

Promoting the Well-Being of Humanity Throughout the World

An Interview with Dr. Rajiv J. Shah, President, The Rockefeller Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Rajiv Shah brings over twenty years of experience in business, government, and philanthropy to The Rockefeller Foundation. In 2009, he was appointed to serve as USAID Administrator by President Obama and unanimously confirmed by the U.S. Senate. Dr. Shah was charged with reshaping the \$20 billion agency's operations to provide greater assistance to pressing development challenges around the globe. In this role he also led



Rajiv J. Shah

the U.S. response to the Haiti earthquake and the West African Ebola crisis, and served on the National Security Council. By elevating innovation and public-private partnerships, and shifting how dollars were spent to deliver stronger results, Dr. Shah secured bipartisan support that enabled USAID to dramatically accelerate its work to end extreme poverty, including the passage of significant Presidential priorities – Feed the Future and Power Africa and the Global Food Security Act, which is the second largest global development legislation after PEPFAR. When Dr. Shah left USAID in 2015, he continued to follow his passion for creating opportunities for communities to thrive in the developing world by founding Latitude Capital, a private equity firm focused on power and infrastructure projects in Africa and Asia. He was also appointed a Distinguished Fellow in Residence at Georgetown University. Earlier in his career, Dr. Shah served as Chief Scientist and Undersecretary for Research, Education and Economics at the United States Department of Agriculture. He also served in a number of leadership roles at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where he helped launch the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (a joint venture by the Gates and Rockefeller foundations) and the International Financing Facility for Immunization (credited with raising more than \$5 billion for childhood immunizations worldwide) and where he supported the creation of the Global Development Program. Dr. Shah is a graduate of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, and the Wharton School of Business, and has been awarded honorary degrees from Tuskegee University, American University, and Colby College.

INSTITUTION BRIEF The Rockefeller Foundation (rockefellerfoundation.org) is a global institution with an unparalleled track record of success carrying out its founding mission to promote the well-being of humanity around the world. Over its century long history, The Rockefeller Foundation has embraced scientific frontiers to lift up vulnerable children and families. Today, The Rockefeller Foundation seeks to apply science, technology, and innovation to this task and end preventable child and maternal mortal-

ity, transform food systems to reduce the global burden of disease, end energy poverty for millions in Africa and Asia, and enable meaningful economic mobility in the United States and around the world.

Will you provide an overview of The Rockefeller Foundations' storied history?

This institution has an extraordinary history that is 106 years old. It was created by John D. Rockefeller before there was an income tax, and therefore, an income tax deduction from which to benefit. It was also before the federal government had a significant role in supporting the living standards and welfare of vulnerable American families across the country, and certainly before we took on those responsibilities around the world. It was founded in a very simple idea that we could bring the frontiers of data science, evidence-based policymaking, and innovation to the task of lifting up everybody.

Now, 106 years and two Nobel Prizes later, we have helped create the field of medicine and public health at home and around the world, invented agricultural technologies that sparked a Green Revolution that moved a billion people off the brink of hunger and starvation, built much of the scientific infrastructure of many parts of Europe and the United States, protected scholars during World War II through our Refugee Scholars program, which included Madeleine Albright's father, who was brought here and installed as a professor at the University of Denver as a result of the Rockefeller grant, and trained tens of thousands of people, including Albert Einstein and others, as fellows of this institution.

It is an extraordinary legacy, and one that I think is a profound example of what

intentional focus and professional civic leadership can accomplish if appropriately resourced and focused on delivering results for people who are vulnerable.

What were your key priorities when you assumed leadership of the Foundation?

These institutions are amazing, but can also sometimes feel like it's difficult to make the change you need to make to live up to the moment we live in. I was appointed into this role shortly after the last election, which was a couple of years after I had played a role as a member of the Obama administration in shaping two global agreements, one on ending poverty around the world and one on addressing climate change between the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Accord. It just felt like we had to change the way we work to rise up to a moment where public leadership was going to walk away from the biggest challenges we face as a planet – poverty, inequality, and climate – and so we did change. We re-embraced our roots, refocused on data science and innovation, created programs in four areas – health, food, power and jobs.

Will you discuss the Foundation's efforts relating to power and energy?

We have for years been working on bringing the science and technology around off-grid solar mini-grids to communities where people don't have power electricity. There are roughly two billion people on the planet who don't have regular access to reliable electricity, and it's very hard to read at night, to be safe in your community when it's dark, to get a job, to start a small business and hire people, to use power tools to make carpentry products, without electricity and power. Much of the world, especially the poorer parts of the world, rely on diesel backup generation, which is dirty and very expensive.

