

Transcript of 'Global Entrepreneurship and Sustainability'

Season 2, Episode 35, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow, the podcast from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington. Today we're keeping our friends close and our enemies closer, because we're chatting to the man who beat us out for an award about entrepreneurship, its importance in rural areas and the role of university research in the real world.

[Theme music]

Paul: Do you hold a grudge, Jan?

Jan: No, I don't, 'cause I'm a very even tempered and lovely person.

Paul: Okay. I've not heard you described as that before, [Jan laughs] but I will take your word for it and take it that you don't hold a grudge.

I like to think I don't hold a grudge, and that today is going to be evidence that I don't hold a grudge.

Jan: Well, I, there's no reason to hold a grudge, and I think we are going to really enjoy talking to our next guest.

Paul: Yes, because we're going to welcome a guest today, a guest who beats us to an award. [Jan laughs] Yes. Are you sure you don't hold a grudge? I, I can see you grimacing and screwing up your hands and punching things.

Jan: Ahh, he's lying, dear listeners, he's lying. We are so pleased to welcome someone we were shortlisted with, but the person who ultimately won the prize. So what prize was this for?

Paul: Yes, that was the Chartered Management Institute, the British Academy of Management and Chartered Association of Business Schools Management Publication of the Year in the Sustainable Futures category.

Because we were shortlisted for the award, and so was our guest today, who it turns out is a bit of an expert on all kinds of sustainability, particularly around issues of entrepreneurship.

And that is Professor Sreevas Sahasranamam from the University of Glasgow Adam Smith Business School.

Hello Sreevas.

Sreevas: Hello Paul. Hello Jan.

Uh, thanks so much for having me at the Transforming Tomorrow podcast. Uh, wonderful to be on this.

In terms of the prize, I think we were very close and it's, it's very interesting and encouraging, the fact that now there are awards which encourage alternate forms of content generation in the knowledge creation space and research translation space.

So, uh, I think we are, uh in the boat where we are trying to do things in a different way.

Paul: Yes, because Sreevas like us is based at a university, and most academics in university - don't be offended, Jan, don't be very offended Sreevas – are totally obsessed with getting articles published in certain high-ranking journals, and don't care about communicating their research beyond that.

Would, would you say that was true Jan?

Jan: Um, I think it's probably a good characterisation, but it's also good to break the mould and, um, both our guest today and I think Transforming Tomorrow breaks that mould.

Paul: Yes. I, I think they do, I think we do. Um, I think we try and communicate things in a way that's a lot easier to understand, 'cause if there's ever a complaint about stuff that academics do, it's that it's not always easy to understand by someone who's not an academic.

Jan: And that's probably a good way in to ask Sreevas, um, about your background and the kind of questions that you address in your research work, but of course then flows over into the conversations you have with others, um, uh, in a public domain as well.

Sreevas: Sure. Thanks Jan. So, in terms of background, I was born and brought up in India. I did all my schooling up till my PhD in India, and then moved to the UK as an academic, initially doing a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Liverpool. Then at University of Strathclyde as a lecturer and senior lecturer, and now at the University of Glasgow's Adam Smith Business School.

Now I'm in fact talking to you from Trivandrum. The reason why I am in Trivandrum in Kerala is because we have an ongoing project where we are looking at the role of digital commons based ecosystems when it comes to innovation and entrepreneurship.

And I'm in fact following one of those projects that are happening around here, which is uh, open-source digital healthcare platform, that helps with doing a lot of the background digitisation around healthcare monitoring and intensive care units. So that's the reason, and that's one of the products that we are currently ongoing, as of now.

And then the other project that we are working on is again, on how rural entrepreneurship ecosystems are being built in remote and rural communities.

And then a third project, which we have been doing for quite a while is looking at the global trends around entrepreneurship and sustainability. And earlier, uh, in this year, we had come out with a report that looks at entrepreneurship and SDGs across different countries.

Paul: [deadpan] So never mind all of that. I wanna know about how you won an award and we didn't. [Jan laughs] I, I said I didn't hold a grudge, but maybe I do. [Sreevas laughs]

Can you tell us a little bit about the blogs, the work that you do to try and communicate your research with that more general audience? What, what it involves, what it contains, and why you decided you wanted to do that?

