by the media.

So for example, plane crashes are sensational and scary and terrifying. And so we attribute more risks to getting on a plane than something that is not quite as in your face. So radon gas, for example, is an invisible gas. And those that it's the leading second leading cause of lung cancer in the United States alone. But if you ask Americans, what is radon gas and should you be scared of it? It's shocking how few actually know about that risk, right? So we predictably overreact to sensational risk and we predictably underreact to invisible risk, slow moving risk, risk that's perceived as far away. Humans across the world have this in common.

Nik Gowing

So where does fear fit into all of this?

Sweta Chakraborty

So those risks that are sensational are the ones that actually cut through that clutter, that actually make it to the processing of information in any human, anywhere in the world. So if we use fear in a way that we know works, that's aligned to the science, it's actually a very, it's a tool that works in the sense that we get attention. And that's what we need in this landscape where there is so much to think about. It's so complex.

The globe is so complex, it's so interconnected. There's so many things to be worried about from terrorist attacks to immigration and climate refugees and the next pandemic breaking out. How do you cut through that clutter and actually bring relevant risks to people's minds so that we can then encourage them to act in a way that increases their safety and security? That's my purpose is to answer that question.

So we do that through fear. We do that through getting their attention, but then giving them tangible, actionable steps to follow through with.

Nik Gowing

Let me return to that phrase you used and I quoted back to you. Pessimism is overblown. A huge problem you're facing is that good news is not getting through. It's pushback from the public. Why is this such a problem and can it be overcome?

Sweta Chakraborty

So it's really hard to get people excited about good news. It's why we see negative news and fear and headlines that are talking about devastation. Those are the news stories that resonate. And this is the way our brains are wired. Again, humans have this in common wherever we are on the planet. We respond to fear. We respond to negativity. For better or worse, that's just how humans are. And

we shouldn't be mad at each other for this. We should just understand that this is how we humans are wired.

Let's acknowledge that, let's recognize that. And as a climate community, let's use that to our advantage to really get information across that's relevant to people. So if we know that negative news stories are actually going to reach the surface of people's imaginations, then let's lead with that if we need to and then move people to action.

So yes, right now it looks like... based on what, for example, in the United States, Trump has done in repealing all of the Biden era administrative actions that were towards moving the United States towards clean energy. hundreds of billions of dollars was put into the United States manufacturing sectors towards creating new jobs that were clean. And since then, those new stories, as great as they were, and as many of the conservative part of the United States population, the red states that ultimately did not vote for Trump, these clean energy jobs were primarily helping these red states and these conservative voters.

But for some reason, those positive news stories did not resonate. But now, now the repealing of all of this effort and the loss of a hundred thousand jobs already since Trump has taken office in the clean energy sector, the 90 billion in investment that is going away, and ultimately the moving of manufacturing, potential manufacturing in the United States, the moving of that overseas, those headlines are actually hitting home. So it is an opportunity to take advantage of the fact that there has been a hit to the American economy in this new administration that will drive action forward. This is the, we need to take advantage of these negative headlines now to move people to action. That's how we take advantage of pessimism.

Nik Gowing

Now, but Sweta, how do you counter what is essentially something like a war now, where you've got a phenomenal amount of money and enterprise and dynamism being created by on media and education. A hundred billion, I think, is the kind of figure I've been hearing from those who are determined to crush everything that you're talking about.

Sweta Chakraborty

This is the uphill battle that those who are on the side of science are fighting. A hundred billion dollars has been mapped for several decades from the conservatives in the United States. That money has been very nefariously, systematically, strategically put into media, put into education and put into politics. some someone like a president Trump with some mix of charisma and this machine behind him was able to be a outcome of this hundred billion dollar effort.

Now, those on the side of science have not been able to do this. There has been no counter to a conservative, extreme, Christian, evangelical narrative that has propagated so much of the American public for decades. And what is the opposing, attractive, secular, liberal counter to that? That doesn't exist. So this is what the United States is currently dealing with is trying to create a worldview that is really, that is entrenched in science. And ultimately that includes climate science.

That includes actions that we need to take as a United States and as a globe to protect ourselves against global risks that we know are coming associated with climate change, associated with its impacts. But that effort requires funding. And it is an uphill battle to catch up to the hundred billion that an extreme Christian evangelical right wing narrative has been established. So how do counter that? We need to create a communications mechanism to be able to stand up to the other side.

Nik Gowing

Now you're a very successful communicator yourself as we're seeing here and you have your own very successful podcast for your organization. But you no longer broadcast success because you're finding that companies don't want to join you anymore on the podcast. Why is that?

Sweta Chakraborty

I do everything that I'm saying about pessimism and fear. This is this is true. But that doesn't mean that positive stories are not inspiring. They absolutely are. And the majority of stories that you will see on we don't have time are positive the majority, right? But that doesn't mean we are going to ignore what companies are or are not doing we have to hold companies accountable.

