Reema Saleh: Hi, this is Reema, and you're listening to the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts. You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies and policy issues it affects. In this series, you'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P in collaboration with The Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research Institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Reema Saleh: How do nonprofits navigate changes in humanitarian aid policy and how is the philanthropic sector evolving? In this episode, we speak with Liz Drew, a Chicago based strategist with nearly two decades of leadership in advancing human rights, gender equity, and social justice. From working as a US State Department and White House advisor under the Obama administration, to leading international programming at Heartland Alliance, she shares insights from her work on human rights, HIV and AIDS and refugee protection programming.

Liz Drew: I'm Liz Drew, and I am currently the founder and principal of LD Global Strategies, a consulting firm for mission-oriented clients. My background is though in government and nonprofits, working on international human rights issues.

Deqa Aden: For foreign aid policy funding grants, they typically change with the administration. Based on your work experience with the Obama administration and then working with Heartland Alliance under the Trump administration, what changes have you noticed there really was like, aha for you?

Liz Drew: A lot of the work that I did in government was establishing new initiatives that were meant to prioritize programming for prevention and response to gender-based violence at the onset of humanitarian emergencies, as well as programming that would be more LGBTQ inclusive. So, you know, some of that programming, in fact much of it, has actually continued with the Trump administration and now on into the Biden administration. What I think some of the differences were is there was a real chilling effect in terms of speaking about reproductive health and rights and in really thinking about LGBTQ leadership and sort of advancing opportunity and equity on that front internationally. So, there was just, everything became a lot
more quiet on the LGBT agenda. I use agenda in quotes because that was what they, many conservatives, were accusing us of, of having a specific agenda, when really it was an agenda that was about human rights for everyone.

Liz Drew: And so I think, from my perspective, what I noticed when we were at Heartland is that there were a lot of issues with the way that you had to present some of the work that you were doing, so that it would be palatable to the administration. But that there was still a stated commitment to advancing programming around gender-based violence. And so that was important to kind of, in some ways, take them at their word and move forward with programming that was in line with our own values and technical standards. So, that was something that we tried very hard to keep doing.

Deqa Aden: Just a follow-up question on that. You would assume that every government, every administration would be for human rights, yet it becomes controversial to who's included, who's excluded. Do you think there will be a time where we will have no controversy when it comes to human rights?

Liz Drew: Oh, what a great question. I would love to hear all of your responses on that. I mean, I think that that is the eternal struggle. The lifelong multi-generation struggle that our ancestors and our children and children's children will be involved in, I think. I think that we're in a time in this country where some of the rights around, I'll just say abortion access, for example, but also voting rights and so many other things, there's a real retrenchment and a threat to those rights here in the United States. And I think that that happens in so many places where progress unfolds and more people are included in the social compact and that there's more opportunity. And that is threatening to people who have previously enjoyed more exclusive opportunity, right, at the expense of others.

Liz Drew: And so I think there's unfortunately always going to be a group of people in power who feel like they're not able to enjoy their power in an unfettered way, and that there will be efforts to stamp down people who are trying to work toward more inclusion and opportunity for everybody. And so I don't think that we will arrive anytime soon at a common understanding of human rights. Our project is one of making sure that it does expand to include the most number of people. And I don't think that there will be a time when that work is not necessary.

Deqa Aden: Again, along the lines of human rights being a controversial topic, which it should really not be at all, I noticed that nonprofits, a lot of them are very dependent on grants from the government. And then when you see a shift from, let's say a Republican to Democratic government, the values or where the funding should go always change. And there comes the question of how can nonprofits become resilient to shocks like that? How can they prepare? Give us some guidance on that.

Liz Drew: I mean, I think this is such a huge challenge and it can really create all sorts of perverse incentives and just really structural problems in the field where you have also donors like to talk a lot about fostering collaboration between peer organizations. But the truth is that they're actually competitors. And that does not create a warm and fuzzy environment in which people are collaborating and sharing information, if they're all competing for the same resources. And so I think that it is also the case that any nonprofit that is taking government funding has to have a really clear sense of its own moral values and kind of vision as an organization, and how to navigate taking funding from an entity, from a donor that where you don't agree
with all of their policy decisions. And I think in some ways, I've always said also that programming and grant making is policy.

