

The Most Essential: Water

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EXPO TALK: I used to work with multilateral banks and I was working in the power sector and I started going into villages to explore the potential for off-grid solar.

And the biggest hurdle that I saw there within these communities was affordability. So while the technology existed, the people who needed it the most, couldn't access it and couldn't afford it. And, mostly, they couldn't afford it in cash, but what these communities do have, are things which they grow and raise.

The community that I was starting with had a lot of goats. And so the idea for Goats for Water came around, where this community which was living without access to water, could buy a solar water pump using their goats as payment.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Water. It's such an essential resource. And yet, one in four people globally do not have access to clean water.

The person you just heard is Fariel Salahuddin, an energy specialist and my guest on today's episode. She was speaking at Global Goals Weeks at Expo 2020 Dubai back in January.

After an accomplished career working in the energy sector at the World Bank, Fariel decided to go back to her home country of Pakistan, where she discovered that at least 21 million people don't have access to clean water. But what they did have was a lot of livestock, more specifically, goats.

That's when Goats for Water was born — an innovative initiative to trade goats in return for water in rural communities in Pakistan.

Since then, Goats for Water has become one of the many projects Fariel leads as part of the thriving company which she has rightly named Uptrade.

On today's episode, our final episode of "People and Planet," we talk to Fariel about water, energy, and barter economies

But before we start, I would like to extend my gratitude to all our past guests; your inspirational journeys and candid storytelling over the last five months have helped make this show what it is. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts. And a big thank you to you, our listeners, for tuning in.

I'm Tariq Al Olaimy, and this is "People and Planet." A podcast from Expo 2020 Dubai's Programme for People and Planet — where changemakers discuss what it takes to create a sustainable future for our planet.

[INTRO STING]

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Currency has been one of the key inventions in human history. For centuries, we've used anything for money, from beads, shells to spices, money has often been what we imagined it to be and give value to. And as a social entrepreneur and barter economist, Fariel is reimagining money through goats.

Thank you so much for joining us today. It's a real honor to have you with us.

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: Thank you, Tariq. Thank you for having me here and I'm excited to share our story and to chat with you about it.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: I'm excited to start from the very beginning. And to roll back to your upbringing and your growing up in Pakistan. Now in many ways, Uptrade

and its initiatives — Goats for Water, Goats for Solar, and E-Mandi — combine several missions into one. How did your family, your upbringing and background shape the path that led you towards becoming passionate about water and energy access?

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: So I actually grew up in a very urban area with a very urban lifestyle. And I don't think I'd ever met a farmer in my life, until the time I started this work.

So I had this opportunity to visit the communities by chance. [MUSIC] I was in Karachi. I had just moved back to Pakistan and somebody was going and visiting the villages and asked me to come along. And I thought, "Why not?"

MUSIC

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: And just two hours away, imagine a landscape which is completely barren. It's just wherever your eye can go, you see open, vast land. And if you pay attention, you will see, as you're driving in, settlements. And these houses are built with mud, with thatched roofs. This community had a diesel pump installed, which they had been using. But this pump had not been working for many weeks. And this community was bussing water, so they were bringing water two hours from Karachi to their community.

When I spoke to the people there, they were saying, "We are using the water really, really carefully because it's really expensive." And looking further into it, what I noticed was that the community was obviously low on cash. But as I was sitting there, I noticed, every few minutes, there would be a goat that would pass by or a herd of animals would pass by. And so I asked them to pay in goats. They agreed. I had no idea what I would be doing with these goats at that time.

And then a few months later, Eid al-Adha came around, and this, as you know, in the Muslim world, it's like Christmas. And the idea is that you sacrifice livestock and the meat is distributed amongst those people who generally cannot afford to have a high-protein, high-meat diet. So the prices of livestock go up. And I thought to myself that, "I own goats and I should try and sell them. It's a good time to do that." And so I just put up a post on Facebook, friends and family ordered their livestock from me. We were able to recover the cost of the pump that had been installed in this village, and that was it. That was the beginning of this model, that it could work.

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EXPO TALK (HOST): And so what would your advice be, now, to communities and people who are looking at what they have? What would your advice be? What are some lessons that you learned from Uptrade?

EXPO TALK (FARIEL SALAHUDDIN): The lesson that I would like to pass on and which I've learned, is that a lot of the time we look for solutions which are working already, and also solutions which may not be very adaptable to the communities that we work with. And it's important, I feel, to look at how things are already working and what is working within the communities, and what are the ways that these communities already function, and bring them into more formal arrangements.

