



Pioneers of the Planet

Episode Three: Tariq Banuri

Madhyama Subramanian - I am Madhyama Subramanian, my guest for today is Dr Tariq Banuri. A national of Pakistan, Dr Banuri is the director of the UN division on Sustainable Development, prior to this he was the director of the Stockholm Environment Institute's future sustainability programme. A man of ideas, ideals and imagination, Dr Banuri's work merges both conceptual and practical issues of development policy. He has served on various national and international policy development bodies and research networks, including the board of governors of Pakistan's national bank, Pakistan's environmental council, the world's future council and the inter-governmental panel on climate change in which he was a convening lead author. In recognition of his services in research and education, the President of Pakistan conferred upon him the medal 'Sitara I Imtiaz.' Welcome Dr Banuri, it's a pleasure having you with us today. You've done a lot! Where did your journey into sustainable development really begin?

Dr Tariq Banuri – Well, it's always a little bit accidental! I had finished my PhD and was working on issues of philosophy of knowledge; why do people think about things in a particular way and what difference does it make. And I started looking at forests; the way in which people think about forests, that was one of my earlier books, 'Who will save the forest?' co-edited with Frédérique Marglin and when we looked at how people conceptualise forests. You start engaging with a different community of people and to use more recent metaphors, you then realise that the planet is not too big to fail. And we are doing things, we have broken through a national barrier, we are doing things which are at enough of a large scale that we now need to respond to it. This was about twenty years ago when I started working on this. And then one thing leads to another. You begin to engage with different communities, different people, different ideas and that's how this happened.

Madhyama Subramanian – Any particular reasons why you had started on forests?

Tariq Banuri – It's difficult to say, at that time, my motivation really was the notion of social justice, and the question was that there were different types of people engaged in protecting forests, you know, communities which were largely illiterate, scientific foresters, bureaucrats, activists, with very different levels of education, organisation, power, but political power and communicative power. And the question was, when people with such different levels of power, engage with each other what happens? And how do you make sure that there is some form of justice in those communities? So it was more motivated by the notion of justice and I must say, to this day, my notion of sustainable development or environment is driven by the notion of what is just, how do we behave justly as a group and as a species? If one person does something, you can talk about justice in an individual sense but when a collective does something, and then you have to talk about justice in a more collective sense and this notion of planetary justice, how do we, as a species, engage with nature? What our impact is and how do we moderate it? It's also driven by the notion of justice. So initially it was just looking at different communities and their balance of power and how they could engage with each other on a much more equal terrain but then you realise that the global community is also making an effect and that too is not just the effect on how it was organised at that time, so that's essentially the starting point. But then many more things happened in the meantime! For instance, after I started looking at it I decided to go back. I was at a UN research institute in Helsinki at that time, but I decided to go back and set up an institute in Pakistan. I set up the Sustainable Development Institute, which is still an influential institute in Pakistan. The main purpose was to organise policy research, advocacy and policy advice in an integrated manner on a re-conceptualisation of development which includes environmental and social concerns integrally into its domain. That is my sustainable development. This is now 17 years later and I'm still pretty much at that place.

Madhyama Subramanian – So how difficult is it, what are the challenges you face when you have to translate a lot of these 'ideas' into reality in terms of policies?

Tariq Banuri – It's difficult, but it's like when you think about turning a ship around, you don't do it on a dime, you have to think about how to convert your energy and how to join forces with others. And a lot of our actions, when I say this whole process is happening globally and globally there are people with many different motivations,

with many different needs, ranging from survival needs to luxury needs, you have to try to bring people onto a platform together.

Madhyama Subramanian – So how do you do that?

Tariq Banuri – You begin to realise that it is a generational issue; it's not something I would say 'oh look, I'm going to work on this for two years and then it's going to get done.' It is really the challenge that lies before my generation and perhaps your generation as well. I mean, it's an unfinished agenda and we have to pass it on. So the two questions to ask are, at the first stage you realise that literally anything you do can be useful because there is just so much to be done, everybody can just pick up a little piece and start running with it. The other thing is that you also realise to the extent to which you can build partnerships, across groups, across countries, across domains. You know, there are people working on economics, on social, on political, on labour, bringing some of those people together between international and national to the extent that you can build those partnerships, you can achieve much more success. And create the basis for action that is more effective. After I started doing this, for the first ten years or so, I worked mainly at the national level and things were difficult as they still are in Pakistan and now I'm working at the global level and things are just as difficult! But I think we have made some progress over the last twenty years in terms of making new mechanisms through which to push these processes and more importantly, new partnerships. If I can speak parochially, when I first started in Pakistan, one of the major innovations that the environmental community did was one of the first India and Pakistan Environmental Conferences. Now, the India and Pakistan Environment Conference was one of the first conferences between Indians and Pakistanis in government, civil society, media, everybody together in trying to come up with a common agenda. This was, at that time, a little bit unheard of as a process. And yet I think that the partnerships that we have established have gone far beyond any of the other difficulties that might arise in the Geo-Political arena. So building these kinds of partnerships is one way of creating a much larger community that can engage with this agenda. Look, this is a civilisational agenda, this is not an agenda for a particular organisation, this is for us, as a human civilisation to address this problem. So our task is to build this large community to the extent that I am now working in the UN, I am trying to contribute to the UN's law making role, the agreements, the conventions, the decisions in

particular forums. But I also do not forget that at the end of the day it is a civilisational agenda that involves media, it involves business, it involves NGO's and civil societies, and it involves educators and governors in all ways. And it's building that partnership together so that we can work on each of our domains and move it forward. That's really a larger agenda and I think on that we have done quite a bit over the last twenty years.

