

# The Human Instinct of Pragmatism and Survival

An Interview with **Kathy Baughman McLeod**,  
Senior Vice President & Director, Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center at the Atlantic Council

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Kathy Baughman McLeod is Director and Senior Vice President of the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center at the Atlantic Council. She leads creation and execution of the Center's strategy to achieve its goal of reaching one billion people worldwide with resilience solutions to the challenges of climate change, migration, and security by 2030. Baughman McLeod is the former Senior Vice President, Global Environmental & Social Risk, for Bank of America. In her past role as Managing Director, Climate Risk & Resilience for the Nature Conservancy, Baughman McLeod led a global team of 50 policy experts, scientists and financial specialists focused on using natural infrastructure to reduce storm and flood risk throughout Latin America, Australia, Asia, the U.S., and the Caribbean. A published author and award-winning producer of the documentary film series, The Nature of People, Baughman McLeod was a policy fellow of the French Foreign Ministry and an appointed member of the Florida Energy and Climate Commission. She holds a BS in international affairs and an MS in geography from Florida State University, and an MBA from Duke's Fuqua School of Business.*



Kathy Baughman McLeod

impacts. These times are proving to be a pivot point for all of humanity, where we are forced to reckon with generations of unsustainable behavior as well as decades of action, or inaction, that has now all come painfully and refreshingly home to roost.

How might we best face this historic and pivotal moment - not just meet it, but lead our organizations through to build new, innovative, resilient solutions – lasting solutions that begin to reshape society and the planet for a more just and habitable

tomorrow, where more of us can thrive? To begin with, we must work to see these problems in their full convolution. Then, we can start to understand how interconnected they, and we, truly are.

But even seeing these problems clearly presents its own challenge, for there are so many crises, a whole fog of never before in history problems to tackle. As we are talking, there is another spike in COVID-19 cases in the U.S., and the overheated Atlantic Ocean is already busier than ever before, deep into its hurricane-alphabet as storm after storm lines up for what is predicted to be one of our strongest seasons. In China, record rainfall has caused flooding along the Yangtze River, raising fears that the Three Gorges Dam, the largest structure of its kind in the world, could fail. A huge swath of the one billion people in Latin America are at risk of falling out of the hard-won middle class, and a quarter of Bangladesh has flooded, displacing millions. Swarms of locusts are plaguing swaths of Central Asia, Africa, and the

Middle East. Siberia is on fire. Protests continue throughout America. And, amid all this, the results of a huge study undertaken by a team at the World Climate Research Programme found that our doubling of the amount of carbon in the atmosphere will cause the average surface temperature on Earth to rise between two and a half and four degrees Celsius by the middle of this century.

This bit of news was easily buried amid the torrent of more seemingly immediate disasters which is understandable, but a shame. A planet that is two degrees Celsius hotter is a striking, enormous, ominous sign of far greater challenges to come: still more hurricanes from even warmer seas; heat waves and fires rolling through stressed communities forcing evacuations and causing plummeting air quality; greater rainfall in some regions and longer droughts in others; and perhaps most destabilizing of all, an increased movement of people, climate refugees escaping zones that have become too hot to support human life, unlike anything we've ever experienced before. This movement of people is already underway. Another report, by ProPublica, detailed the experiences of climate refugees currently fleeing Central America, a prelude of far more to come, writing that, "the United Nations and others warn that in the worst case, the governments of the nations most affected by climate change could topple as whole regions devolve into war."

The harm caused by a rapidly changing climate will be widespread, but it will not be spread equally among us. In fact, a bitter irony of this new and fearsome age is that those facing the brunt of it are largely the least responsible for the

**INSTITUTION BRIEF** *The Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center ([atlanticcouncil.org/programs/adrienne-arsht-rockefeller-foundation-resilience-center](http://atlanticcouncil.org/programs/adrienne-arsht-rockefeller-foundation-resilience-center)) will reach one billion people with resilience solutions to climate change, migration, and human security challenges by 2030. The center will help build a more resilient world by focusing its efforts on people and communities to help them better prepare for, navigate, and recover from shocks and stresses.*

**The world is facing multiple crises and an uncertain future. Will you discuss where you see the world today and the challenges being faced around the globe?**

These are unprecedented, unstable times. We are beset on all sides by monumental challenges to the status quo, the COVID-19 pandemic and the swells of people in the streets demanding racial justice in the forefront. But also, in the background of everything, ever-looming, there is climate change and its increasingly severe

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high carbon emissions driving the disasters that are causing them such suffering. This is a vicious cycle, as the already existent inequalities are further exacerbated, deepening the instability to our global economies and health systems.