Back to the interview with Fariel Salahuddin

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: The panel at Expo was a great panel. It was really interesting to hear about grassroots solutions that are in place, and that is what captures what Uptrade is doing, and what I believe Uptrade brings to the larger table in the context of innovation around solutions to sort of endemic problems around poverty.

Most of the time, we are looking at problems through lenses that have been in place for a very long time, that have not been changed, that have been, “Okay, this worked in this place, this worked in this economy, let's try and bring this to this particular community. Let's try and bring it to this particular solution.”

I think what Uptrade and my other fellow social entrepreneurs who were on the panel... What we are seeing and what we are doing is that let's actually look at how the communities themselves are currently operating. What is the ecosystem that they operate in? What are the systems that are currently in place? How are they currently interacting to resolve the issues?

Because at this point in time, for example, in the communities that we work in, goats are literally used as ATM machines. Well, not literally, but they could be akin to how we use ATM machines. When we need cash, we go to an ATM machine and we pull out cash, and then we go buy whatever it is that we need to buy.

MUSIC

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: These communities hold a number of livestock, and goats are a very liquid form of asset. There's always a demand for them. And a goat can be taken to a middleman or taken to a mandy, which is a marketplace and sold for cash. And then that cash can be used for whatever need has arisen.

So for example, the communities that we work in, during drought times, they will sell a goat to go buy fodder for the rest of the herd. Or they have a medical emergency, and they need cash. They will go sell a goat, get that cash and buy medicines or travel to the nearest city to get the healthcare that they need.

So when we see these transactions happening, and then we consider where we are at, in terms of the technological advances and the technological ecosystem that

we currently exist in, we are talking about alternate currencies, in the world and the urban.

Very connected, very sort of financially integrated world that we, and by we I mean those who are living in the mainstream economies are living in. Why can we not bridge communities and the way they are currently working and the way they are currently sort of conducting financial transactions, bridge that with how the high-tech world is conducting financial transactions.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Can you tell us a little bit more about your personal journey, of what it has really meant for you to be in such an urban setting, and to now really be grounded and rooted in all these wonderful worlds?

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: I actually, like I said, I had not visited a rural community before I started this work. And my personal journey has been a very conventional one that most of us sort of follow. Which is to go to college, get a good education, get a good degree, look for a job, which will set you off on a trajectory, a stable, secure trajectory. And that's where my career started and I sort of made my way into energy.

And then SPRING Accelerator, which is this accelerator that works with businesses that are impacting women and girls, reached out saying, "We heard about what you're doing and we'd like to see if this would be a good fit for us, and we are holding a bootcamp to explore this."

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FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: I actually had never heard of the term bootcamp, what an accelerator was, and I was just thinking, "What is this?"

That's when it kind of came together. And I thought to myself, could I actually do this full-time?

And then I considered, and I spoke to my family and friends and they said, "Oh, what, you're going to leave this amazing job to what? To sell goats, seriously?" And it was risky and it seemed risky, but to me, it just felt very clear at that time, that I had to give it a shot. And I took a leap of faith and I left my job and I went down this path.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And how did working in the more formal sector of energy consulting, shape your path to returning to Pakistan and founding Uptrade and Goats for Water? And I'm really curious, what insights did the formal sector provide you that you might not have had otherwise?

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: It gave me a framework and it gave me the tools to build a company in terms of the systems and the processes, which the organizations that I have been associated with are really, really good at. Of putting down processes, formal structures in place, which can be scaled.

But it also gave me insight into what is not working. I feel that a lot of development work becomes captive to political agendas, and that really takes away from the vision and the mission that these organizations were created for. And there are a lot of people who are mission-driven within the organizations. But at some level and at some point, there's been an element of mission creep, where what was set out to be done was kind of captured by other goals. And both on the side of the governments that are the clients of these organizations, and the organizations themselves.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: You'll be also holding a talk for Water Week, which is the final theme week at Expo 2020, as this episode is being released. And Uptrade has

started with Goats for water, before bartering for other resources. And I wonder, why water? Why begin there? What's the context for water security in the community and environments that you're working in?

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: So when I went into the communities, I wasn't looking to solve for their water needs. I was looking to solve for their electricity and their energy needs. But when I got there, it really seemed like a luxury to think about electricity at that point in time for this particular community. And if I can describe to you how it felt to be there.

