Harnessing AI for a Better World featuring Vilas Dhar

Vilas Dhar [00:00:02] I was always just struck not by a question about technology, but about a question of fairness and justice. If we had all these cool toys, why couldn't we use it to help people make their lives better?

Grace [00:00:15] Welcome to Giving Done Right, a show with everything you need to know to make an impact with your charitable giving. I'm Grace Nicolette.

Phil [00:00:23] And I'm Phil Buchanan. Today, our guest is Vilas Dhar who is president and trustee of the Patrick McGovern Foundation. He's an entrepreneur, a technologist, and someone who really has become a global voice on issues of AI and also equity, AI's role in philanthropy, the nonprofit sector. We're super excited to have Vilas here.

Grace [00:00:51] Yeah, we wanted to have him on because many of us are watching the growth of AI around us with a mix of concern and excitement, and we wanted to know what individual donors need to know about how we can ensure a positive AI future, as opposed to a disastrous one. So welcome, Vilas.

Vilas Dhar [00:01:15] Thank you so much for that warm welcome. I'm excited for this conversation.

Phil [00:01:19] Us too, you know, I'd love to understand a little bit more about like, why do you do this? Like you personally.

Grace [00:01:24] Yeah. Tell us your story.

Phil [00:01:25] Yeah. How did you get here and what what influenced you? Because I know enough about you. We don't know each other that well, but we've had enough conversations that I know that you're on the road all the time. You have a zeal about this. That means that you're dedicating, I mean, you're dedicating your life. You. You work really, really hard. You travel all over the world. Where does that motivation come, and how did you get to this place?

Vilas Dhar [00:01:51] So thanks for saying that. It's really kind of you. I know that so many in this sector, in this field, so many individual donors, give so much of themselves. I don't think I'm in any way unusual. But I will say two things. I mean, the first is I think I've spent my entire life in the intersection of a very tense set of things. On one side, I really believe that a better future is possible. I think technology is one key to it. It's not the only key. It'll require people to come together and really be creative and inspirational people. And that hope drives a lot of that positive momentum. But I'll tell you, the second part of it that creates tension is I'm sometimes really deeply concerned that if we know a better future is possible, why don't we do more to create it? I'm quite impatient with the world, and in that impatience, I think is a little bit also of the driver of that energy that we see happening around us rising inequality, this sense of a powerlessness and a lack of agency, these dynamics that I think are leading to all kinds of short term challenges in our political landscape and our identity landscape, but it's not driven by a sense of despair. We know we can do better. And to me, that's the kind of unique yin and yang that drives a lot of our work is let's actually make sure that we're letting people express their sense of hope in the world, giving them the tools that let them turn hope into action, and then ensuring that we're holding to account those who keep that action from becoming a reality for all of us. I'm happy to tell you the personal version of this. It's a very quick story. I mean, I grew up

in rural Illinois, and I've told the story a few times, so maybe you've heard it. But I grew up at this intersection of very different communities and moments. I grew up in rural Illinois in the 1980s, which was a fantastic place to understand kind of what real American thinking was. But on one side, I had my family, who were in rural India, living almost in a pre-industrial world, suffering from health challenges that we eradicated in the West hundreds of years ago ..without computers, without phones, without anything else. And on the other side, I lived a few blocks away from the National Center for supercomputing, a place where we were deploying some of the most interesting, fascinating, optimistic ideas of human innovation. And I was always just struck not by a question about technology, but about a question of fairness and justice. If we had all these cool toys, why couldn't we use it to help people make their lives better? I think 30 odd years later, you can see probably the direct mapping of that to what we do today. If we have all these cool toys, why don't we just use them to make people's lives better?

Grace [00:04:24] I resonate with that so deeply. Every time I hear about people talking about the singularity or something, I'm like, why don't we fix some really basic things like eradicating pandemics or other endemic diseases?

Phil [00:04:37] Maybe you could start just by explaining a little bit about the role you play and the role of the Patrick McGovern Foundation, because it's not your typical foundation.

