Interview with Mike Davis (Global Witness)

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you start by introducing yourself and tell me about what Global Witness does?

Mike Davis: My name is Mike Davis I'm the CEO at Global Witness. Global Witness is an international investigative organization and we do work which relates to helping to avert climate breakdown, but particularly by looking at the balance of power between big polluters profiting most from climate breakdown, and on the other hand, the people most adversely affected. We think that the climate crisis is quite one-sided in that sense. There are very important dimensions to it, which are to do with technology, consumption patterns, but there's a really ugly political reality at the heart of it, which is far too much influence over decision making that's exercised by people who are most vested in continuing to drive us towards planetary meltdown. At the same time, we've got all sorts of people who have a right to be heard and actually need to be heard, because in many cases, they are the most successful advocates for a very different future, and they're protecting climate critical landscapes as well.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I understand now about your mission. What is your actual approach to the work? How do you actually achieve all of that?

Mike Davis: The way in which we do our work has three main parts of it. There's the first one, which is doing deep dive investigative research. We use a range of methods, and those include undercover investigation. They include use of document leaks that we get, for instance, dossiers of documents, dealings between governments and companies. We do increasing amounts of investigation that are based around interrogating big data sets. We've assembled quite a large data investigations team at Global Witness in recent years. That work includes use of things like geographic information systems (GIS) and sometimes AI techniques as well. We also do quite a lot of work, often with partners, which is a more classic journalistic form of investigation. Getting out and about, talking to people, getting to know people, gathering testimony. That, you might say, is the foundation of what we do, but that then yields for us compelling information, which we then turn into stories which we make as arresting and accessible as we can. We produce a lot of our own reports, short films, increasing amounts of content through and designed for social media.

We use that to generate attention on not just our findings, but our ideas about solutions to the problems that our investigations document. Then that, in turn, provides a basis for what I guess I might call the third piece, which is engagement, targeted advocacy, lobbying of decision makers typically in governments and in lawmaking bodies, parliaments, congress. That sort of thing in different jurisdictions around the world, but typically places where we think major concentrations of economic power lie.

The EU is a big one, the US, to some extent, China. That involves a lot of getting out and talking to people in person on the back of relationships, which often take years to build. We think of it in terms of a sort of investigation, to expose, tell the story, and advocate a model. That's how we do our work, but it's also worth stressing that we don't work by ourselves, and every aspect of what we do is situated within networks of partnerships and work with allies around the world.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I would love to take an example of an impact and if you can walk me through those three things with a specific example. Also, you're very much a systems change orchestrator, so I wanted to talk a little bit about what you're looking for from other actors within the ecosystem.

Mike Davis: I could start with an example of impact, I'll take one which relates to things that we've been doing just in the past month. That relates to work which we've been doing since about 10 days after Russia invaded Ukraine, which is to expose and try to reduce the extent to which that conflict can be financed with Russian fossil fuels, particularly oil and gas, but also to some extent, coal. We were asked to intervene by somebody from a loose network of Ukrainian diaspora figures. Ten days after the invasion started, I got a call from someone who said, "Well, we know about Global Witness's work on blood diamonds. We'd like you to do a campaign on Putin's blood oil." We thought about it for about a day, and decided that that was something we wanted to do. We set up a team of half a dozen people to go at it straight away.

The work they did initially focused on fast-paced investigative storytelling, because we knew that the narrative was going to be set quite early around what this conflict was about, the main dimensions to it. We thought that the economic one and actually how that connects with the planetary impacts of fossil fuel use, needed to be brought out fully and very quickly. Over time, that work has expanded to bring in elements which are also very much integral to the way in which we do our campaigning, so work to make the case for sanctions on Russian fossil fuels, and then to try to identify and close loopholes. In the past month, that's involved, for example, working with lawmakers in the EU to bring forward a proposal to restrict imports of Russian liquid natural gas (LNG) into Europe; also working with around 55 members of Congress in the US who signed onto a draft bill which would address a particular loophole to do with Russian oil being refined in certain refineries in India. Then a really interesting case, which was to do with another

loophole concerning Bulgaria in Eastern Europe, where Bulgaria has been effectively hosting a Russian oil refinery on its territory, which has been processing Russian oil and making it into products which then go into EU markets. We released findings and investigation into this, and how it was generating a huge amount of money, extra money for the Kremlin each year.