It is an extraordinary constraint to unlocking human potential and inclusive growth. We built solutions and partnerships that we believe can help hundreds of millions of people move out of energy poverty. In November, I launched the largest public/private partnership this institution's ever been a part of, which is a billion dollar joint venture with a company called Tata Sons in India that will reach 25 million people by building 10,000 of these rural solar mini-grids, powering hundreds of thousands of small businesses and creating jobs and growth for those communities.

“Obviously we are still confronting the COVID-19 pandemic and its repercussions. It is times like these when philanthropy can and must step up to meet the moment for our grantees and partners, and for the communities we together seek to serve. The Rockefeller Foundation is working to do this in the near-term in China, Italy, and for low-wage workers in America hurt by this crisis, but our longer-term response is also guided by our DNA: in this case, investing in a data platform that will enable tracking of pandemic disease cases worldwide in real time. While serving in the Obama administration I helped lead our efforts in West Africa during the Ebola epidemic, and I know how critical real-time data is to stop the spread of disease. Coronavirus does not respect national boundaries, and we hope to do more to help countries mount a coordinated and aggressive response, because protecting people in other parts of the world protects us all.”

You have been deeply engaged on the issue of climate change. How concerned are you about America’s current position in addressing climate change?

I’m deeply concerned, because at the end of the day, without American participation and leadership in a global agreement, it’s next to impossible to keep China and India on a green growth path and to collectivize the challenge of reducing emissions with the urgency and specificity required to save the planet. In our case, we’re very focused on helping two billion people go from one or two dollars a day to \$10, \$20, \$30 a day of income. We know as that transition happens, and if we provide a renewable energy-based growth path for that population, we will be very much displacing a huge amount of coal and fossil fuel based development.

We think that’s an alternative vision of what’s possible compared to, say, 150 gigawatts of coal power that China is currently exporting into many of these countries through concessional finance and subsidies, and other commercial and public sector investments. We think the world needs a better path if we’re going to both end poverty and address climate change. We have to do it together, and we have to do it with real focus and commitment to succeeding.

Will you highlight the Foundation’s work around health?

Health is an extraordinarily important area for us. We helped fund something called the Flexner Report 100 years ago that introduced the world to a simple idea that medicine should be science-based, and ultimately supported medical schools across the Eastern Seaboard at the time. Today, we’re on the cusp of achieving something truly extraordinary. It used to be the case that if you were poor, at home or anywhere around the world, one of the most dangerous moments in your life was giving birth and one of the most dangerous realities for your children was that many of them would not survive to age five and thrive beyond that.

There are still about six million kids under the age of five who die of simple diseases. We have built a partnership with the world’s largest health institutions and dozens of countries around the world to end preventable maternal and child death. We are doing it by bringing predictive analytics, data science, and new software tools and putting them in the hands of community health workers around the world.

These community health workers are often relatively low-skilled health outreach workers that will go into a village and knock on doors and find out if a woman is pregnant, and if she is, they will help her get access to a medical provider, or if a child is deeply malnourished, will help that child get access to appropriate nutrition so they have the immune strength to protect themselves from simple diseases.

There are more than five million community health workers around the world today and if we can turn them into hyper-empowered, hyper-effective outreach personnel that are using data to identify which woman is likely to be a high-risk pregnancy, reaching her with really targeted and specific interventions, making sure she gives birth in a facility where there is a doctor or a midwife, and then tracking the nutrition and growth path, and whether her child is on the growth curve for the first few months after childbirth, we can end preventable child and maternal death writ large.

We have set a goal for ourselves to save six million women and children’s lives in 10 countries in 10 years, and we are working aggressively with partners to do that. We’ve launched

a \$100 million Precision Public Health initiative to achieve that outcome.

Do you see the issues that The Rockefeller Foundation is addressing as interrelated?

They’re deeply interrelated, and at the end of the day, the interrelationship is all about using data science and innovation to empower women to be successful. Sometimes that means empowering them to be successful as mothers through childbirth and in the early part of a child’s youth. Sometimes it means empowering them to be in a community where they get a job or start a business. I met a woman in rural Bihar, the poorest state in India, who is the beneficiary of one of our solar mini grids. She had a sewing machine, and she switched from a manual one to an electric one. Then she had a second and a third and started hiring people.

Before you know it, she has a small seamstress shop and is creating jobs, is training young girls, is turning the lights on, and is creating that cycle of growth and opportunity.