Sreevas: I think the striking point for me was, how do I communicate what I have in my research to the audiences whom I wanted to reach to? And in my mind, the audiences that I wanted to reach to were policy makers, because a lot of my research was about ecosystems, so it was more macro. And the kind of target audience that I was wanting to reach to were policy makers, government bureaucrats, those sorts of people.

And I was pretty sure that they aren't going to come and read my 40-page article that that's there, and then some, uh, behind the paywall somewhere

online. Right, so the purpose was how do I reach them? And that was the key trigger for why I began writing up blogs.

And the target also where the blogs got published was also critical, because I was putting up these short content pieces in platforms like the World Economic Forum, where I thought my target audience would potentially likely engage with some of this content. So, that was one key target audience.

And the other was just in, in some of my research where I was trying to communicate to like a general public, there I would do maybe like an opinion piece for a newspaper or regularly put out short pieces on my LinkedIn.

Those sorts of pieces to communicate with a more general public sort of an audience.

Jan: Do you feel that in writing the blog, uh, and, and these really sort of engagement pieces, that that changed your understanding of the research that you've done? And did that inform your future research as to how you might construct it and articulate what you're doing?

Sreevas: Absolutely, both ways. So, in terms of what the blogs began to do, is it began to open doors that I don't even thought were there. Because, uh, for example, one of the doors that had opened was G20. I was, in 2023 under the G20 Indian presidency, uh, sort of looped into work as a co-chair for the sustainability task force that was there within the G20 startup 20.

Some of these opportunities I would not have got, if I was not engaging with some of these actors through blogging and other forms of non-conventional academic outputs. Uh, as far on from that last year, I will continue to engage with G20 as an advisor with the ESG task force. And then this year with the digital economy working group. All of these were pretty closely linked to the blogging part.

And another totally unexpected thing that happened is, in 2020 around COVID, I had written a blog around the innovations that were coming up around COVID times. Three years later I did, I, I wrote the blog, I knew it had quite a bit of readership, but 2023 when I was go sort of in YouTube searching my name, before any of my own content came, as in any of the videos that I would've put up myself, there was another two, three videos which had my name in it.

I went in and saw like, who is this that's talking about me? Uh, surprisingly, that blog, which I had written in 2020, had become part of the curriculum of,

uh, in, in the University in Andhra Pradesh, that where they were using it, not for innovation, not for entrepreneurship, but apparently that blog has been referred to as material in the English Language course because they wanted diversity of topics being discussed in an English Language course, not just your conventional Shakespeares uh, and apparently my blog is now being used there.

So if you go and look at conversation for the readership on that particular blog that had about 60K readership, because now it's, it's part of this curriculum. So every year these students are reading it and there are explainer videos on YouTube trying to break down that article to make it easy to consume.

So, uh, totally unexpected. Not even thought that was an area to go, but those sorts of things also kind of happen from a blogging standpoint, yeah.

Paul: Something I find interesting is that there's a lot of emphasis placed now, particularly in the UK higher education system, around impact of work when it comes to the research excellence framework, REF, which is something that a lot of universities work towards to demonstrate their research excellence across the board compared to other universities in the country.

Much of that is down to the actual practical impact of your work. And what you're saying, sounds to me is that yes, you can publish in really high-quality journals, absolutely brilliant, it's really well respected within the academic field. But you're not necessarily gonna have them read by government, by policy makers, by business, by students on, uh, a programme, you know, at a university who are getting assigned it as part of their coursework.

But by doing things that are more accessible, that don't have that traditional academic, um, lustre to them, you can reach a lot further.

Sreevas: Yeah, absolutely, totally, uh, with you on that. And just one more example there would be, as a thought exercise, I was thinking about, let's say the future of AI and how it might influence the future of humanity.

And it started off as a thought exercise, and wrote up a blog that was just summarising what my thoughts are. And that has in fact now become a full stream research, uh, portfolio pipeline for me because that blog really took off. It blew off almost in, in sort of current virality terms.

Because I was then getting people who had, uh, who were like working in AI and faith, uh, called in to do a, a seminar at, at Cambridge around the future of

intelligence. Called in for a podcast that we're talking about AI and faith, which is absolutely nothing to do with my business school sort of portfolio.