Our investigator actually launched it on a panel at an event in Sofia, in Bulgaria, and then a few hours later, found himself called into a meeting with the prime minister of Bulgaria and his entire cabinet to explain our findings, such was the extent to which this had hit a nerve. I would cite that as an example of ways in which we do campaigning that involve quite rapid investigations, and storytelling, and narrative building, but then using that as a basis for setting the standards, shaping the rules around particularly how companies behave, and how that intersects with their relations with government. That's one example.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you measure success then by when the bill gets passed or when the legislation gets passed?

Mike Davis: Yes, we do think about ways in which the laws get set, so bills get advanced and passed, and then implemented, and we do related work which concerns other sorts of standard setting as well. In China, it quite often takes a different form more in the realms of what one might call soft law standards, and then there's international fora that we get involved in. I mentioned blood diamonds earlier. The Kimberley process would be one, Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, another, where it's about generating a source of global norm and a set of standards around particular industries and the way in which they behave. Typically, having had some success in those sorts of voluntary settings, we then try to get those standards flipped into law in big jurisdictions globally.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is that how you measure success?

Mike Davis: It's one of the ways we measure success. It's not the only one. There are occasions where we can measure our success in, if you like, classic, quantitative terms. I just talked about Russian oil and gas exports. You could measure impact or lack of impact around levels of that. We've done that previously around levels of timber exports, for example, from the Democratic Republic of Congo when there was a timber export ban there. Quite a lot of our work is not that easy to measure in a quantitative way.

We can typically be fairly confident about what our contribution to a change is. Being able to say with total confidence, "Well, that's entirely down to our work," that's quite rare and actually something which I think we need to be quite careful about getting too fixated on, because I think it can then lead to quite narrow and sometimes organization self-centered decision making, which is not really in line with our values, and it's not very effective, either. It is always a bit of a balance,

because we do want to be able to measure impact, and we do need to be able to account to those that support us for the work that we do and how they fund it. It is important to us to do that. It's a field in which we're quite actively plugged into in terms of how to do this sort of thing really well.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you give me an example of something that you've tried that hasn't worked?

Mike Davis: Yes, there are plenty of those. I'm trying to think of an example I could give with confidence and enough specificities to answer the question without leaving some of my colleagues perhaps feeling really sore that I've picked up on a particular case. I'm going to talk about one, in slightly broad brush terms if you don't mind, which is some work we did around use of fossil fuels quite early in the period, which began around four years ago when we focused on climate change as the main priority for the organization. The quality of the work was very good, and it did have some good impact, which in terms of shaping laws and standards would look quite admirable, actually. The reason that we decided in the end to move away from it was not because it was a failure. It wasn't, but we felt that it was not sufficiently playing to our strengths in terms of the role that we can play through our investigations and storytelling, building a narrative for change, which goes beyond trying to shape this or that quite narrow piece of legislation.

That's me being slightly broad brush and maybe a little bit evasive, but we do try to recall the instances of failure as well. Yeah, we have our share of those.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I'd like to discuss if there's anything that you failed at that you think would be a good lesson for other people within the social innovation space to learn from?

Mike Davis: Yes, I could cite another example, which is definitely an instance of us getting something quite badly wrong, which concerns some work which we did to do with oil and gas extraction in Guyana a few years ago. It's a pretty complicated story, but the gist of it was that we were looking at the deal between the government of Guyana and Exxon, and scrutinizing it carefully, and pulling out aspects of it which we believed were unfair, and inequitable, and severely disadvantaged the population of Guyana, and there were many of these.

What we didn't do, though, was think through strategically what impact this work might have from a climate debate point of view. We were looking at it very much in terms of probably the money, where's the corruption, that sort of thing. Although we engaged quite a lot with civil society organizations (CSO) in Guyana, and could say with confidence, "We've consulted all these people, and the overwhelming majority have encouraged us to do this piece of work or proceed with it," what we didn't think carefully enough about was the impact that we might have as an international NGO with a relatively well-developed communications capacity on a really important debate in quite a small space.

The impact that we did have was to actually make it harder for climate activists in Guyana to make their case for there to be no extraction whatsoever. What we had done was set out the ways in which the deal was not fair from a financial point of view, and in a sense, created a compelling case for the deal to be renegotiated, so that Guyana would get more money, which would be absolutely sensible and the right thing to do, were it not for the fact that we inadvertently detracted from the question of whether the oil and gas should even be extracted in the first place. I think that was a case of us getting it wrong in terms of not doing the right kind of landscape mapping, and thinking about our own imprint on a debate in a country which we did not know all that well. Yeah, perhaps being a little bit naive as well about the way in which the work we were doing at the time, which was more focused on investigating and combating corruption, might usefully or not so usefully add to the climate movement. In this case, it was not a very useful contribution at all.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's so interesting. What you're saying is that you were trying to do it from a cost benefit analysis position, and how we could make it work, and what the climate activists locally actually wanted was to not have any of it happen at all.