Vilas Dhar [00:04:47] I think that's right, Phil, and I appreciate you saying we are not the typical foundation. When we started this institution. Now coming on about 7 or 8 years ago, one of the realizations for me was that philanthropy is often played a reactive role to the ways that technology have changed our society. We've often been trying to catch up to understand how to better use tools, to understand how to protect against harms. But we've rarely, as institutions, stepped in to say, how do we create? How do we architect what these technologies might mean for our future? That's the ethos we live at The Patrick J. McGovern Foundation is to recognize that the convergence of technical skill and competency can meet a real commitment to social justice. To let us try new things in the philanthropic toolkit and try to architect a better digital future for all of us.

Phil [00:05:36] Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of folks, I think, though, who would say, look, between environmental implications, concerns about AI displacing, jobs, the embedding of systemic inequities. Is it isn't this more a potential threat than opportunity? I'm curious how you respond to that.

Vilas Dhar [00:06:03] Yeah. You know, Phil.. one of my very nontraditional approaches to being the head of a multibillion dollar foundation is to commit most of my time to actually being with communities around the world. And I'll tell you that the universal start to a conversation with AI is exactly where you've started from, which is let's understand the risks, the fears, and the challenges. I have to tell you, I'm a big fan of novels and science fiction and movies, but on this topic, I think Hollywood has done us a disservice. I think the stories that we're so used to about AI start from killer robots. They start from AIs that are trying to affect us in bad ways. And it's a very different conversation than the ones that I think socially minded technologists have been having for decades about AI to say there's a whole world of possibility. But look, acknowledging that that's where the conversation starts. Let's start there. Should we be worried about these tools and technologies? The answer is an absolute and unequivocal yes, we should be worried. But I think maybe we should be clear about what we should be worried about. We don't need to, I think, be worried about the computers that will take over, the robots that will enslave us all. Instead, I think what we should be worried about is if these tools create a possibility of a new future,

what are all the ways that we're being pushed to a future where we just continue the inequalities of the world we have today? Where we think about the aggregation of power in the hands of the few? Where we think about people that none of us have elected, that are making technology decisions that will affect all of us, and about all the ways these tools might be used to hurt those who are most vulnerable. Those are the fears that I wake up with every morning, and the ones that I think philanthropy is uniquely suited to step in and do something about.

Grace [00:07:48] Say more about that. I mean, I wonder to your point about unelected folks. Is this really more about corporations making the right choices or regulators stepping in to regulate, like what is philanthropies' role? And also just more broadly, I'd love to hear about your vision for AI for good.

Vilas Dhar [00:08:08] You know, at its core, Grace, I think the challenge is this isn't really a conversation about technology companies or about government regulators. It should be a conversation about why we've all decided it's okay to give up our agency to make decisions and say, let's let the technology companies figure it out and governments regulate them. It's a conversation about basic human equity, about dignity and participation. About a recognition that these decisions that feel sometimes pretty alien and abstract, they feel far away from us because they're about technology, actually affect every part of our lives. So I think the role of philanthropy, and there's plenty to say on this, but let me at least give you the architecture with which we approach it. The first is to say we can't have robust public conversations and discourse until we at least have a baseline of fundamental and shared digital literacy, that when we talk about AI, we need to start from a place where our institutions are helping every citizen, every person, know what AI is and why it matters. And that's a place that's actually been quite neglected. Over just the last few years, we've invested heavily in building curriculum in schools, in supporting institutions to train their stakeholders on what AI is and to do it outside of the tech-Bro, hubris of saying AI will fix everything, or the doomer proposition that AI will kill us all. Just a common sense, middle of the road approach that says, let's actually talk about what these things are that we're talking about. Make sure we know. If that's the starting point, then we get to something really quite exceptional and hopeful from my perspective, which is how do we begin to use these tools in ways that show the way forward in terms of AI for good? Instead of just having use cases about 'how do I use that an LOM to come up with the next Taylor Swift's set of lyrics,' to saying, 'how do we use predictive algorithms to understand how a community faces particular impacts of climate change?' and come up with a predictive model so the next time a bad typhoon or a hurricane comes through, we're better prepared to deliver service and relief. I could give you 100 more examples, and maybe we'll talk about some of those. In order to do that at scale, philanthropies have to step in with resources and support community organizations and nonprofits to actually feel like they can use these tools to do more and better. And that's the very unique proposition of philanthropy in the moment. It costs a fair bit of money. It requires a limited resource of talent, and it requires strategic vision for a nonprofit to step forward and say, I want to do something with AI. Philanthropy has to be ready to meet them in that moment to say more than just, we'll give you capital…but maybe we can also use the structural weight of philanthropic organizations to bring more talent into the sector, to share best practices among organizations, to create new models of technical service– all things that we're piloting at the foundation and with a set of institutional partners, but also individual donors.