And interestingly, I also had startups who were working in this space of cultural heritage and technology reaching out to know more about what I was doing. And building on from that now I have multiple sort of early-stage research pieces where we are looking at this intersection between cultural, heritage, emerging tech, and startups, and how are the intersection of these happening.

So a whole portfolio of new research happened because a thought exercise related blog did what it did. And I have a whole stream of research that sets sort of now building up as a post-hoc of that.

Jan: That's really fantastic, and I think that really speaks to, um, not necessarily putting out summaries of research, but putting out summaries of ideas and thinking. And, um, so it doesn't have to be the final polished, perfect thing that's out in a journal that's somehow made into a mini-blog, that actually the, there are different flavours and varieties.

The, the other reason why we are keen to have you with us is that you are, you are keen...

Paul: ...well, don't go that far...

Jan: ...yeah, I am keen, I am keen. The reason why I am keen to have you with us is of course you won the, the award for Sustainable Futures. So I think that, that we should, um, you know, I think it's been really interesting to talk about the blog, but it would be nice to get into the, the real depth of your expertise as well.

So what trends are you seeing in global entrepreneurship and sustainability?

Sreevas: Uh, The background to answering this question comes from the recent report that we have brought out from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, that is looking at the intersection between entrepreneurs and their engagement with sustainability.

The top trend that we are finding from that piece of work is, while in the Global North where we are sort of now having this conversation, while there is a lot of talk in terms of sustainability, if you look at actual numbers, particularly about entrepreneurs engaging with sustainability, the Global South is taking a big lead.

Let me give you some stats to back this up. The highest proportion of entrepreneurs who were meeting the sustainability criteria, which is around your environmental sustainability-related goals, were from Latin America and the Caribbean region. In comparison, especially in Europe, we saw that less than one in six new entrepreneurs in countries like Norway, Italy, and Poland were actually meeting sustainability criteria that we were uh, following.

And the speculation that we have, in terms of why this might be happening, is because the Global South is probably seeing a lot more of the adverse impact of sustainability. And that, be it your floods, be it your health crisis, be it, uh, other forms of climate effects, that the entrepreneurs are naturally attuned and are responding to that through innovative responses. And thus a higher proportion of the Global South seem to be engaging with sustainability in the actual numbers.

The other trend that we find, which we again thought was very interesting, is what we are calling is the paradox between what we might think as SDG awareness and SDG action. To give you an example, in countries like Sudan and Chile and Qatar, we found that there is relatively lower proportion of entrepreneurs who actually say that they are aware of SDGs in terms of what the UN defines as SDGs.

But these countries had a relatively high proportion of the new entrepreneurs actually meeting sustainability criteria. So there might be this paradox between what we know as SDGs and who are actually already engaging in it in terms of action. So those are some, uh, highlight trends which we are finding from that piece of research.

Paul: It's really interesting that entrepreneurs in the Global North aren't necessarily as engaged in SDGs, ESGs as you might expect, and by the sounds of it, not as much as they are in various areas of the Global South.

Jan: And I suppose that becomes a problem if as researchers in the Global North, we only look at research sites in the, in the Global North, because there'll be a whole range of practice which is totally invisible, either because we're not looking in those places, or maybe we don't have the language and cultural skills to be able to, um, you know, engage properly with, with entrepreneurs.

Paul: Or, you've got the thing as well where if you do look at the Global South, you're applying Global North norms to what you're looking at and assuming

they should be matching up to the norms in the Global North when there is a totally different ecosystem down there.

Sreevas: Absolutely. Let me give you an example to, in fact, reiterate that point that you just, uh, said Paul.

Uh, in January, I was spending some time in the place called uh, Jhabua. This is in the state of Madhya Pradesh in India. This is predominantly indigenous community area and uh, there is a social enterprise there called Shivganga Jhabua that's been working with this tribal community for a number of years in engaging with, uh, rural youth employment, engaging with, uh, water issues, all of that.

I was there and one of their volunteers was just taking me around. When we reached a hill on which they had done a lot of this contour trenching to conserve water, this person, his name is Rajendra, and then he was like, he took me to a particular tree and then said that, this tree is my aunt. And I was like, what do you mean?

And he said, apparently in their tradition, sub-communities by their second name are linked to particular natural resources. The purpose behind that link is that if you are from that particular sub-community, you are then expected to be the guardians of that particular natural resource.