**How does this instability you outline impact organizations and does instability provide opportunity to drive true, lasting change?**

Instability makes it more difficult to lead any organization. But instability can also be clarifying by making problems that were once easy to ignore impossible to continue to be swept under the rug. It presents an opportunity for real change. It forces problem solving. Unstable periods, after all, are often filled with the most lasting innovations. All the old models and the old ways of doing business are being reassessed, tossed out, and built anew. This brings me back to that initial problem, the challenge of seeing the problem clearly so that we might work toward the best, most lasting solutions. The first step is to recognize how all of these problems – health, the economy, inequality, instability, and climate change – are deeply and essentially interrelated. The tremendous biodiversity loss that led to short term booms is, today, the cause of tremendous economic losses which are only increasing with a global crisis in public health. The same forces that drove ecosystem degradation have raised the risks of pandemics globally. Just as one cause affects another, so might these problems be tackled and solved together. The question is, what would those solutions begin to look like?

For starters, it would begin with a movement away from short-termism toward a real and rigorous reassessment of what we actually

mean when we talk about value. Value can, and indeed must, be about much more than economic growth and the cost of goods and services. Value needs to once again return to its original meaning, an expansive view of wealth that has less to do, purely, with money, and more to do with well-being, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. “The concept of value must once again find its rightful place at the center of economic thinking,” the economist Mariana Mazzucato writes near the end of her book, *The Value of Everything*. This should include, Mazzucato concludes, “more fulfilling jobs, less pollution, better care, more equal pay.”

A movement toward long-term values would also mean real equity in leadership by seeing diversity and inclusion not just as a catch phrase but as a strength. The future we build must be built for everyone and where we think and behave differently toward each other. It would mean true accountability and there are glimpses of this future we can see now. Initiatives with staying power like the Task Force on Climate Related Financial Disclosures, which presents companies with a way of quantifying, disclosing and responding to risks associated with climate change, require long-term thinking and, most importantly, action from the 1000 plus CEO’s who have signed on, with a market capitalization of \$12 trillion. It might also look something like the InsuResilience Investment Fund, formerly known as the Climate Insurance Fund, an initiative created by KfW, the German Development Bank. The overall objective of the InsuResilience Investment Fund is to contribute to the adaptation to climate change by improving access to and the use of insurance

in developing countries, primarily by reducing the vulnerability of micro, small and medium enterprises as well as low-income households to extreme weather events.

It might look like the Campaign for Nature’s 30x30 Petition which brings together 196 parties – from universities, to nations such as Costa Rica, to the National Geographic Society – to work to protect at least 30 percent of the world’s land and oceans. Such a clear and strong conservation policy isn’t merely about protecting the natural world from impending collapse, but as studies related to the movement take pains to point out, it is also about saving the built and human world as the nature conservation sector drives economic growth, delivers key non-monetary benefits and is a net contributor to a resilient global economy. In fact, the benefits of giving back 30 percent of our land and oceans to nature outweigh the costs by a ratio of at least 5-to-1.

These solutions require acknowledging our shared responsibility, a willingness to own up to the problems we face, and seeing the challenges facing the world today for what they are and, ultimately, a change in our collective and individual behaviors, large and small.

Adrienne Arsht, after whom the Center for Resilience at the Atlantic Council is named, is fond of saying that the spirit of resilience starts with the individual. We see this resilience on display, all around us, every day, from the front line healthcare workers and scientists fighting the pandemic, to the performers and athletes and so many others such as parents, who have adjusted their livelihoods and simply made it work in these trying times. We can look to individuals as examples and learn from them, and then apply those lessons to whole systems and institutions to build and infuse resilience in all directions.

The world was on its knees for much of 2020. What does standing up look like for 2021? How is your role in your sector, and role in the world, different now and in the coming year? What role will you play? What metrics will we use to judge your leadership? How do you define resilience? What contributions will you and your organization make to resilient problem-solving?

Rather than bracing for the next set of massive changes and shifts, rather than standing back and reacting, we can begin taking an active role in building this new, more just, more resilient and healthier world. ●

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