Grace [00:11:05] You all have like an in-house group that equips nonprofits. Is that right around these things? Tell us more about that.

Vilas Dhar [00:11:14] When we started doing the work at the Foundation, our first intuition, as might be pretty common sense, was to say the sector needs more monetary resources. Let's make grants that support this work. But what we learned very quickly was actually quite a striking realization about the state of modern philanthropy. Organizations that we funded would come back to us and say, we're very grateful for the financial support, but there's nobody that we can go to who we can spend money with that'll teach us about AI. The field was too nascent. What they were saying to us was something deeper than 'we need money.' They were actually saying, 'we want a partner that will help us navigate that journey.' And what we heard and did because of those conversations was to say, okay, how do we continue to support with monetary resources, but how do we also begin to aggregate talent? And so we went out and we hired our first team of data scientists and engineers who in the early days came to us with a model of saying, let's build accelerators for nonprofits where we can actually bring our own expertise and bring in the tech sector to support a journey of learning and engagement. That quickly turned into more and more involved projects where we ended up supporting entire organizational transformation at scale. We now have two teams that are totally integrated inside of our strategy and innovation work. One mandate is to directly support our partners to be available as technical resources, to do everything from 0 to 100, to start with webinars and accelerators and programs all the way through to direct hand-in-hand partnership to help build technology solutions. And at the same time, that team has a second mandate. And this is quite unique, I think, to philanthropy to say, you know, we brought together some really brilliant people with the technical resources to deliver. What if we could ask them to envision and build products that are designed exclusively for purpose instead of profit, that make the world a better place to build a tech company wholly owned by a philanthropy whose only mandate is to create AI tools that make the world a better place. And it's been an amazing journey. The first set of products we've come up with on one side, support nonprofit and journalistic organizations to use AI to repurpose investigative content and better talk to the people who are reading, essentially changing the infrastructure of how journalistic newsrooms use AI. On the other, I'm very excited to preview for you something that we haven't quite released yet, but will maybe be of direct interest to our listeners today. A tool that changes how philanthropic donors do financial diligence with nonprofits. Let me tell you about the problem here, and you'll know it. I think quite intuitively, every foundation, every donor has their own mechanism for looking for financial documentation from a nonprofit. Sometimes custom templates, sometimes a nonprofit that is still very early in its day is still using spreadsheets or back of a napkin kind of math. It creates such a friction for organizations and nonprofits to be able to talk in a way that says, how do we really identify what's risky and what's challenging? And so what we've done is we've built an AI solution that lets a nonprofit submit financials in pretty much whatever format they have them, without having to adapt them to a custom template. Using generative AI to understand what those financials represent, and then using inputs from the potential funder to delineate what kind of risks they're concerned about and to provide risk scoring. What this actually looks like is a nonprofit that says, look, I've got some back of the napkin math. I'll take a scan or a picture of it. I'll submit it to a funder who says, I'm really interested in certain kinds of capital ratios, their long term sustainability, and it generates a risk matrix and a set of questions that a human at that funder can look at and potentially use as a starting point for further inquiry to streamline diligence.

Grace [00:14:56] That's awesome.

Vilas Dhar [00:14:57] It's kind of a very basic implementation. And yet you think about the thousands of nonprofit funders, the many tens of thousands organizations. If we could

save them all 20% of the time it takes to do a grant application, how much incredible capacity we'd create for different kinds of innovation in those organizations.