In his case, it happened to be that class of trees, and he said, we treat this class of trees as our aunt, and so that sort of a cultural norm, orientation of how nature is viewed almost in a daily life, everyday life setting is something that we might not really think from a pure Global North lens, but in actual reality of a Global South, uh, indigenous tribal community this is how they are viewing nature. And that tells us a very different way of how sustainability might be thought about in these settings compared to how we think about otherwise.

Jan: Yeah, that's fascinating.

Paul: It is, and so, you know, you've mentioned you're in India now, you've been to India quite a few times for your research, what specific angles around entrepreneurship and the SDGs do you work on whilst you're in India?

Sreevas: A couple of them are of particular interests currently. One is around rural entrepreneurship and it was around that, that I happened to be in Jhabua earlier this year.

And there our interest is particularly around indigenous knowledge, community-based entrepreneurship, and how do you build ecosystems around that? There is, there might be some digital component in them, but in a very good number of cases, there's no direct digital element, but it's more about indigenous knowledge and community-based entrepreneurship. So that's one lens.

The other interesting piece of work is around. How digital ecosystems are being built, be it your blockchain, be it AI in rural, be it digital commons, which is more digital public infrastructure in rural. So, the intersection between different emerging technologies and the intersection of that powering SDG-focused entrepreneurship. So that's the second piece of work that, that's ongoing.

Paul: It's interesting. We've spoken a long time ago on this podcast about the difficulties of digital access, um, in rural areas in this country. When you are considering digital access in this country, which has compared to India, a population that's about one 20th of the size of India, maybe, something like that?

Then you consider the rural areas in India, which is so much bigger geographically and population-wise and the difficulties they must have. I can only imagine, Sreevas, that having, you know, working in these areas and making sure that there's opportunities, equal opportunities with regards to digital access, that people are not being left behind, it must present a whole different raft of challenges than you're gonna get in this country.

Sreevas: I'm totally with you on that. The good thing, however, that has essentially happened in the last, I would say six to seven years or so in India, is that the cost of internet access has become extremely cheap. This is post the launch of, uh, Geo in 2017, if I'm, if I'm right. And what they did, especially in the first year or so, is it was absolutely free internet access.

You would have free data, and that meant a sudden boom in terms of access to internet. And complementing that was what digital public infrastructure was beginning to do. This is, think about it as digital identity, digital payments, almost available on a commons-type platform, in the sense that, it's like an intermediary layer that's between your broadband and between your public services, let's say social security, public access, all of that, right?

So when you have an intermediate layer like that, it suddenly opens options out there. So let me give you another example that probably conveys this point very strongly. About three years ago, I was in a rural area of Andhra Pradesh called Araku Valley, and I was, I was there for a project where I was wanting to look at blockchain and agriculture. But the bigger thing that struck me was something very different.

On an evening, I was on the roadside trying to get a cup of chai, and there was a lady from the rural community giving me chai. Don't think of a fancy Starbucks here. It's just four poles of bamboo and a sheet on top. Okay? And this lady was giving me chai out of like a kettle. Poured me chai, and she said it costs 10 rupees, which is roughly 10 cents.

I was going to my, uh, wallet to actually pay her the 10 rupees in cash, because in my head I thought we were still working in the cash world. But she surprised me by showing me a QR code, essentially nudging me to make a digital payment. That told me a number of things, because, one, the fact that this lady in a rural remote community trusts digital payments. And the fact that she finds it almost as, as cash to probably transact with it, that she's fine with the payment going there and not getting to it on hand.

Secondly, also conveys the fact that she has a bank account, and if she has to have had a bank account, it means that she needs to have some form of identity. And in these parts of the world, unlike a UK setting, you don't get a birth certificate on the day of your birth, right? So identity in itself is a first challenge that then gives you a bank account, and then digital payments. And all of these three were there in the one action, right?

And what has happened in the background of this is the digital public infrastructure that's been built out over the last 10, 12 years, which has elements of other, which is the identity part, which has digital payments through [inaudible] payments interface, and it's now as simple as a QR code. And all of them have bank accounts because they have identity, and all of these things now seem to work seamlessly.

And this has meant a number of things, right? So now if you have bank account access, you have an audit trail of transactions that you are having, and as an informal entrepreneur, you don't typically have that. So otherwise you are in an informal lending market trying to raise credit on informal basis, which will be extremely high interest rates.