Unfortunately, now in the period, you know, in the, following Trump's election in the United States, there is fear in the private sector. There's fear outside the private sector as well. the public sector does not, both the public and private sector do not want targets on their back. They do not want the Trump administration to fixate and hurt their work and their effort.

Nik Gowing

You can confirm that many of them have positive experiences.

Sweta Chakraborty

Have had positive experiences?

Nik Gowing

They have positive experiences of adapting to what is needed to counter climate change, the climate emergency, but they don't want to talk about it.

Sweta Chakraborty

Right. We see more green hushing and we see a lot of pausing. So companies are pausing what they're doing for the time being as they're trying to see how the Trump administration, its policies, its legislation are going to play out. And so there's a general fear that let's not make any moves right now and draw attention to ourselves. Those companies that are still going forward with their sustainability efforts and their transitioning to clean energy within their company, across their sector.

We see this in fashion still. see this in agriculture, transportation. Those companies are still doing it. They're just not talking about it as much. And you can see which companies we are supporting as a,

don't have time platform. You can see where companies are ranked. You can see who's doing well, who's not doing well. Companies, Swedish companies where we, we don't have time are based headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. And disproportionately, a lot of Swedish companies are still really doing a great job.

Like, Alpha Laval is a company that is, we highlight on the platform and there's so many other examples across sectors. And we encourage your listeners to just check it out and to rank and rate because those companies that are green hutching should be called out because let's have a backbone in this time. We still need to stand up to power.

Nik Gowing

We're in our last couple of minutes, Aswad. So what is your overarching message at this stage? You've been fighting this fight for a long time. We don't have time. But are you feeling that we do have a bit more time, even though we've got to be more intense about it?

Sweta Chakraborty

We are going to solve the climate crisis. have no fears about that. I'm convinced that again, as a human species, we have overcome so many challenges in our existence and our time on earth. So we are going to overcome it. The issue is how quickly we're going to do it and how we're going to reduce suffering, how much suffering.

Nik Gowing

That's still a big question for how you do it.

Sweta Chakraborty

How we know how to do it. It's a matter of will now. It's a matter of understanding how to communicate to audiences to get them on board. We need a public groundswell of support for technologies to get us to adopting all the solutions that we already have that are in the pipeline that will result in overcoming the climate crisis.

We need to use social science, behavioral science, not blame people, but make it easier for people to get behind solutions and to make the right decisions and make it easier for them to make the right decisions. And that's what We Don't Have Time does. It's a communications platform to drive people to behavioral changes that are aligned to the reality of the climate science.

Nik Gowing

So how do you get that ground swell, that ground swell, that pressure, that momentum, that mass that's building?

Sweta Chakraborty

It's through communications. And as I said, right in the beginning of this interview, that was the piece that was missing. We didn't have the communications piece along with all of the technology and innovation. Now we understand the importance of communication. So what we're doing

alongside the technologies that are here that are in the pipeline is convincing people to get behind it, to support it, to vote a certain way. That is what has been missing.

Once we communicate based on how we know audiences perceive risk and respond to information once we use communication science to reach those audiences and drive them to behavioral outcomes, then I don't see any issue with resolving the climate crisis. I don't think communication is the magic bullet. But if there was a magic bullet, my magic wand for solving climate is just custom tailoring messaging in a way that gets that end recipient that end audience member that the person who's listening to your podcast this podcast right now, driving them to some sort of behavioral outcome, some action.

Nik Gowing

So Sweta, in 30 seconds, what's your big call to action? What's your takeaway about what people should be feeling, particularly those who are not massively involved in it at the moment, but are suffering from it?

Sweta Chakraborty

My first takeaway is do not blame yourselves. We are really wired to ignore certain things that should matter to us. But now there's no excuse. You've heard this podcast. You've heard several of Nik's amazing guests on various episodes. Go back, take a listen, recognize that there is action to be taken and there's no excuse not to do it anymore. And it's easier than ever to get engaged and get involved. We don't have time as a free platform. You literally sign up, make a profile.

Start, start, join a campaign, join a movement, look up and see what's happening locally in terms of climate action and get involved. It's never been easier to take action.

Nik Gowing

Sweta, thanks so much for joining us. You can reference every detail that Sweta has just given us. A transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website, along with contact details for us and Sweta at We Don't Have Time.

Do please join us again when we have our next conversation about Thinking Unthinkable. Subscribe to our YouTube channel as well as We Don't Have Time. As you've just heard from Sweta, you'll find all our podcasts very much in the same vein of frankness. But from me, Nik Gowing, until the next time.

Keep thinking unthinkables more than ever. It's both possible and necessary from Sweta and me. Bye bye.