Phil [00:15:16] Vilas, this is so interesting, and I'm curious about the audience. I mean, you're alluding to it. Might it go beyond the institutional grant makers to individual donors as well? Because I could see an argument that it's the individual donors who really struggle to figure out is this organization, you know, a going concern? Is this organization one that I can be confident in supporting, whereas the foundations have staff to do that work now, it it may be inefficient the way it's being done currently. And and this tool could help with that. But what about the sort of broad audience of millions of individual donors? Do you see them as potentially able to benefit from this as well?

Vilas Dhar [00:16:00] Absolutely And that's the heart of the intention. I think with AI tools in particular, the incredible power to take these decision making frameworks out of what I almost think of as the Oracle of Delphi. Right? Like the special people who have been trained to do this task and to make it accessible to all of us. I mean, when I make my own end of year charitable giving donations, I want to be able to ask some questions about whether, you know, there's a going concern issue. And I know that it's not reasonable for me to contact the nonprofit directly and ask them questions for whatever grant I'm making, because the other 5000 donors probably can't do that. Instead, what I'd love to see is a tool that serves as a medium of exchange that knows quite a bit about the nonprofit. That lets me ask those questions first to satisfy my own curiosity and needs. But if I am able to somehow suss out or find something that I think is challenging, to be able to flag that to the organization as well and say, hey, this is what your donors are asking about, do you want to respond to it? It streamlines that capacity for engagement and interaction in a way that actually creates, and this is a beautiful thing, technology in the middle that actually creates a much more human and authentic connection between me and the cause I'm donating to.

Phil [00:17:09] I could imagine donors who support smaller grassroots organizations or those organizations themselves worrying that if their balance sheet isn't as strong, this kind of tool might end up being a sort of 'rich, get richer,' and organizations that need more funding desperately are doing important work, but don't have as strong a balance sheet, getting punished. How do you ensure that that doesn't happen? Because so often we see these well-intentioned technological innovations in various parts of our society that end up baking in biases, or actually and I know you care so much about inequality, exacerbating inequality when it was meant to do the opposite. Has your team, I'm sure they have, but sort of thought about this and how to how to mitigate that risk?

Vilas Dhar [00:18:02] It's actually the starting point Phil, of how we do technical design is before we write a single line of code to actually ask those questions that you just asked. And I think they are exactly the critical ones. But I'll tell you something. For someone who's as elbow deep in technology as I am all day long, I have very little trust in technology. I have a high level of trust in human nature. So what I mean by that is when we build a tool like this, I think that to think that the tool is going to give us answers is always a problem. Instead, I hope that the tool helps us ask better questions. That in analyzing a balance sheet and identifying exactly the same challenges you came out, we should be asking the question what is our institutional or as an individual donor? What's my appetite for providing riskier capital to an early stage organization? And if I believe that's something that's aligned with my values and my interests, my entrepreneurial sense of how nonprofits should work, then this tool should help me identify the organizations where I can do that in the most effective way. And if I'm somebody who feels a little bit more risk averse, if I want to make sure that I know where every dollar is going and how it's going to be allocated for,

then I also should have the capacity and the ability to have that kind of transparency. These technologies, when they're used, right, they don't supplement. They don't change my decision making capacity. Instead, they give me more and better information. They give me a way to connect to an organization in a more wholesome way, and hopefully they create a better relationship for me to actually be able to ask the questions I need to ask.

Phil [00:19:37] Stick with us. We'll be right back.

Grace [00:19:52] One of the challenges, even as I'm listening to you, is that it seems like what we're talking about in terms of what's possible with AI keeps changing every few months, right? Like it seems to be developing at this rapid clip. How can donors and the nonprofits they support stay abreast of all these changes? It does seem like, you know, what you folks might have known a year ago is now pretty much obsolete. And so what's the advice that you have for folks who want to stay up to speed?