Now you can go to a bank and give me like an audit trail of my digital payments and say, this is what I make on, on a monthly basis, and you'll give me loans because you have this. No collateral, but an audit trail.

The other element is market visibility, right? And there are now open source, open protocol based e-commerce platforms that rival your Amazons of the world, which is again, an open commerce sort of a space, which now allows these informal microentrepreneurs to have market visibility and discoverability pan-India.

Jan: That's so interesting. And, and talks about that intersection. So a QR code is enabling all of that to happen, which is phenomenal. And, um, please forgive me with my tax hat on, it also means that there's, there's a tax pace build out for, for local government as well.

If, if that's a, you know, taxable income, that can be, you know clear, approvable, et cetera, et cetera. So it's, it's just phenomenal.

Paul: [teasing] You always have to bring it back to accounting and tax don't you, Jan, you just got, that's it. Always speaking up for the man [Jan laughs] never mind the little people, it's always the man as far as you're concerned, isn't it?

Jan: Well, the man makes money available to everyone...

Paul: ...in theory...

Jan: ...just saying, just saying, in theory, but yes, just saying.

Paul: Speaking of bigger organisations...

Jan: ...the man... [laughs]

Paul: ...the man, well, I don't know if this is the man, it's, it is the little man. Uh, through your work, you've become involved with the G20 and the Startup20 task forces, the ones on sustainability, the ones on ESG.

This obviously ties in with a lot of the work you are doing with regards to entrepreneurship, with regards to sustainability, et cetera. Can you tell us a little bit about what it's involved and what you've learned from working as part of this?

Sreevas: What it's involved is the opportunity to engage with policy making in some way.

So prior to 2023, I would've hardly even spoken to a politician, uh, or, or anybody in, in that sort of a space, right? And this was sort of my first big break, if you want to call it that, that allowed me to be on the same table, just to understand the mind and the process. So that was one key learning for me.

What happened as an outcome is we, we created like a policy communiqué. Uh, there was a policy paper on sustainability that each of the task forces created, and that contributed to an overall policy communiqué, which was then given to the G20 leaders at the G20 summit in 2023. So that was what happened in the first year of this.

Last year under the Brazil's presidency, because I was involved in the first year and some of the people in the larger group knew about me, but I was not that involved as I was involved in the first year, where I was a co-chair of the whole task force itself. In the second year, we, last year we had a, a piece of, uh, literature review that came out in the Journal of Management that was focusing on the literature review for about 40 years on how organisations engage with poverty.

And after the, uh, literature review piece came out in JoM, we wrote up a blog on that in the World Economic Forum, and I was just put up that in some of the WhatsApp groups, which I was previously a part of, in these G20 groups. And coincidentally the G20 Brazil team, uh, saw that and then they followed up to know more about what we were doing and what our insights from the research was, and all of that.

And then they looped me into become an advisor with the ESG task force last year, and, uh, contributed insights from what we know from research around entrepreneurship and poverty. Because they were particularly interested last year around entrepreneurship and solidarity economy, because Brazil is a big solidarity economy focus, right?

So they wanted insights that could link into that larger story that we're working on. And this seemed to fit very well with their orientation. And that's how I became involved with, uh, the ESG task force last year, in a minor role compared to the first year, but still contributing more of these insights from poverty, entrepreneurship, uh, to their work.

And this year, uh, as I said earlier in the conversation as well, we have an ongoing project where we are working on digital commerce and the role of digital commerce for entrepreneurship. And we had a, a short piece around

this in the Stanford Social Innovation Review late last year, where we were talking about some of the examples that I mentioned to you earlier about this Araku Valley and public infrastructure, and all of that.

And this year, digital economy working group of G20 was interested particularly in thinking about innovative responses to how microenterprises in the Global South could be digitally enabled. And they happened to see some of this work and they said like, can you kind of come in and add to the policy note that we are writing around digitisation for microenterprises?

And that became the root for how I am now engaging with the G20 South Africa digital economy working group. So that's been the sort of engagement largely. Outputs being policy notes or policy communiqués, but engagement across different strands.

Paul: It comes back again to that communicating to a different audience than is the natural forum for academic work that comes out of universities, isn't it, Jan?

