

# Transformative Change

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

**EDITORS' NOTE** Dr. Rajiv Shah brings over 20 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 was 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



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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](http://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 highlight the history and heritage of The Rockefeller Foundation?

The Rockefeller Foundation is more than a century old. Our very first grant was to the American Red Cross, and in subsequent decades, The Rockefeller Foundation has built a reputation as a trailblazer that convenes unlikely partnerships and sparks innovations for transformative change. We founded the modern field of public health, developed vaccines for infectious diseases such as yellow fever, funded

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urban visionary Jane Jacobs, and catalyzed a Green Revolution that moved a billion people off the brink of starvation.

I began my tenure at the Foundation in 2017 and have sought to focus our work on four core commitments: to end energy poverty, achieve health for all, nourish the world and expand economic opportunity. We are pursuing these goals through innovative partnerships and through impact investments that find new ways to leverage private and philanthropic capital for social good.

Even as The Rockefeller Foundation is among the most respected and deep-rooted of American philanthropies, we’re still able to pivot and meet the moment with urgency, as seen by the Foundation’s swift response to the COVID-19 crisis. As from its earliest days more than 107 years ago, The Rockefeller Foundation is serving as a crucial catalyst, convener and innovator, helping the private sector and government do more to ease the pain of the pandemic and put equity and justice at the center of the global response and recovery.

## How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

I began this job three years ago, and while I had a broad range of prior leadership experiences in government, philanthropy and the private sector, I have since continued to learn a great deal about effective leadership – in part because I believe a deep desire to learn is one of those keys to being an effective leader. In some cases, my answers to this question reflect my long-standing beliefs and personal philosophy: I believe in data-driven decision making, and I try to foster an environment of learning, testing, adapting and iterating. I surround myself with talented people I trust who are unafraid to tell me their views candidly. I’ve pushed our team to be bold in setting our vision and aspirations for The Rockefeller Foundation in this era, including by articulating clear, measurable goals, because you can’t manage what you don’t measure. I also prioritize being results-oriented and listening to those we seek to serve because I believe we can never lose sight of whom we’re working to help and why. Structured self-scrutiny helps me and my team to evaluate good ideas and whether they are aligned with our bigger mission. Finally, I believe humility is one of the most important qualities in a leader – to know that I don’t know everything, to be honest

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when I don't know the answer, and to ask for help when I need it.

**How has The Rockefeller Foundation's work changed as a result of COVID-19 and the anti-racist movement taking place across the U.S. and the world?**

The past several months have been a time of extreme pain, heartbreak and reflection for our country. They have also been a catalyst for our work at The Rockefeller Foundation. Let me first speak to the anti-racist movement. My wife and I are both children of immigrants from India, and like every person of color, we each know the exact moment when we first realized we weren't like everyone else. Even though we have both experienced racism and discrimination in different forms, the systemic racism and extraordinary violence African Americans have lived with and continue to experience is unique in its history and depth. The murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Tony McDade, Sean Reed, and Breonna Taylor left me angry and heartbroken. These acts of violence and police brutality were despicable. Yet again, innocent men and women were killed for no other reason than the color of their skin. It's painful that these murders occurred during a pandemic that is disproportionately threatening, and destroying, the livelihoods and lives of African Americans, Hispanic Americans and other minority communities. Tens of millions have lost their jobs, and hundreds of thousands have lost family, friends and loved ones. Their anguish and despair is real and understandable, and so is their outrage at countless decades of racist murders.

For more than 100 years, The Rockefeller Foundation has worked to advance racial equality in America because it is core to our values. Our actions speak to the unique role philanthropy can play in driving social change. While we may not have the resources or the power of government, we can identify and act on solutions when others fail to do so. We can take on unique risks that others can't or won't. We can use our voice and amplify the voices of others fighting injustice. We can bring together different parts of society, serving as a bridge between public and private, between nonprofits and investors, between communities and government officials, bringing everyone to the table to help solve some of the biggest problems we face in order to create plans, programs, and innovations that others can follow.