Vilas Dhar [00:20:22] You know, Grace, you're asking the question. I, I am probably considered one of the world's foremost experts on these topics and I think every three months I look around and I say, I have no idea what's going on. It is moving so quickly and so transformatively that our very boundaries of what we think is possible are changing on an almost monthly basis. On one side, that's deeply exciting, right? I'm inspired by the possibilities. There's another part of me that's deeply unsettled by how quickly we're changing what these things can represent. And if I'm a person who spends most of my waking life thinking about this, then what hope for those who are kind of casually dipping in, right. That's a starting point.

Grace [00:21:01] Yeah.

Vilas Dhar [00:21:02] But at the same time, look, again, I'm deeply committed to the idea that people are the best decision makers for themselves and their communities, and that we can fix this. I think there are a few things that do need to happen to enable that. And again, I'll start from a philanthropist's perspective. The first is I think we need to enable public storytelling about these topics in more meaningful ways. One of the things that we've done and a number of other foundations have come together to do is to equip nonprofit newsrooms to be able to tell deeper and more nuanced, more robust stories about AI and to make it available to the public. I think this is maybe one of those critical intersections between what I might call traditional or legacy philanthropic approaches and the needs of a technology inspired future, is our investments in institutions that help us learn, translate and engage with these kinds of topics of extreme change. Then the responsibility as individuals we have. You know, it's, it's kind of hard to see it, given where the news cycles are and how much is going on in the world. I can understand why people don't need or want to make learning about AI their next priority. But I think there are ways that we can change that dynamic. Some of it is meeting folks where they consume information. You know, I very unexpectedly and somewhat uncomfortably decided to teach an online course about ethics in the age of AI. It's just not a forum or a channel that I usually would have thought of myself as being. And that course has been seen by 300,000 people around the world who have committed hours of their life to really understand these issues. We're now beginning to see it in documentaries, in storytelling, and even in narrative fiction, where people who really understand this field are beginning to translate that into stories that connect to people where they are. And I think curiosity is the name of the game. I mean, I really think for anybody in the world today that's curious about AI, one of the amazing things that's happened since the launch of ChatGPT is the flowering of public resources. Some of that is available even on our website, certainly through our

social media. I know that the center has done some really incredible work in helping to translate. I think we can build a social movement around learning expertise and then opinion forming about AI together.

Grace [00:23:07] What I'm hearing is a big thread of your work is making sure that the social benefits of AI, like the positive vision, won't be the exception but actually the norm, right? Because I think we have a unique window right now to shape how AI is used and the parallel perhaps with like social media, where folks may not have foreseen all of the negative impacts. So is that an accurate description, like really platforming and foregrounding the positive vision so that, you know, that narrative is not hijacked by others?

Vilas Dhar [00:23:42] That's right Grace, the challenge is where most of today's investment research and development dollars.. capital expenditure are going are trying to build a use cases that propagate commercial activity. And I'm not going to paint with two broad of a brush here. That can be all kinds of things, some of it quite good. But also there is an element of that that is about mechanizing and automating jobs and displacing workers. That's about changing supply chains and actually allowing for more extractive and exploitative practices. If that's happening in the world and we see it happening, where's the counterbalance to that of public investment in ensuring that we're investing the same kind of capital into building the AI use cases that transform our access to health care? That change how we access education, that change, basic delivery of human services? Well, this is the early days, and I'm not going to say to you that I think the inertia of the moment creates the inevitability of the future. If a lot of early investment has gone into private sector activity and some of these more negative ways, I think we still have an incredible opportunity now to balance that out. I think it starts with early actors and particularly risk aware actors like philanthropic donors stepping forward and saying, this is something I want to support, and it's not a diversion from what I may have done last year to support malnutrition or poverty or political participation. We can actually bring AI solutions in that support, that kind of intention and that work directly. And the second part of this is philanthropies also need to support a public conversation about increasing public research dollars and government funding, something that we've done quite successfully with organizations like Ford and Pivotal Ventures, where we partnered with the National Science Foundation to say, how do we put together a massive program where they can support, using federal dollars, the creation of responsible practices around AI development? These are areas where early movers have an outsized voice. And if we really believe in the idea that AI can be a tool for good, it can't be a conversation that we sit on the sidelines and expect that somebody else is going to take forward.