Jan: It is. But what I like about it is, um, particularly if you're an academic looking at global trends, your ability to pick up and translate and to provide insight to different, between different countries or between, you know, different, um, institutional settings is there as well.

So a really good sort of, uh, you know, bit of glue in the system as well. And that should be a really great role for academics to be involved in as well.

Paul: So, Sreevas, we're coming towards the end of our conversation. So there's two areas we're gonna go through now. One of them very happy and one of them a bit more depressing. Um, we'll start with the depressing first and we'll end, uh, on a slightly happier note.

So what sustainability challenges can you see arising at the moment? We've got very challenging circumstances. We've got governments in certain parts of the world that have come out and said they don't essentially believe in sustainability and you want to have nothing to do with it. You've got, a drive back against things like equality, diversity, et cetera in certain parts. You've got companies that are withdrawing their ESG policies, et cetera, everything like that.

What challenges are you noticing with regards to your particular areas of research?

Sreevas: So very clearly what you said, uh, which is government orientation, the political orientations and different parts being different. And that has challenges in terms of, let's say, if you think about startups, it's harder for you to think about scaling when the awareness and the language around SDGs and circularity, for instance, is very different in different countries, right?

So that comes with challenges in terms of how do you build a global business case around, let's say, a particular technology or technology linked venture that's linked to sustainability. So that is that.

The other piece is very clearly, there's certain parts of the Global West, which is dropping the ball when it comes sustainability, which is part of the narrative. But the equally positive aspect is other parts really picking it up. Now, if you look at, uh, trends, let's say around electric vehicles in China. Over 60% of the new vehicle registrations last year in China were electric vehicles.

In the UK it's only 20, 25%, right? So, if you're seeing one Tesla on your road today, you're probably seeing three of them, not Tesla, but a BYD, in China. But you're probably seeing thrice to four times the number on a Chinese road, right? And, and that's a big EV, renewable energy based space that is happening over there.

Uh, the other is on renewable energy. And there, in the last 10 to 12 years, in India, for example, what we are seeing is now, in the installed capacity about 46% of the installed capacity is now renewable energy based. It's not just solar. It's a combination of solar, wind, hydro, all of that. But it's about 46% of the installed capacity generation.

And these trends are beginning to show us the story of what is possible in other parts of the world, even when a certain part of the world from a political narrative standpoint is probably dropping the ball on sustainability. Others are picking it up well in how it's being pushed on.

Jan: And I suppose that leads us quite naturally into our final question, which is what, what do you find inspiring about the work that you do?

Sreevas: For me, especially since, uh, the last three, four years, what's been more, most exciting for me is to look at entrepreneurship from a community empowerment standpoint. And look at it from the intersection of not just, uh, the, the stakeholders, which is, uh, from the community standpoint, but look at the intersection between entrepreneurship, innovation, and policy.

So having this sort of a broader vision to how I am beginning to look at my research is allowing me to think about outcomes and outlets and outputs in much more different, uh, ways and not just think about that one article. Yes, my, my two articles will come, but there is a whole set of other things that I'm doing around it, right?

From podcasts like this, to writing my blogs, to writing my LinkedIn posts, to uh, talking to policy makers, to a whole host of other things. And that is now personally for me, a lot more satisfying as a journey, and not just think about everything from that next ABS 3, ABS 4, FT 50 journal output.

Paul: Keeps bringing it back to that, that broad conversation and that broader communication rather. And showing that, yeah, work that's done here in, uh, the university isn't just done in an ivory tower and it doesn't, you know, just apply to us within the walls of the university.

Jan: Absolutely. And, um, I'm so pleased that you won the, uh, Management Publication of the Year Award...

Paul: [joking] ...speak for yourself...

Jan: ...in the Sustainable Futures category. I'm going, I'm gonna ignore my co-host, because we would've never have met if we hadn't been at, at, you know, the ceremony when the, when it was announced, et cetera. And so I certainly personally have found it hugely enlivening to see what you're doing.

And at the Pentland Centre we have occasional blogs, but we haven't actually really focused down on that blog space. So I'm going to take inspiration from, from you and try to craft that over the next couple of years.

Paul: Sreevas, thank you very much for joining us. Congratulations on the award, [joking] I say begrudgingly. But no, seriously, congratulations on the award. The, the blog and the work that you do is really inspiring. Thanks very much for talking to us about it.