Mike Davis: Yes, that's right. I think we thought it would be useful to look at it from a corruption and equity perspective, and there's no doubt about it, those things were very relevant to that deal. It wasn't that we, or for that matter, the CSOs in Guyana encouraging us to take that approach were wrong. It's just that we did not really, I think, display sufficient self-awareness about the impact that turning out those sorts of findings in the way that we did might have on that debate. We should have done that, and we didn't. That's something that we really have to own and learn from.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Interesting. Outside of funding, what would you say are some of your major challenges?

Mike Davis: Well, the issue that we work on these days is particularly challenging. All our work is to do with the climate crisis, and that is really about the biggest issue which we could possibly work on as an organization. It's quite daunting. It can be quite difficult at times to convince ourselves and other people that we're making inroads, that what we're doing is having a useful impact, and that it's worth continuing, and in fact, scaling up our work as we wish to do. I don't actually think for our staff, that's such a challenge, because we're very committed. We're highly motivated as an organization, but I think the reality is that we have to accept that we and other members of the climate movement have a long way to go to convincing a critical mass of policy makers certainly that the time for kicking the can down the road is over, and really need to grasp the nettle and do things, like come up with a clear plan for phasing out fossil fuels. That's quite a challenge. We could be working on other issues, where perhaps it would be easier to demonstrate

clear progress towards a neatly delineated pathway to impact. We've not chosen that, we've taken on something rather more difficult. I think we also have increasingly, and this is a good thing to think about, our legitimacy as an essentially northern organization. Our staff are based overwhelmingly in the UK, the US, and in the EU, and needing to think about and work harder to make sure that we are good partners to others, and that we are opening up space which others can use. We are really working to share not just our information, but also our access to decision makers and also funders as well. That's an increasingly important challenge for us to take on.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's really hard.

Mike Davis: That's another one that stands out. I'm not sure about public skepticism, but amidst all the noise and disinformation, it definitely gets harder to get your voice heard, and have an impact if, in a sense, your main offering is a really well evidenced fact to build a case for change. As people often remark, we seem to live in a sort of post-truth landscape now, and I don't entirely believe that sweeping generalization observation, but there is something in it. We have to work ever harder in the face of all sorts of skepticism about the motivations, and the legitimacy of not-for-profit organizations doing this kind of work.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you see yourselves as someone trying to advance systems change? Do you identify your organization as that?

Mike Davis: Yes, we see ourselves as a systems change organization. We like to think that we get into the root causes of the issues that we take on. That's why when it comes to climate, for instance, we're looking much more at the political systems around the debate. Who has power, who doesn't, much more than specific elements or the technicalities surrounding the transfer that we all need to make from fossil fuels to renewables. Those things are obviously hugely important, but we think that we can add something a little bit different by sort of pulling out the question of who's in the room, who's not in the room, and how we change that. Yeah, we would see that as something systemic, which we can contribute to. We can't deliver it on our own, but we think we can make a contribution.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I think you have talked about the role of governments. What are the things you need from other actors within your system?

Mike Davis: A lot of the work that we do is about trying to bring about behavioral change from companies. I'd say the majority of our work deals with that. That's not because we're ranting companies per se, but we think that they do have a very significant and sometimes quite harmful impact on the world, on the climate. We also see them as, for better or worse, a globalized force in an era where other forms of globalized power and systems aren't working terribly well. I'm referring here to the fact that when we started out, which was 30 years ago, I think probably at the

time, there was more optimism around something of a rules-based order, in which governments would potentially hold each other to account, and respect and work through multilateral systems. That now feels like a very long time ago. We don't see the private sector and its globalized dimension as a substitute for that, but we see it as a force out there in the world, which we should try to influence. You can potentially, through chains of financial transactions and supply chains, make quite a big difference at an international level through effectively forcing companies in rich countries and jurisdictions like the EU to change the way they behave, and the way in which they get their business partners to behave. Companies are a very big part of it.