Grace [00:25:44] It sounds like donors need to be a part of building an ecosystem while we still can. Let's get really specific. Like what are the specific areas that donors can give to? Or you talked about even the advocacy of government funds, like if I'm a donor who really cares about our AI future being as positive as it could be, advise me on where I should be putting my funds.

Vilas Dhar [00:26:08] Yeah. Let me give you two parts of that answer. The first will be about AI, and the second will not really be about AI but you'll see how AI's interwoven into all of it. The part about AI is this: we recognize that there are challenges that we're facing, that we can actually use the lens of liberal democracy to think about in terms of AI. I think about questions like, 'who will regulate the use of these tools?' It's not just whether governments will regulate it or not. It's where is the ecosystem of actors that are representing civil society in those discussions. In our work, we've had the great opportunity

to support incredible institutions like The Center for AI Digital Policy, The Center for Democracy and Technology, and many more who are building government capacity to regulate AI. And because these are supported by philanthropy, much like the ACLU and the NAACP and other incredible organizations in the civil rights space, they have the independence to advocate for all of us instead of merely bringing a technology perspective in. We're seeing this at international and massive scale and really inspiring ways as well. We work quite closely with the United Nations, where with UNESCO, we built a tool that's supporting the creation of AI policies, not in Europe or in North America, but in 50 countries across the global majority, countries that maybe aren't the ones you'd naturally think of when you say who's advanced on AI? But these countries are. Countries like Senegal and Morocco and Chile, philanthropically funded activities that are supporting capacity building at scale inside of these governments. To ask the question, what will the impacts of AI be on our people? How are our interests represented in the international space? So there's plenty to be done there and for donors who are interested, there's plenty to do around building capacity around positive use cases of AI. But let me go to the second part of the answer, which, as I said to you, just because AI is everywhere doesn't mean every donor needs to be thinking about how they become an AI expert? I will tell you whether it's across climate resilience or agricultural inputs, economic opportunity, childhood malnutrition or education, the organizations that are already active in that space are asking the right questions. They're asking, how can we use our incredible data sets that we've built over decades, coupled with our really deep knowledge of this problem, to try to identify a way that AI can be useful in this space?

Grace [00:28:29] Hmhm.

Vilas Dhar [00:28:30] They are already asking questions like, how do we build AI based literacy aides to support our school systems in sub-Saharan Africa? How do we use AI to bolster our capacity to drive frontline health care in very rural villages? How do we use it to develop learning and skills training programs that can help people find jobs in new fields? And I'll give you my one last example. How do we support refugee and asylum migration by using AI to create a new form of self-reliance so that people can find jobs and economic activity wherever they are. In these instances, a donor doesn't need to become an AI expert, but they do need to, I think, partner and listen with the nonprofits who are already asking these questions and putting forward solutions, and to partner with them in ways that drive resources, support and capacity that restricted giving, that says we're not going to support your technology product, but we'll support a direct support service, maybe isn't the right way to engage in this. And it continues to underscore a fundamental move towards unrestricted giving that lets organizations define how these technologies might transform their capacity to drive impact.

Grace [00:29:37] Interesting.

Phil [00:29:37] Yeah, that that's super helpful, and I love the specificity of the questions about what might be possible. I think for me, what has been hard is to imagine not just the questions prospectively that might be answered, but even just to imagine what has been done that has been positive, that utilizes AI, because then that gets us out of this sort of rut of thinking about it only as threatening and scary. And I have listened to a lot of talks you've given and watched a lot of interviews with you just in preparation for this discussion and also another conversation we had at an event of ours, and I have found that your stories about things that you've seen have been really helpful in just shifting me to think, even when they're sort of discrete small stories of what have particular group of people did or a particular community, expanding my horizons for thinking about the good that can

come when AI is hardest in certain ways. Can you give us just a couple of your favorites just to exemplify that?