Liz Drew: And so if you're in government and you are funding different programming, you are saying, this is a priority for this government to do this kind of work and I want to see it continue. And if you are in a nonprofit getting donor funding, I think it can be, it's just a really interesting way for you to also be able to influence what they should be funding. So you can say, you know, here's some of what we're finding in this programming. We want to let you know that it is really critical and you should think about funding this differently. You need to bring some of this to scale. We have data from this program that you're already funding. Or you can say to the donors, you need to be bringing on other governments. This needs to be a more shared effort and shared initiative.

Liz Drew: And I think that can be something that nonprofits can do, is to really press their donors to bring other resources to the table and to encourage other governments in particular to take part in a shared enterprise. And I think otherwise, the fundraising question is really challenging. What is really amazing to see, and I'm already working with some clients where I'm amazed by the different kinds of resources they have. And it's from no-strings-attached philanthropy, Mackenzie Scott, her type of no-strings-attached, sort of large scale donations that are just kind of core funding to different organizations that can allow them to really do work that isn't then also requiring an exponentially larger staff to report to the donor. So there is this kind of staffing of the donor can be very challenging and not necessarily beneficial to the programmatic outcome. Sometimes it can be, but it's not always the case.

Deqa Aden: Along the lines of philanthropy, right now we see a shift from the private sector, especially banks who are interested in incorporating climate change initiatives. And even beyond that, you can even see, because there's this big generational shift where there are young people with a lot of money, but their values are different. They want to put their money into causes, nonprofit causes. Do you see a shift where maybe these nonprofits are heading to the private sector more, especially in America where politics is becoming more polarized, where it becomes more unpredictable?

Liz Drew: Unfortunately, in terms of ... Private sector and philanthropy have not caught up to funding that is offered by government. And so I think that until that changes, you still see a huge need for government funding. In my experience, working with private sector donors has been particularly challenging for this type of work because there tends to be a real demand from their sort of corporate social responsibility slash comms teams, to be very clear in tying a benefit to the company, to the work that they're funding. If you're not selling or creating a product, it can be tricky for companies to feel like they just want to make a donation and be mentioned maybe in your annual report. There tends to be a level of engagement that is required, that I don't know that all nonprofits have the ability to navigate those relationships effectively. It can sometimes just take a lot of time and effort and hand holding and it's not always worth it in the end if it's not going to be like a multi-year, tens of millions of dollars worth of funding. I have not seen a lot of those partnerships.

Liz Drew: I've seen a lot of interesting collaborations with the private sector, I think, around refugee resettlement and where there's specific, tangible commitments around jobs or around housing or around flights or transportation. So there are specific ways that different private sector companies can partner with nonprofits to actually provide tangible benefits. But that creates a lot of work to manage those programs. And
so it's not that they're not important and significant, but I think nonprofits need to be aware of what it takes to manage those public private partnerships. And those can be important but also tricky.

Deqa Aden: Do you think with the pandemic that there will be more shift from the private sector to be more philanthropic? And the reason for that I was thinking is because this disease really impacted everybody from different socioeconomic stats. Even beyond that, even with Facebook or social media, you see a lot of GoFundMe page where people are constantly donating and they feel the need to be part of this community of trying to help other people out because they themselves have been somehow impacted.

Deqa Aden: And I feel like, I think the silver lining with the pandemic was that it kind of showed us how everybody’s vulnerable, despite whether you're from a higher class or a lower class. So do you think that will shift or change the dynamic of philanthropy from all sectors where everyone will be more committed to listen to nonprofits with, let’s say, an initiative that has maybe nothing to do with their corporate priorities?

Liz Drew: That's a great question. I mean, I think that what I'm seeing is there are still a lot of companies that are essentially saying, well, we are willing to hire people, but nobody wants to take our wages. I think that there's a lot of dynamics within the labor market here that suggest that perhaps organized labor has an opportunity to really push forward for more protections. I mean, I think in the US, the fact of not having paid leave and the controversies around including childcare in these recovery bills, I mean, I just think that speaks very much to, we have really different, radically different ideas of what is the social contract here. And I think that until the private sector as, in terms of being employers, can say these are our core values around a living wage and affordable childcare and, you know, health insurance that works and paid leave, I don't think we're going to see what we need in terms of the commitment from government.