We also, of course, depend on things that other organizations, which to some extent look like Global Witness, do. We can't really do very much on our own. We can't gather information on our own. The stories that we want to tell that are most effective are very often other people's stories that we don't own, we can't extract. They may be willing to share them with us or have us help them get them over to policymakers in the public, but again, that's not something we can do in isolation. When it comes to influencing standard setting laws, for instance, yeah, we are typically working in some kind of formal or informal coalition with other organizations with a more or less similar profile to our own, that maybe do different things that we don't do.

Increasingly, we're trying to share the access that we have to those decision-making spaces with our partners in the global south as well. That's something which is very important to us, and it's something which we're increasingly putting at the heart of our work, not just in Europe and the US, but also China as well.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That leads me to the next question, how do you see your work evolving over the next five years?

Mike Davis: It would be about sharing more information to larger networks and doing more of our work in partnership with others. I think it will continue, as it has been over the past couple of years, to take on more diverse and more agile forms. One of the things we've been doing over the past couple of years is try to bring in types of campaigning and sometimes particular teams which do things a bit quicker in a more nimble way, and a way which is more responsive to the speed at which we're working on are changing. That's very exciting, and it's also necessary. If you're looking at aspects of the climate debate, for example, they move pretty fast. They don't sit still and wait for an NGO like ours to reset the agenda or move to the base long by dropping some enormous great report. It just doesn't work like that anymore. We need to be more adaptive, speedier about how we do things, but also bring in different ways of compiling information, and getting our message across, so it's not sort of moving from one off-the-shelf formula to another, but greater diversity of the methods that we build into our campaigns.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's exciting to hear. What insights or advice would you give to someone else trying to do what you're doing or in this space?

Mike Davis: I think my advice would be to do a lot of listening before starting up a campaign or starting up an organization which does this sort of work. At the same time, trying to find that neat balance between doing a lot of listening, and being suitably humble with being decisive, and also ready to jump in and just do things when perhaps you don't have all the information you'd like to have. You don't necessarily have the perfect moment to start or to say something, but you have enough in terms of quality information, quality partnerships, and the right value set that you can be confident that you can get involved. You won't necessarily know exactly what you're getting into, but you'll be able to adapt as you go along, and make a success, and have an impact.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: This is something I think a lot of organizations struggle with, either taking too long listening and taking stock and then missing the moment or going in without full information. How do you balance that?

Mike Davis: Well, we grapple with that as you do all the time. At the risk of not answering your question, it does very much depend on the circumstances. In recent times, quite a lot of our campaigns have been through very big changes, because we've moved from being an organization which variously was seen by others as an anti-corruption organization, or a classic environmental organization, or a conflict financing organization, to one working on climate.

We've had lots of moments of doubt along the way, about whether we're ready to contribute to climate debates based on what we have and what we know, people we have, the information that we can gather, and so on. We've become increasingly confident in making those decisions. Sometimes it is about starting small. Very often, it's about once we have identified an opportunity that we think we can get involved in and contribute to, without being too perfectionist about it. There are certain things which we have to always be very careful about, in terms of listening to others, building partnerships, making sure that our facts are absolutely proofed, making sure that we tell the story in a way which protects us against unnecessary levels of legal risk. Beyond that, we do need to guard against a kind of perfectionist streak, which I think sometimes creeps into organizations like ours, and be prepared to take some risks, accepting that not everything's going to work out. As long as we're learning from that and being adaptive, that's okay.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you do when these big moments, like COP, happen? Are you there front and center or do you wait for the aftermath?

Mike Davis: In the past three years, we've done quite a lot of work around the COP summits, and we do contribute to some degree in efforts to shape positioning. For instance, at this COP in Dubai, we contributed, after many other groups, to positions around this global stock take

exercise. We're particularly feeding in on this issue to do with human rights. By and large though, the way in which we think about COP is that these are very flawed summits, but they do have something of a kind of only game in town feel to them. They are extremely useful in terms of amplifying and accelerating work, which we and our partners are already doing, and intend to do more of after COP has finished.

Now, the way in which we show up is very much in line with our overall strategic purpose of helping shift the balance of power from big polluters profiting most from climate breakdown, to the people most adversely affected. In Dubai, what that meant was that we had a team, quite a big team, sitting a couple of partitions away from where I'm sitting now in a London office, doing work to crunch through the list of delegates at COP as soon as it dropped, to try to figure out who was there, particularly who had got in from fossil fuel companies, and who was there in a lobbying capacity on their behalf, so that we could then, with our partners, release the results of that about halfway through the COP, and use that to help shape the narrative.