For similar reasons and in line with our history, The Rockefeller Foundation has faced the COVID-19 crisis with all of the resources and human power we could summon. In April, we called for the nation to get to three million COVID-19 tests a week by June and to 30 million by October. To beat this virus, we need a massive national effort to get to 30 million and beyond with tests that are easy, fast and cheap. Only then can we keep the economy open and protect our most vulnerable. I ask people to read our updated National COVID-19 Testing and Tracing Action Plan, launched on July 16, 2020.

We believe a massive public/private collaboration to scale up COVID-19 testing and contact tracing can best support our economy and society in the coming year, and we are working through our partners to make testing ubiquitous and accessible across our nation with a specific focus on African American communities and other minority communities in places like Baltimore, New Orleans, Detroit, Oakland and dozens of other cities. The recent federal commitment to track COVID-19 testing access by race and ethnicity is an important first step to make sure America recognizes that a strong, community-led pandemic response in minority communities across this nation is essential to overcome a crisis that has already forced too many Americans of color to choose between their health and their livelihoods.

We're also fighting for African American communities that are twice as likely to face hunger, and four times more likely to suffer dietary diseases such as diabetes and heart disease. America is facing a hunger pandemic, particularly for the 30 million children who rely on the National School Lunch Program, and so we are supporting partners to reach African American and other minority communities to transform how this program works for the summer and coming school year. No American family should have to line up at food banks to meet their basic needs, yet we know that our economy and food system forces a disproportionate number of minority families into this dire situation.

Our recently announced Equity and Economic Opportunity initiative also helps make capital more accessible to low-wage families and minority-owned small businesses and works to ensure the American safety net is accessible and supportive of all those in need. The average African American family has almost

no wealth (just 2 percent of what the average white family owns), and this did not just happen. America's biggest tools for the creation of household wealth – K-12 public education, the G.I. Bill, home ownership, social insurance policies, and a variety of tax incentives and credits – were often designed and administered to specifically exclude African American families. We are proud to stand with our partners to demand structural changes in the U.S. economy, including changing the tax, savings and investment policies that define who wins and who loses in the American economic experience.

At the same time, we know this moment is a unique one where a nation in crisis demands change. We will continue to stand with and support partners working to address the specific issue of police brutality in the hope that our nation may watch the videos of the brutal killings that have transpired, talk at our dinner tables, our schools and businesses, and come to the conclusion that enough is enough.

**How has your personal resilience helped to drive your work?**

I am fundamentally an optimist. I believe that most people in this country want to live in a fairer, more just world, and are willing to work to make that world a reality. We need leaders who will honor that overwhelming belief and strengthen our good tendencies, rather than drive us apart. As we have seen, in times of crisis, the latter can have deadly consequences. In my view, resilience, optimism, faith in the future and open-mindedness are all linked inextricably.

**What interested The Rockefeller Foundation to be engaged in creating the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center and how do you define its mission?**

The Rockefeller Foundation was one of the early pioneers of the resilience movement, out of the recognition that building resilience can improve the quality of life for residents and help communities fare better during and post-disaster. As such, we remain committed to that field – to forging new partnerships to create and implement innovative policies, programs, and mechanisms that help the most marginalized and vulnerable populations adapt and become resilient to a changing world.

The Atlantic Council is a leading, globally-focused institution working to address an array of challenges that require resilience

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from climate change to rapid urbanization to mass migration. We have seen the systemic and downstream impacts of these challenges and the disproportionate burden on vulnerable and marginalized populations. The COVID-19 pandemic is one example: while it began as a public health crisis, it has wrought cascading devastation on the economy, food security, education, and exacted an outsized toll on African American, Latinx and Native American communities in the United States, as well as Indigenous populations in South America and urban slums in India and Africa. Our partnership, enabled by the generosity and strategic vision of Adrienne Arsht, is empowering the Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center to work to deliver innovative solutions globally, from public policy to finance to communications, that can lift up hundreds of millions of people by working at the individual and community levels and with a broad spectrum of governments and institutions.

### **How do you define resilience and how critical is resilience in nonprofit work?**

Resilience is a crucial aspect of sustainable, equitable and prosperous societies, especially as communities are increasingly facing multiple, interconnected challenges. Resilience is the ability to survive, adapt and rebound from shocks and stresses, whether they are social, economic, environmental, personal or political.