Liz Drew: And so what would be nice is to see even more private sector folks coming to the table and saying, here's what I know what's meant to my employees to have these benefits. And this is the bare minimum that I'm going to offer as an employer so that people can recover as families and as communities. And I think that's, to me much more important than what donations they might make to the local food bank, for example. I work at a food bank down the street here in Chicago on the Northwest side, I see a lot of great donations from the private sector, but I don't see a lot of, sort of, tying the need for food assistance to the reality of what it's like to be living in poverty in America. And what I would like to see more of is the private sector stepping up and being willing to essentially give up some of their bottom line to help people survive and thrive.

Deqa Aden: A lot of the students who came to our event today is that they're all interested in nonprofit. They just want to do real good work. Oftentimes when we think of change, we think of this macro level change, be the president, create your own nonprofit. So my question for you is what is change? What is a good change? And does it have to be micro, macro? What advice would you give these students? Because—

Liz Drew: I love this question. Well, I will tell you, I am at this stage in my life thinking about everything in a pretty hyper local way. I would say that what the pandemic did for me and my family is we were in our little neighborhood and community. And I haven't traveled internationally since the pandemic. I just felt pretty committed to being useful within kind of a walking distance of my house. And so what that's meant is I've been really involved in our neighborhood public school, where our daughter now goes as a kindergartner. So I'm on one of the parent committees there. We support the administration and families there as much as we
can. There's our local food pantry down the street, which has been sort of something that's kind of saved me in this last year. It's been like the one time where I see people outside my family, especially in the past year before everyone was vaccinated, that was a place I went once a week.

Liz Drew: That's one example of something where I think it's really important to think about mutual aid. And I think there was a real resurgence of that during the pandemic. And so it's not just the idea of nonprofits and government giving something or charity and an influx of something from the outside, but more a sense of advancing change that comes from neighbors helping neighbors. Or, you know, a lot of the volunteers at our pantry are also clients. And most of the clients are also dropping off other kinds of donations. It's like a real ... The feel of it is much more like there are people helping each other out as opposed to what you often find, I think people wanting to feel good about having an input or making a donation where you know somebody will be helped by what you do. And I think for me, I think it's been helpful to think about.

Liz Drew: And I think for any of the students that we talked with today, to just think about what is the impact that you can have within your own family system, your community system, and then yes, you know, going out macro level. But thinking really about where do you have an opportunity to change someone's life, but also be changed in return. And so just thinking about where are you in relation and in solidarity with others, and that I think can be really important to be as local as possible and as informed about kind of where you live and what's happening and as well as thinking about, you know, scale and where else you can be. You have your perspectives challenged.

Deqa Aden: The reason why I asked that question is there's this misconception that if you want to make a difference, go work at a nonprofit. And I'm like, "You can still make a difference at a big corporation and impact so many people's lives."
Liz Drew: Mm-hmm, totally.

Deqa Aden: So how can we still preach to people that you can be a public policy advocate, even if you go to the Booth School, and not Harris?

Liz Drew: Oh yeah, that's such a great question. Yeah. Well, I think, I mean, it sort of goes to what I was saying before. And that's why I'm really interested in some of the work I'm doing now around climate, where I think because there are such challenges in getting government action at scale, there is a huge role for the private sector to play. But this is like you said, unpaid leave, that's an enormously important area for the private sector to become leaders. Private sector is also so important in terms of just norms and culture. And nonprofits and governments are one area to affect change, but [you] really kind of need to look at what are the things you want to change and what are the policy areas that you want to change in your lifetime and beyond. And so I think kind of getting a sense of what scale you want to operate at. But also, what do you want your influence and your impact to be?

Liz Drew: So kind of when you look back on your career, what do you want people to say about you is another thing to kind of think about as sort of like, do you want to be known as somebody who is a mentor to younger professionals? Do you want to be known as somebody who's an amazing sounding board and collaborator that is always willing to pitch in on a project and is maybe going to not take all the credit, but is always the person that everybody goes to to kind of push something over the finish line? Do you want to be known as somebody who is like always going to say the riskiest, most ambitious, wildest idea and push
everybody to think way outside their comfort zone, even if it only nudges them a tiny fraction of an inch toward that ambitious goal? Or do you want to be known as somebody who is always going to be requiring every single initiative to be a hundred percent grounded in data and truth and evidence?