Vilas Dhar [00:31:05] It's my favorite thing in the world to do Phil because as I said, you know, I was always curious about tech, but these stories are never about tech. They're about people who come forward to do really cool things. So let me give you a few and happy to share more. Let's see, what can we, what can you talk about? We'll talk about, three young girls in Delhi who through an organization called Technovation, which is an incredible group that's supporting a transformation of how women and girls across the planet access tech skills, began to take a course that taught them how to build an app. And they looked around and living in Delhi, you may be familiar with, there's a chronic problem every year because of crop burning that happens in the Western Ghats that essentially destroys the air quality in Delhi. You walk out and you almost can't see your hand in front of your face because of the smog, a problem that maybe some of our L.A. folks will remember from, you know, the older days. Well, these young women said, well, how do we do something about this for our families? And sitting down, they built an app that uses a combination of data sources around climate and air quality, as well as predictive models to build a tool that can sit on anybody's phone, digitally literate or not, and give them an indication not just of what the air quality will be like that day, but specific recommendations of things they should do to protect themselves as they walk out. On particularly bad days, what level of covering of scarves and masks they should have, in local language accessible to their community, built and designed for the needs of their mothers, their aunts, their uncles, their brothers, their cousins. It became an incredible tool and incredible story of how little it takes to create an amazing sense of agency, to build an AI product that just works for you. I'll follow the theme and this, this, these stories actually all involve incredible women entrepreneurs that are building these. An organization called I See Change that started from the recognition that climate issues aren't some abstract thing and they're not some macro thing. They're, unfortunately, phenomena that are experienced by every single one of us in our cities. I See Change built an app, and the app lets you do the following: on days that you have a particularly bad weather event, storm, a surge of the ocean, whatever it is, you can go through your neighborhood and you can identify the places where the existing infrastructure just isn't designed to meet it. If there's a section of a street that always floods, if there's a neighborhood that always has an issue, you can take a picture, you can annotate it, you can upload it into a system that then is using predictive models and AI to synthesize the results of all of that citizen contributed knowledge to then create a tool for city planners and infrastructure leaders to say, hey, this is a chronic problem that many people are experiencing. If you have a limited set of dollars to invest in building climate resilience in your city, here are the hotspots. Here's what people are experiencing, and here's how AI models are showing us what that might look like over the next five, ten, or 20 years. It becomes an incredible tool to move from a negative experience to a positive action. And again, built by an incredible entrepreneur with a small team, she's leading to design for global scale.

Grace [00:34:08] As I'm listening to you, one thing that I'm kind of processing and I would love, you know, I'm inviting you to kind of educate me because we all read different things about AI. One of the things that is often in the news around AI is just the tremendous climate impact, right? Like the use of large amounts of energy and electricity and possibly fossil fuels, and how that may contribute to some of our climate problems. Is that true? And like, how do you think about it? Because in conversations I have with others, it's like, well, whether we like it or not, that future of AI is here, but like, is it actually impacting the environment as poorly as some say? And surely that should inform you know, what the applications are, right?

Vilas Dhar [00:34:52] Yeah. You know, I said it earlier in the conversation. It's one of my favorite kind of ideas is that inertia doesn't equal inevitability. I think there's an inertia of the moment we are leading and trending in a direction where companies are realizing the amazing profitability possibility of AI, and they're doing some really tough things. They're continuing to build these data centers in places that can't sustain them. They're building them without really clear guidelines on what environmental sustainability and on what renewable power should look like. They're in the context of a political milieu where we're still talking about extracting fossil fuels to drive datacenters. Like, there's a lot happening that's all tied together. It's not really an AI story. It comes back to a political and social story. Should we be concerned about it? Absolutely, yes. And I think we should have a voice stepping forward and saying, look, we recognize the need to build new AI capacity, but having basic guidelines and government regulation about the environmental sustainability infrastructure is not a bad thing that we need to have that kind of participation. I'll also give you a little bit of a potential break through the clouds is we're so in the early days of this conversation, Grace, I mean, we really have very little data and a lot of speculation, but one of the things we're seeing is this move away from very large models. And I won't get technically wonky with you, but these are the complex, big, crazy, hairy things that drive a lot of modern AI and require a lot of power in moving away from those to smaller models that are modular, that are designed for purpose, that actually have significantly lower power consumption. We are really only in the first three years of broad based commercial AI, and so we don't really have an answer. We see trend lines, but I'm always a believer that we can adjust those lines. We can bend the arc. So I think there's a lot to be done. I think forcing accountability for companies that are building these data centers, I think continuing to invest research dollars and innovating better, more power friendly ways to do this kind of AI work, continuing to monitor where these are placed, ensuring that data centers don't just go into the most vulnerable communities where there's the least political will to oppose them. There's a lot to be done yet, and it's something we should all be thinking about.