I’ve spent my career working in global development and in some deeply fragile and poor and difficult places around the world. The



Raj Shah touring a Tara Urja mini-grid in Bihar

one constant truth is that if you help women succeed, make them more productive, protect them from violence and sexual abuse, give them the tools to grow more food and process that food more effectively, they will invest their time and their money that they earn from all those activities in raising up their communities and their families. The crosscutting piece is that we believe in investing in women, if we give them the science and technology required to succeed. And we think that's the path to ending poverty.

How critical are metrics in order to track the impact of the Foundation's work?

If you can't measure something it's hard to manage to it, and that's true in business and in philanthropy. That doesn't mean everything we do is measurable. We helped make a small early grant that allowed the former mayor of New Orleans to take down statues that were deeply offensive to African-American communities in New Orleans. We don't really measure the impact of that action. That was a more modest values-based commitment to do something.

When it related to our biggest initiatives, we insist on investing in areas where we can see what the results are and where we can measure those results, we can track our progress, and we can make course corrections to improve our impact. Whether it's reaching 25 million people and moving them out of poverty through electricity access in India, or saving six million women and children's lives in 10 countries in India, Africa and Asia, or our major program in Africa that reaches 15 million farmers and improves their access to seeds and fertilizers and markets so that they can both grow more food and have higher incomes, we need to measure our efforts. We need to know that we are delivering results as expected and how we make changes to optimize performance.

How critical has it been to build your team and to attract top talent to the Foundation?

We have brought in extraordinary talent. Frankly, I think the last American election caused a lot of people to ask themselves, what are they doing as citizens to make our world more just, to make our world more collaborative, to make our world more compassionate? We have built a team that we're extraordinarily proud of. Of the 12 senior members of our leadership team, 10 are new over the last few years, and we are now an exceptionally diverse team.



*Raj Shah visiting digitally enabled community health workers in Jaipur (above);
A flour mill powered by mini-grid electricity (below)*

As an organization, we are over 50 percent in terms of diversity and that diversity is a strength for us. We're a global institution. Even our work in the United States is focused on helping America's working families who are often living in poverty and even if they're not officially in poverty, they're not able to make ends meet and be hopeful about their kids future and they are disproportionately African American or Hispanic American.

Having a diverse team that has a diversity of experiences and represents different communities in this country and around the world has been a big part of our success. I'm so excited about our team. The person who leads our health program was a senior executive at Merck and is a well-respected scientist who has built massive programs around the world to save women's lives at the point of childbirth and is a hero of mine. The gentleman who currently leads our domestic portfolio was a former civil society leader in Baltimore and has worked with cities around the country to help expand opportunity and protect communities from being displaced, even as growth and development happens around them.

The person who leads our food team has got two degrees from MIT and a PhD from Cornell. He is a true leader in every capacity and has a vision for addressing long-term chronic disease like diabetes and cardiovascular disease by changing diets and is working with food systems at home and around the world to do that. The person that leads our power team is an extraordinary leader who spent nine years building that power program that we described and shepherding it along and brings a lot of respect and talent.

Our chief operating officer ran Microsoft's servers business which would, standing alone, have been at the time the fourth largest

software company in the world, and he was President Obama's chief information officer and has a deep personal commitment to service and these issues. Our chief investment officer is a Chinese-born immigrant and is on the forefront of mission-oriented endowment management and investing, and is such a courageous leader willing to take risks to do things that ensure that our actions speak our values, even as we protect our financial capacity to be a strong and present grantmaking institution.

We have a tough, diverse, committed, focused team. I would say we have the single best team in American philanthropy, maybe globally. It is an incredible group of talented leaders.

Did you know early on that you had a passion for this type of work?

I grew up in suburban Detroit. My dad worked at Ford for 30-plus years. My mom was a Montessori schoolteacher. All I ever wanted to do was be an auto designer and maybe someday have an auto company. Somewhere along the way, I became a doctor and health economist, got inspired by politics, worked for Al Gore during the 2000 presidential campaign, and then met Bill and Melinda Gates when they were early on in starting their foundation. They invited me to be a part of that experience, and I helped them set up largely immunization programs around the world that have since saved millions of lives.

I just saw the power of this work. I don't even think of it as philanthropy. Once you get the best people and the most capable people, the smartest minds in the room, cut across left, right, cut across private, public, you can solve pretty much any problem out there if you stay focused and persistent. The Rockefeller Foundation is an institution that has proven that many times and I hope to have a chance to prove it many more times. ●