Resilience also helps nonprofits and foundations achieve deep, scalable, and lasting impact. We have a finite number of resources, so it's important for us to consider how we can use our limited funding to address multiple challenges and generate social, environmental, and economic benefits that improve the lives of millions of vulnerable families through a single initiative.

At The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, we are investing in a microgrid electricity resilience project in Puerto Rico, a model for how to rebuild more sustainably after disaster. Hurricane Maria completely devastated the island in 2017, knocking down 80 percent of the power lines and leaving millions in the dark for months. Puerto Rico is becoming more susceptible to these types of shocks, exacerbated by climate change. This microgrid resilience project that we have undertaken with our partners will help Puerto Rico prepare for future disasters and alleviate chronic stresses by building more resilient critical infrastructure that can enable economic and social life to function with minimal disruption, while also contributing to the daily operation and well-being of communities.

### **What do you see as the importance of resilience in addressing the global crises the world is facing today?**

In addressing the global crises we are experiencing today and helping mitigate future ones, resilience can be used as a platform to recover and rebuild with equity and justice. This pandemic has created an opportunity for government and institutional leaders to plan and undertake a recovery that integrates lessons learned from this crisis and approaches that will help communities bounce back from and prepare for future shocks while addressing chronic stresses, such as unemployment, racial injustice and poverty.

### **How important is it to look holistically at global health issues, climate change, migration, social injustice and other challenges in order to create real impact and lasting change?**

As the world becomes more connected through globalization and technology, global health, climate change, social justice and other challenges also become increasingly interlinked. It is crucial for us to view these challenges holistically, thinking about how they influence, impact and compound each other. For example, it is no coincidence that in the United States the COVID-19 pandemic is disproportionately affecting communities of color and compounding underlying social, health and economic inequities. African Americans, Latinx and Native Americans were already more than twice as likely to be living in poverty compared to white Americans, and they're now two-to-three times more likely to be infected by COVID-19, and four-to-five times more likely to be hospitalized because of it. These inequities are tied to long-standing barriers to accessing resources, such as health-care and transportation, and a deep history and recurring cycles of discriminatory policies, unequal treatment and outright racism. We have to break that cycle by putting equity and justice at the heart of how we respond to and recover from this pandemic. That is the only way to address the massive inequalities that this crisis has exposed and exacerbated.

### **As a leader, how are you able to build a resilient culture within your organization?**

Building a resilient culture relies on an organization's ability to continually improve and adapt to change as well as transparency, the latter being one of our Foundation's core values,

“TO ACT,” which are trust, optimism, accountability, collaboration and transparency. COVID-19 has tested the resiliency of the Foundation's culture, and in the wake of this health crisis, we have instituted a number of policies and flexible arrangements that can help ensure the safety of our employees and their family members while allowing them to manage personal obligations around taking care of loved ones, home schooling and child care.

I'm proud of our global team's tireless work even in so-called normal times, and for their heroic efforts over the last several months. I've watched our people put in 12- and 14-hour days, while somehow still finding the time to care for themselves and their families. Many are based in New York City, northern Italy and Bangkok, which were among the earlier COVID-19 hot zones this past spring, while those in New Delhi and Nairobi have been engaged as the pandemic spread more widely in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Some colleagues are building public/private partnerships with technology companies, gig workers and school districts to help feed kids who would otherwise go hungry. Others are working to make safety net benefits more accessible, supporting efforts to keep fresh food markets from closing in East Africa, or crafting innovative policies that could hire and train millions of newly unemployed workers to help fight the pandemic by providing the testing that will allow our economy to reopen. Our team in Asia is helping doctors and public health professionals in China share lessons learned fighting the coronavirus with millions around the world, and in Africa, Italy and New York, our teams are helping procure and donate personal protective equipment for local health agencies, paramedics and hospitals.

The Rockefeller Foundation is taking a conservative, science-based approach to our return to the office, as the health and well-being of our teams around the globe is of paramount importance. Mental health is just as critically important as physical well-being, and at the Foundation, we are providing our people with the resources that can help them adapt to the “new normal” as well as additional time-off to allow colleagues to decompress from work and regain a sense of balance. Lastly, we are always seeking employee feedback because it is important for the Foundation to continually learn, improve, and support each other through change. ●