Phil [00:37:02] Through this entire conversation. I just keep coming back to this question that's really probably reductively simplistic, which is, as an individual donor, should I be more focused on mitigating the negatives or opening up the possibilities, and we've gone back and forth between both. Is the answer that you kind of have to do both simultaneously? Or do you think different donors should sort of go deep on one or the other? And that may be a tough question to answer, but I'm just curious if you've thought about that. And when you see folks doing things philanthropically that you admire that relate to these issues, does it tend to be that they're focusing on unleashing the positive or reducing the negative, or do you see people doing both simultaneously well?

Vilas Dhar [00:37:54] You know, Phil, I was always very bad at standardized tests because I could never I could I was never very good at dealing with a situation where somebody said it's either A or B, right. The answer is always there's something else. There's a more creative solution. Look, I think what it goes to and I want to get to the core of this is if you're an individual donor, if you're an institution, if you are a social changemaker leading a nonprofit, if you are a mother, an aunt, a father, a grandfather, and you are concerned about what's happening in AI, the answer is the exact same one, right? Which is first, let's understand what the state of the world is. Let's use our moral compass and our heart and our ethics to guide what we do about it. Let's think about what resources we contribute to the future. And let's design not out of fear, not out of worry, but out of an optimism about a better future that's possible. If you're a donor and you can follow that dynamic, then I think it gives you a branching pathway. It might mean that you say, you

know what, I've learned just enough about AI and I don't want to go any further, but I do want to understand how we apply it to a particular social cause I care about deeply. And I'm going to go talk to the people who know that problem and give them the resources to ideate it.

Phil [00:39:01] Yeah.

Vilas Dhar [00:39:01] Or it might be to say, you know, I'm so concerned about the actual technology itself that I want to go down a path that takes me further and further down that topic. But this is the beauty and the privilege of generosity, right? Is that you're not constrained necessarily by what you can do because somebody else told you, you're only constrained by your own imagination, your capacity, your expectation of how you create impact. I think that's quite a joyous thing.

Grace [00:39:24] How can donors join you on this quest? I think that you lay out a very positive vision. It really gives us a lot to think about. What can they do if they would like to march in the same direction as you?

Vilas Dhar [00:39:36] Well, we'd welcome that to happen and I'm so happy to say that even if when we started, we were one of a very few limited voices, institutions, donors are stepping forward and contributing of themselves to become a movement rather than something that we're doing. But we welcome engagement. I think certainly through our social media, our LinkedIn is quite robust, as well as our Twitter, through conversations that we have with our partners to engage and learn about kind of a clustered approach to becoming great at these topics, through institutions like yours that I admire so deeply, that are creating spaces for us to come together and talk about it. For me, the starting point is always curiosity, and then it's engagement, and then it's finding like minded people to march together, Grace. And we welcome that, we'll support however we can. I know that you will as well. And I think in many ways this is the topic of the moment, we're not getting away from it any time soon. So we'll be in this for a while together.

Grace [00:40:33] Thank you so much for sharing your story with us and sharing your wisdom. You've given us a lot to think about, so thanks so much, Vilas.

Vilas Dhar [00:40:40] You're very kind to say that. So enjoyed this conversation and thank you both for the incredible work you do. I'm such a fan.

Phil Thank you. There are so many resources about effective giving on The Center for Effective Philanthropy's website, cep.org, as well as givingdoneright.org, where you'll find all of our episodes and show notes.

Grace: You can also send us a note at gdrpodcast@cep.org.

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