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There was this general energy of almost fatigue in the community, where people were mostly in their homes. And when I started talking to the communities and they were talking about how they're really struggling to meet their water needs, obviously that became the focus.

And then to find out that their livestock, which they depend on for their livelihood, the kind of impact lack of water has on that, was astounding. So when we first put in the first solar water pump and went back to the community to speak to them, and we asked them, "So what has been the change?" The one change they talked about was, now that we are able to give our livestock water whenever they want water, has resulted in higher body weights for the livestock. It's a healthier animal, it's a heavier animal and they get a higher price for it.

We also were surprised to find out that the goats are dying less. They are falling ill less, which means that the mortality has gone down, that the reproduction rates within the livestock have increased. One of the communities talked about how the miscarriage rates amongst women went down. Because these women, previously, would be involved in very hard labor to pull up water from great depths. And now

when this kind of labor is not needed, the women who were experiencing miscarriages at a rate which they thought was normal, suddenly they said that the rate of miscarriages has gone down. And that was surprising, shocking, heartbreaking to see, that water can have this level of impact or this depth of impact for these communities.

TARIQ AL -OLAIMY: I find that incredible. You know, Uprade is seen as the successful example of a mission-driven enterprise that has both managed to sustain itself, and the community it serves. I wonder where do you see the future of mission-driven companies and social enterprises such as yours, especially ones that are really pushing the forefront of all these different pioneering, both macro models and micro models.

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: So on one hand, I see a great drive towards mission-driven companies and that seems to be the natural progression of any kind of enterprise that is now being built and created. The just-for-profit model does seem to be now outdated.

On the other hand, it's still a bit of a struggle because in some ways the capital is not following as easily as it would a completely profit-driven company, right? I have spoken to investors who have very plainly and very sort of bluntly said, "Look, we're not interested in the impact. We're only interested in the money." And before I can even say look, this company makes money and the margins are good. But there's such a strong sort of prevalence of this idea of fast, quick capital gains to be made. That is a hurdle.

And especially in countries like Pakistan where social capital is extremely difficult to come by. There's still the traditional way of looking at money, that if you're doing socially driven work, it's obviously not going to make money. And we are

only driven.... We're only sort of interested in institutions and companies that are purely driven by profit.

The myth here is that the word "social enterprise" also, at some level, is such a misnomer. To me, any business which is creating value, is a successful business. Why should it matter which socioeconomic group happened to be the customers? Because people are gaining from it and they are willing to engage in the economic activity that the company is sort of there for.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: On a closing note, what has your work with Goats for Water taught you about the importance of exchange and bringing minds and communities together, when coming up with solutions to the world's greatest problems?

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: I would say there are two primary learnings for me from this work.

MUSIC

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: The first one is to be open to every voice and every opinion that is part of your stakeholder group. That means that actually the solutions will come from the people whose problems that you're trying to solve for.

What this experience for me has been, and what I've really learned is [that] the solution is actually within the problem, and within the people who are facing the problem.

And you have to be open to hearing and seeing the solutions within. And it's a difficult ask, because we are so conditioned to see in ways that are predefined, because we've had so much training in so many ways, you know? College has taught us one thing. The place we work at has taught us one thing, and it requires

you to dismantle some of the things that you have learned to be able to actually see some of the answers.

And second is, I think, consensus building, in terms of all stakeholders and all actors that are involved in a problem have to be on board. A solution may be a perfect solution, but if there are detractors or there are people who are opposed or actors that are maybe opposed to it.

And there could be a whole range of reasons that are not obvious. It could be due to very minor issues, but you have to know what those issues are, and those have to be considered, even if they're not something that you've set out to do. That's not your mission goal, but then that has to become part of the mission to be able to solve the problem.

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FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: And Tariq, I have to tell you, it has been such a fulfilling experience in every possible way. And I really feel lucky to be doing this work. We have worked in about 49-50 communities putting up solar pumps.

We've expanded to solar home systems. We are exploring other assets. We've also created and we're building a marketplace to connect farmers to the tertiary market through our meat line. And it's just so much fun. Every day is just super fun. Of course, there are days where it's super frustrating and scary as well, but things somehow keep lining up and I am so grateful for it.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Thank you so much Fariel for sharing your incredible story and mission with us today.

FARIEL SALAHUDDIN: Thank you, Tariq. Thank you for this conversation. Thank you for the platform, and the opportunity for me to talk about my work. Thank you.

TARIQ AL OLAIMY: People and Planet is an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai. Creating a sustainable future for our planet, together.

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