

RATIONAL MIDDLE. NET ZERO

A JUST TRANSITION

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks:

As we get closer to 2050 and recognize the impacts from climate change that communities across the globe are facing today, reaching net zero is critically important.

Shanika Amarakoon:

The United States has relied on fossil fuels, and this has resulted in greenhouse gas emissions, but also contributes to health impacts.

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali:

And of course, our most vulnerable communities, communities of color, lower wealth white communities, and indigenous populations are the ones who are hit first and worst.

Shanika Amarakoon:

We'd need to move in a very smart and thoughtful way, and especially for some of these communities that are going to see significant changes in their local economy as a result of these transitions.

Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks:

If we're talking about net zero, we need to ensure that we're talking about approaching it in a way that is equitable and just. Then there cannot be winners and losers in this equation.

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali:

We've got to make sure there's truly a just transition. That just transition means that no one gets left behind.

Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks:

This call for net zero is really important, but it has to be such that everybody is a part of this solution.

Shanika Amarakoon:

With climate change, we're already starting to see the impacts firsthand. Extreme weather events, higher temperatures, flooding, coastal erosion, sea level rise. These impacts tend to be

the same across different communities, but the level of exposure and degree of severity tend to differ for different communities.

Katie Mehnert:

Generally, those left behind are communities of color and underserved communities, communities that typically don't have accessibility to affordable housing and to affordable education and healthcare.

Daniel Blackman:

These areas traditionally are the last received resources and also the first to have, at times, irrecoverable impact.

Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks:

We're talking about communities that have an older housing stock, who are living in spaces that are energy inefficient. And when you bring climate change into it, we've got to look at what the root causes of climate change are. We look at things like a very extractive economy. These communities are vulnerable to air pollution and to the health impacts that that causes. We definitely see that in the south and southeast, but also in other places, in the Appalachian regions as well.

Dr. Suzanne Tegen:

People have been suffering from the pollution, asthma. They're dealing with lung issues, such as lung cancer and other lung diseases because of the pollution.

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali:

These are the various types of dynamics that we've created across our country. And now we have the overlay of the climate crisis, which brings a number of other additional dynamics into the space.

Daniel Blackman:

You can stick your hand in a hat and you can pull out any array of issues from flooding, for example, not having water infrastructure in place that leads to issues such as sewage contamination. There are certain areas that have been so overwhelmed by heat that they are not able to grow food. That's a direct correlation between climate change, and access to food, and access to a quality of life.

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali:

How do we get to this type of situation in our country, the wealthiest country in the world?

Shanika Amarakoon:

One of the key factors can be attributed to our historical redlining and racial segregation laws that were in place starting in the 1930s. The government actually created maps delineating areas that they considered higher risk. And those higher risk areas essentially corresponded to communities with more minorities and more immigrant populations.

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali:

So we had laws on the books that actually pushed African Americans and a number of other groups into flood zones. They were pushed into areas of swamps and the least desirable lands, and that created a set of situations where there was disinvestment.

Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks:

These policies have shaped where industries tend to locate, and so, while many of those policies that have shaped some of that planning in our country no longer exists, there is still an indelible imprint that has been left because of those policies

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali:

And these communities, if we don't begin to make real change happen, if we don't begin to lower the emissions and hopefully one day be able to eliminate the emissions, they are going to continue to, not only be in the sacrifice zones, but they're going to be the sacrificed people based upon the policy decisions that we've made. So it makes sense for us to address the climate crisis because when we make these investments now, we are strengthening these communities that have often been sacrificed.

Katie Mehnert:

We're in a time where we're asking ourselves critical questions. What do we want the future to look like? What do we want energy to look like? What do we want prosperity to look like?

Dr. Suzanne Tegen:

So we're really, right now, concentrating on switching from coal fire generation for our electricity to natural gas, solar, and wind, mostly. As we go forward with the energy transition, we have to make sure that we are not leaving behind the workers who have powered our system for decades. Many of the coal towns where coal is mined are in rural areas. Some are also in urban areas, but many are in rural areas, especially the coal mining towns. And some of them are built around coal. They will have to diversify their economies. There's really not a job in some of those communities to go to, so they will have to plan for a different future.

Daniel Blackman:

So we have to figure out a way really quickly to make this economically make sense for the communities that need it most. We also have to make sure that we consider our aging populations that are not retiring yet. We've got to bring everybody to the table. And I think the challenge is showing people where they fit in this conversation so they don't feel left behind.