Madhyama Subramanian - Which are the most challenging groups to interface with?

Tariq Banuri - Well at some level every group is very challenging because people are looking at things from their perspective and it's not as if they have a lot of free time to think about additional agenda's so you have to work with them starting from their own concerns. My advice, when I was working with my colleagues in Pakistan, is that I do not problematise the people or the institutions; I try to problematise the issues. I try to say practically how we can build some of these institutions together. So if I'm working with, say, the business community, I would try to work with whoever are the most progressive elements in that community, because once I find partners in that community they can talk to the others. They're not seen as outsiders, I am seen as an outsider who has to be resisted but they can talk much more actively. If I talk to parliamentarians, I take the same role; if I talk to bureaucrats I take the same role. And so you really have to find who, within this particular community, can lead that process and you empower them and you strengthen them by the ideas, by the analysis, just by the background. People are difficult because they have their own work to do. And you're trying to engage them in an additional task which is not easy. So you have to find the ones who are the most willing, the most capable to do it and you try to help them so they can do it in their own communities. As one of my friends keeps saying, there is no point in hitting your head against the wall; you have to look for the door! So I try to look for the door.

Madhyama Subramanian – In all your work so far, since you also have a lot of ideas and then also translate them into action, what are the lessons that you had to unlearn? What are the theories which maybe didn't make sense in the real world?

Tariq Banuri – Well, the simplest one is that I was trained as an economist, I have a PhD in economics and I found that a lot of the economical apparatus I had to pretty much leave at the door and try to relearn a way of thinking about economics, society

and politics on the basis of practical experience. So that's a very important lesson that I feel that I had to relearn.

Madhyama Subramanian – There was also a very interesting thing when we were doing our research on you. You've written books, you've given lectures, you're on Facebook, so that was quite an interesting thing to see! Is this a conscious way to keep yourself open to informal modes of communication and spread the word?

Tariq Banuri – Well, I don't know! I think it's more out of curiosity and I have younger nephews and nieces who keep saying 'Uncle how come you're not on facebook?' So the best way to do it is to try it out and see how it works! It has worked mainly as a family thing but once in a while I can maybe post things there and I can get messages from other people, friends, which can help me. But I can't say that this has become the most dominant form of media for me. It's one of those things!

Madhyama Subramanian – How do you think that communication to the people about a lot of these concepts that you're talking about, can be strengthened?

Tariq Banuri – The big problem I feel is that what this agenda does, what the sustainable development agenda is about, it is really about the planetary phase of civilisation. It is when people at the collective global level realise that we are responsible. I mean in some sense it is the true sense of globalisation. It is globalisation not in the sense of what is happening to us but that we as a species are responsible, that we will behave collectively. And so there are a number of directions in which this global civilisation is taking place, but without communication, no civilisation has ever taken place. So communication is actually the glue that binds these societies together. And one of the reasons that we can have a global civilisation or a planetary civilisation is because we now have the communicative tools to engage with people at a much larger scale. Now as far as I'm concerned, I am curious about things so I try to say, 'maybe this one can help'. In the end all of these tools can help. If you ask me how to make it stronger, that's not really my field. My field is to speak on things I know about, and to use whatever tools people like you make available to me.

Madhyama Subramanian – So what do you see as the hopes for the future, what kind of future do you envision?

Tariq Banuri – Well, one of the done things that we have done is called ‘the great transition’ which is very simply this, as we look to the future we realise that there are lots of difficulties with ‘business as usual’ and we find new forms of values, situations and structures emerging as a response to them but there is as always a tension. And one side of the tension leads towards a greater civilisation role, so that we can act as a collectivity, the other side of the tension leads much more towards a paranoid role where we all build up our fortresses to try and protect ourselves from each other. At some level both of them are possible, so my sense of myself is that I am part of a community which strongly believes that the first one is not only strongly possible but only through our collective action can we make it happen. So to that extent, it’s very much possible and that makes me an optimist. But it is an optimism of the will not one of probabilities, but I think it is really within us as a human species to try to solve this problem as we have tried to solve some of the other problems in the past. That’s really what makes me an optimist and that is what really makes me speak up.

Madhyama Subramanian – On that optimistic note we sign out of Pioneers of the Future. Thank you so much for spending time with us Dr Banuri.