Liz Drew: Are you the person that's going to be changing the way the organization thinks and talks about impact? And you can do that at any organization. You can do that in your family. You can do that in your school. You can think about yourself and your footprint and your influence in a lot of different ways. And I think it's important for me to say that I have learned different things from every single institution I've been a part of. I've now worked with nonprofits, the private sector, governments, with the UN, with other organizations that are huge, that are tiny.

Liz Drew: And I just think every single place, if you're not learning and if you're not sort of thinking about how you can be influential and also influenced anywhere you are, I think you're sort of really missing an opportunity. So I would say that absolutely don't limit yourself. If you want to think about impact, just think about all the different paths and sort of map out who has the most influence in the sphere that you're interested in. And it may not be the usual suspects. You may have to dig a little deeper and find where the real levers of power are and then try to pull those.

Deqa Aden: Very well said. And these are amazing tips for basically any graduate students here. Now shifting gears from local impact to more of a global diplomatic international development impact. So there's this book called Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa. Have you had a chance to read that book?

Liz Drew: I haven't. I've heard the title, yes.

Deqa Aden: Yes. The book is by Dambisa Moyo. She's an economist and she debunks the myth of foreign aid. So basically the argument goes like this. We send billions of dollars of aid into Africa, but poverty levels are still growing. Moya argues that aid fail to deliver a sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction in Africa because it builds dependency where African countries would heavily rely on foreign aid without fully leveraging their own resources. For example, she said, let's say if we phone call and told all African leaders, there won't be any aid for the next five years, figure it out. Then she talks about how that could make them come up with creative, sustainable way and new financing mechanism, maybe trade amongst one another, other creative mechanism that they haven't thought of. So now that you know what the main argument of the book is, what do you think about that argument?

Liz Drew: So what I recall, and again, I haven't read this thoroughly. I mean, I know I've read pieces of it and I'm sort of generally familiar with her take. I think the challenge that I have with that is that it sort of also in some ways kind of lets the US and other colonial powers off the hook too much. Because I wouldn't say that it's a dependency is the problem. I would say that there's structural inequality in the way that the US and other major international powers have operated in Africa and everywhere else in the world, that have continued to benefit us, by us I mean America, at the expense of those countries. And there's been no reparations, reparative justice process done ever. It's not just that it's too little too late. I don't know that I agree with the theory that if you cut off aid, it would spur creative growth in different directions, where I think that, you know, it's worth absolutely interrogating effectiveness and who benefits.
Liz Drew: I think there are real challenges to, if you look at who, kind of, has held major contracts and who has really benefited and who has kind of designed the solutions to problems, who has articulated those problems and who has benefited from solving them. I think that's where I think some of the better questions to ask are. I recall when I did my thesis research, which was about essentially rubber plantations and ethnic minority identity formation in Southwest China. And some of the sort of theoretical grounding I did for that research was about sort of understanding the inherently colonial project that is international development. And so, you know, the idea of quote unquote civilizing places is inherently a sort of top-down Eurocentric approach that really negates and disempowers people who are in these places. And I think that, to me, is the real question: what are some of the problems as identified by people living in the communities where the aid is going? This is now the kind of question around localization of aid and where does money go and who's able to spend it, so I don't know.

Liz Drew: From my perspective, I think there's a lot of nuance also around what resources are really needed and what could ... I just think it's also very telling, for example, that the solutions proposed to this variant coming out of South Africa, which actually it turns out may have started in Europe, for example, is to shut down borders instead of to really look at what are some of the legal barriers to African countries developing their own vaccines. And I think kind of really thinking about again, just trade and debt relief and sort of a lot of challenges where it's like a band aid on top of a continuing structurally not sound and exploitative relationship, so that would be some of my reaction.

Deqa Aden: Aid is also a controversial topic. And you've addressed that there is room for change and there is a room for people to critique it. Based on your experience with Heartland Alliance or just overall experience, what are the most structural challenges that you've seen and what are some recommendations?