Shanika Amarakoon:

We need to make sure that we are targeting opportunities towards these communities to make sure, again, that they are brought in as part of the solution. This can include, not just helping them become resilient to the current impacts that they're facing and we are all facing, but also making sure that we're providing adequate job training opportunities for this new economy, certification and other programs that will help them have a leg up as these economies and industries continue to grow.

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali:

We'd start to begin to do those basic sets of actions. Then it gives people a stronger foundation underneath of them, helps them to understand the various sets of opportunities that we have in front of us. And then, for some opportunities, especially on the entrepreneurial side, we can make sure that there's some seed money that's there for folks to be able to get those businesses up the ground that they might be considering starting or expanding.

Katie Mehnert:

It's about education. It's about access to capital. It's about access to resources. Underserved populations don't have access to discretionary income. They can barely afford their paycheck to paycheck.

Shanika Amarakoon:

There's a lot of investments being made to electrify our grid to move to more electric vehicles and electric bikes. And we need to make sure that those are accessible to all of us, not just the high income communities that are able to afford solar panels on their roof.

Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks:

Before we can even talk about solar, for some households, especially for people who live in older housing stock, especially that housing stock that might be found in many communities of color and lower income communities, we have to look at ways to make net housing stock more energy efficient to begin with. So programs like programs that focus on things like weatherization.

Dr. Suzanne Tegen:

There's so many things to think about like that, and I think we need to start by listening. We can't just put up a sign and say, "Let us know what you think about this new energy plan." We have to go into these communities and spend time there, and we have to establish trust. It takes a long time. It's hard, but it's really important.

Daniel Blackman:

We cannot assume, going into a community, we know what they want. We have to go into conversations, listening to understand and not just to respond, right? Because, too often, when you go in to respond, you're talking over the people that live every day in the areas that we get to leave and go back to the comfort of our homes and our offices.

Paula Glover:

People move at the speed of trust, and the speed of trust is slow because they don't know if you're really coming in to do what you say you're going to do or is this going to be another situation where you're extracting and not putting back. So we're all walking in with a little bit of distrust and a lot of angst. And I believe we need to plan for that, and that means time. We just have to do that kind of work. And so, we need to be in those communities a lot of earlier and I think be a little bit honest about the fact that we haven't been in them before.

Katie Mehnert:

When Energy 1.0 was built, these were entrepreneurs, they were mavericks, but they were men. Where were the women a hundred years ago? Well, they were in the home. And people of

color didn't have the right to vote, and they didn't have access to credit. Women didn't have access to resources. So when we built Energy 1.0, we were not in a place where society was ready to bring everybody to the table. But I think we know that an equitable, affordable energy transition is going to be the solution. And that means bringing multiple voices, multiple faces. It means not just relying on current people that are in the industry. And so, I get excited because Energy 2.0, it's an opportunity for everybody to be at the table. We've got to seek out new ideas, but that means we've got to engage. That means we have to talk about it. That means we have to have tough conversations about what it's really going to take to bring the transition forward.

Dr. Na'Taki Osborne Jelks:

And if we're not intentional about making sure that every community is brought along, we could potentially get close to net zero, but still have things out of balance in terms of certain communities bearing this disproportionate burden. And that cannot happen.

Daniel Blackman:

We are arguably the first generation that can eradicate poverty and the last generation that can end the climate crisis. So we have to think of the climate crisis as our most urgent matter as a priority that cannot be compromised at all, or we're going to end up fumbling on both poverty and climate. And I believe that if we do the right thing now, the climate crisis can, not only be addressed, but we can put ourselves on track to resolve many of these issues that I think have crippled, not just our country, but the planet as a whole.

Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali:

So now the question is, how do we get it done? The reality of the situation is that it's going to take all of us. It's going to take Democrats, Republicans, independents, everyone coming together to be able to navigate what's the climate crisis that we're dealing with, but we have to think in a much broader construct. It is not just about dealing with the climate crisis. It is also about, how do we build a new economy, a new set of opportunities, and will the United States actually be the leader in that space? We've done it before. If you go back and look through the Industrial Revolution, we were a leader in so many different sets of opportunities. We once again have that chance. I'm optimistic that it's going to happen, but it's going to take work and it's going to take each and every one of us leaning in our respective ways.