What we did was we were able to demonstrate through a combination of machine algorithmic based techniques, and just a hard graft of analog manual checking, identified 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists at COP, which is nearly four times as many as last year, and get that out with a lot of international media coverage that instantly became, certainly in Dubai, part of the story of what COP was about, and also part of the story of what needed to come out of it in terms of fossil fuels phase out.

Now, at the same time, we had a team of half a dozen in Dubai, and I was one of them. Our work there was overwhelmingly about working with partner organizations, land and environmental defenders, climate justice activists, and other allies to curate and run events in which they could get their voices and agendas heard. We did on average one a day, and we participated in some run by other people as well. Those were, I think on the whole, pretty effective. The feedback we've got from our partners is very positive, and we think that's also a good contribution to the debate.

COP does illustrate in a rather graphic way, who's in a room and who's not in a room and whose voices need to be heard. They do offer, even in a place like UAE, some opportunities to elevate those voices and agendas. We wanted to contribute to that.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Awesome. That's great. I know you talked about quantitative evidence, but how do you find evidence that your stuff is working?

Mike Davis: We do sometimes use quantitative measures. As I mentioned on the whole, those don't work that well. We're using more qualitative data. Some of the most hard-edged pieces of data that we get have to do with the moment that the standards that we've been campaigning for change. That is useful and satisfying, and to some extent, you can plot progress towards those

moments. Some of it, if you're not careful, gets a little bit abstract and silly, in terms of how many people have signed onto this motion, this resolution, how many meetings have you had? You do need to be a little bit careful there.

I think the other thing where we also have to own up the fact that we have a bit of a blind spot, and I would argue our funders probably do as well, is that while we can feel like some of our best pieces of work, like we're reeling off a set of greatest hits, quite a lot of them would be to say, "Well, we exposed this issue, we told the story in a way which brought it to the world's attention for, more or less, the first time. Then we campaign tirelessly, and eventually, we've got a change in the rules somewhere, or in many places, which should mean that that kind of thing, whatever it is, doesn't happen again." Actually measuring the implementation can often be pretty hard to do. The incentives for doing it, I think for NGOs like us, frankly do taper off after the big moment where you get the big win on the standards. It's very hard to gauge implementation, as you were saying earlier. All these issues of causality, perhaps even more at that stage, come into play. If things do change for the better, how can you be sure that it was something to do with the change in the rules, or the organizations that helped to bring it about?

This is something which we need to think very carefully about, because sometimes it's probably only really possible to make a very good assessment of the ultimate systems change, or the impact of the hoped for systems change moment quite some years afterwards. I think one of the things which I sometimes reflect on and hope that at Global Witness, we can bring a little bit more into our thinking when we're in the midst of these campaigns, is this question of the power dynamics. I mention that because there is a certain amount of information now out there, which I think is fairly credible and deserves paying attention to, around some systems changing campaigns, which we've been involved in, and many others too, which have, for instance, generated more transparency.

We take extractive industries, oil and gas, mining, notoriously corrupt globally, all sorts of efforts which we'd like to think were catalytic into changing the rules, which would mean that companies would have to disclose more about what they paid to governments. They'd have to disclose who their beneficial owners are, they'd have to disclose along with the government's terms of contracts, those sorts of things, which it's hard to argue that they're not useful. I think there's probably also a case for saying, "Well, some of the greatest benefits from some of that work actually came from something different," which was just creating a space where, for example, authoritarian governments had to get in a room with CSOs from their countries, not necessarily in their countries, and listen to them, and take heed of what they had to say. Sometimes, that might actually have been quite a lot more useful in a bit, which we might have been more excited about, which is the release of the data. That's something which I don't think that's a one-off.

We've just got quite a big win in the EU a few days ago with the passage of this new law called the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. That's about governing the conduct of companies with regards to their environmental and human rights impacts. In some respects, it's quite flawed, but it's got some good things in it too, about how communities could potentially hold companies that operate in Europe to account, how companies have to engage with communities before, during, and after projects, and about companies' climate obligations as well. Those are all great things, and we'll follow them up, and we'll play our part in trying to make sure that the rules are implemented.

I think as we go along, we'll probably have to keep quite an open mind about what success and a good impact really looks like. On the one hand, the new standard could, in some ways, disappoint. On the other hand, it might actually produce benefits that we hadn't anticipated.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Yeah, I think that's great. Thank you so much for your time.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solution Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*