Liz Drew: From my perspective, one thing that is really challenging is you're an organization. We saw this in the Nigeria country office in Heartland turning into a local Nigerian entity that is now receiving funding from the US government independently. I think there's a real pressure for the US and other donors to fund local organizations, not international NGOs. And I think that comes from a good place. I think that my concern is that structurally they're not going to provide enough resources to enable these organizations to survive and thrive. And so I think that there will be a way and they will probably try to pay staff less. They will say that you don't need to have expats on your staff anymore, therefore we can pay all of you less.

Liz Drew: There will be challenges around insisting on finance and compliance mechanisms that were used by other international NGOs and just not providing for, again, those were things that were paid for with extensive overhead agreements. So an international NGO has a negotiated indirect cost rate agreement, for example, with the US government. And it means that, let's say 20% of your award can go to your headquarters' costs, some of which will include your compliance staff, your development staff.

Liz Drew: And what I envision happening is they'll give a lower rate, they'll say, well, for a local NGO, you can only get 10% as an indirect. And so they'll just sort of nickel and dime some of these organizations. And I think that's not going to be a recipe for success. So, in terms of a structural change, I hope that as there's a move towards supporting more local organizations, they don't diminish their ability to grow and thrive as organizations, that they also provide the resources that they'll need. I think that there does need to be a real look at the amount of scrutiny and accountability that smaller grants and awards get versus like a hundred or 10 million dollar. You might, as a small or medium NGO, have to do the same amount of reporting and
scrutiny on a one million dollar two year grant that another larger contractor might have to do for a 50 or a hundred million dollar award.

Liz Drew: And then, not to mention sort of scrutiny that DoD does not provide for its contractors. So I just think that there are some real challenges in terms of expectations for how smaller and medium size NGOs in the field operate. And then the amount that is expected in terms of reporting and accountability and compliance reporting, all of that versus the relative freedom and lack of scrutiny on some of these much larger awards. So I think that kind of burden needs to shift a little bit. I would like to see more specific tangible funding increases for things like gender-based violence, for specific initiatives that require dedicated programming. So I think that you're not going to find, we're just not going to advance progress across the field, unless there are really dedicated programming funding streams. And that means also not just repackaging what's already happening and putting it out in a fact sheet and saying we support gender equality. It means actually making sure Congress is appropriating more funds and pushing it out the door.

Liz Drew: And that's something where I see that that kind of pressure to come up with new funding, unless that increases, we're just not going to see enough of it. And that's something that has to change too, is we can't just say that it's everyone's responsibility to do everything and expect the UN architecture, which is already stretched incredibly thin. And we talked about this a little bit earlier. As you know, I feel very strongly that there needs to be a lot more recognition and accountability about the basic power dynamics that donors have over their grantees and prospective grantees. So we talked about earlier that one of my sort of aha moments working at Heartland was understanding the degree to which fellow staff had been harassed, sexually harassed and otherwise in experiences of inappropriate behavior with donors from different embassies, including the US.

Liz Drew: And so, what that just made me sort of realize is there's also a lot of ways in which donors can add to the stress of a partner that they're working with, or they can really be in solidarity and work with that partner. And I think that there needs to be a lot more scrutiny and training and attention paid to how donors in positions of power exercise that power appropriately. And that there need to be real consequences for when they don't.

Deqa Aden: I feel like sexual harassment is just a topic that really should be talked about in every industry, anywhere in the world.

Liz Drew: Absolutely.

Deqa Aden: And women are all suffering from it. It doesn't matter if it's a woman in Africa, or it could be a woman who works for a bank in New York City. They're all going through it. So that's very important to highlight that. Now let's shift more into the positive aspect of foreign aid. So for me personally, I went to an American school in Somalia funded by US aid. And that school is the reason why I came all the way to the University of Chicago. And that had a huge impact on my life. And that just shows the importance of aid in general and how it impacted people's lives including mine.

Deqa Aden: So now you work on HIV AIDS at Heartland Alliance. So currently there are 2.57 million people living with AIDS, but we actually made improvements regarding people living longer and coming up with
treatments and kind of also de-stigmatizing AIDS in the US especially. What do you think based on your work experiences at Heartland Alliance International have really contributed to that success?

Liz Drew: What I would say is, and this is why, sort of just to go back to Dead Aid, I mean, I just don't think that again, there are a lot of resources that are still needed, and I don't think the private sector can do all of this work. And I think that one thing that we've seen from the sort of advances in providing antiretroviral treatment but also testing and prevention programs across the world have really led to significant advances. And I think that what I saw at Heartland, which was really interesting, was this way in which the programming there was very specifically focused around key populations. So folks who are most vulnerable to HIV and most likely to not also get appropriate care and treatment, in part because of the stigmatized status. So in the case of Nigeria, it was men who have sex with men, people who use drugs and then also sex workers and sex workers also in [inaudible 00:31:29].

Liz Drew: And so those populations, because they're criminalized, there was just not a lot of, prior to a lot of the programming that Heartland did, there were not a lot of movements where people were in solidarity with each other and in community with each other. And so there was not a lot of information flow. There was not a lot of ways in which people could say, here are ways to keep yourself safe, here are ways to be protected and here are ways to thrive and have your identity acknowledged and respected. And so part of what the HIV programming that Heartland developed, and that has been adapted in other places as well, is to really look at where you have a peer led model of informing, in some cases, small groups and associations that then became professionalized into larger groups. And that they were then able to do some of this care and treatment themselves. And really listening to what the communities themselves wanted and having those individuals be the ones driving the response. And that I think was really important.

Liz Drew: And what was important about it was having it resourced, so having money to give to people to spend as they saw fit on their own health and recovery, and within their own community. And I think that's to me really critically important, is that you're not going to see success reaching the most stigmatized people if you're going through traditional channels. If folks are not able to go to the hospital and feel safe there, you're not going to reach the people who most need help. And so I think that's to me, one of the most important things, is understanding that within the HIV world, there is a huge need to sort of understand, from an evidence based perspective, interventions that really prioritize people's human rights and that are essentially led and driven by the communities most affected.

Liz Drew: And to understand that means that you may be shifting a lot of money into different places. And that can be challenging for organizations that are expecting to get some of those funds. But I think that's the right place to go. It's the right move. And I think that has given me also a lot of hope that people can over time, really dramatically shift outcomes if they are supported and given the resources that they deserve and need. I'm incredibly inspired by so much of the work that we did at Heartland and that we supported across US government. And above all it's where people have been able to take the reins themselves. And so it's more about sort of breaking down barriers to enable that success and allowing resources to flow where it should.

Deqa Aden: Liz, you're brilliant, first of all, and thank you for sharing your insights with us. Two years ago, you founded your own consultancy organization, Global Services LLC. What kind of work do you do? Who are your clients? Who are the people, and what are your services?
Liz Drew: So LD Global Strategies is basically just me at this point, but we are a full service consulting firm for mission oriented clients. So I'm working with a couple different organizations right now. One is Tradewater that's based here in Chicago that works on climate mitigation measures. So they're a particularly interesting new work for me around climate change. And I'm thrilled to be working with a global organization that's headquartered in Chicago, since there's not that many of them. And I am from Chicago but will always have a global footprint and my heart is everywhere. So I'm based here, but would love to keep a foot and heart in many different places, so that allows me to do that.

Liz Drew: And what I'm looking to do is to work with folks who are looking to expand their impact and think about strategy and just for those who need additional support, mobilizing resources, but also thinking strategically. And I've also worked now with so many organizations experiencing dramatic transformation and transition. And so I have a lot of insight into sort of how do you build an initiative or how do you manage organizational transformation? And so I am working with a couple different clients that are just kind of thinking about strategy right now and growth. And so really hoping to expand everyone's impact through that work. So, yeah, it's been fun. It's been fun to have an insight into lots of different ways of working too.

Reema Saleh: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Liz Drew. This episode was produced and edited by Aishwarya Kumar and Reema Saleh. Thank you to our interviewer, Deqa Aden.

Reema Saleh: Special thanks to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. For more information on the Pearson Institute's research and events, visit thePearsonInstitute.org and follow them on Twitter.