Sreevas: Thank you so much, Paul and, uh, for, for kind of having me, hosting me on this Transforming Tomorrow podcast. Fantastic to talk to you both on the podcast.

[Theme music]

Paul: I don't know if I'd begrudge Sreevas winning the award as much as I did before that, because he's been very nice and come on our podcast.

Jan: [laughs] I think the more I find out about his work and um, and hearing him talk about it, the more I think yeah, absolutely. He's, he's a superstar. I really loved his work.

Paul: There's so much of interest there. And he is obviously out in the field an awful lot. I mean, he spoke to us from India where he is currently in the middle of his, uh, fieldwork out there. And seeing how he's applying issues around sustainability, around, around entrepreneurship, around AI.

When he started talking about blockchain and uh, you know, people working on the side of the road in India and, uh, having their QR codes and, uh, paying for a cup of tea, uh, via scanning a QR code. And there's just so much that brings technology and the modern together with the, the more older structures of business.

Jan: And what I liked about his examples, and, and it's very hard sometimes if you're purely working in, you know, a, a European or a UK context, is that his examples from the Global South made it really clear that the innovation is there, it's not necessarily here.

But also that people aren't shy of, um, going for QR codes because they can see the benefits. And particularly if somebody provides that sort of middle level platform for people to join up to, you have this huge lift in, um, you know, all sorts of things about income, about wellbeing, et cetera, et cetera.

So I thought it was hugely inspiring.

Paul: Yeah. And he talked a lot about societal issues. He talked about things such as health and hunger, and it tied in again with when we spoke to Biraj from the National Foundation for India and the issues there. Biraj is looking at it from health and um, food inequality side, and this is looking at it from entrepreneurship side. There's always such an overlap with any issues that come up in touch on sustainability.

Jan: And particularly for our listeners who are in the academic world. His, his story about how the blog has changed his approach to research, how the blog has opened up opportunities to engage with policy makers, which then leads him into different questions than he would've had before, is something that I'm, I'm sure you heard it when you listened to the podcast, but which is something from the podcast, I really don't want to lose.

That sense that being more open to the world of practice and to be more willing to communicate in a whole variety of ways will actually yield really good quality results, not just from the communication and the impact side, but from how you can inform yourself as a scholar to ask better questions.

Paul: I take more from that, the communication side, actually, the fact that communicating your work in a way that more people can understand and access, it's not necessarily always just about the language, but it's sometimes about the length of it.

You produce a 40, 50 page journal article as an academic, it might be in the top rated journal in its field, and that's absolutely brilliant academically. The chance of anyone from the street ever coming across that level and reading it is minimal.

But by doing things like the blogs that Sreevas has done, by working directly with organisations such as the G20 task forces he's been involved with, by doing things such as this podcast, you reach new audiences, you communicate to them what you are doing in a way that they can spend 20 minutes, 10 minutes, five minutes sometimes, absorbing it and understanding it. And therefore you are spreading the value of what you've done, which is quite often valuable, but is not always accessible.

Jan: Absolutely. And to be able to have a, be in a conversation space with the G20 is a huge deal. In terms of shaping that, that framework within which other things might happen. So I think, yeah, I think I'm with you. He was a most deserved winner.

I was very pleased to, well, I was pleased on the day as well 'cause he was such a nice man and we hadn't met him before the, the do itself. But then even more admiring of his work having had a bit of a conversation on the podcast,

Paul: [joking] You say you were pleased on the day. I remember having to hold you back [Jan laughs] as you were trying to approach the judges and, you know...

Jan: ...lies...

Paul: ...throwing punches...

Jan: ...all lies. [laughs]

Paul: Yeah. Um, well, there'll be no punches thrown next week...

Jan: ...good...

Paul: ...I'm pleased to say, because we've got someone who's joined, uh, with us who is here in Lancaster at the moment, but who is a guest from fine Italia, bella Italia.

Jan: She is indeed, and I think, uh, you and her are going to shame me by being lingual, ling, however...

Paul: ...lingual. Yes, we can speak, yes. [Jan laughs] And you, and you'll just be going [makes incomprehensible sounds]

Jan: And I think you and her are gonna hold me, uh, hostage to fortune because you're gonna be able to speak a Italian to each other.

Paul: I'm not willing to play this game, because at some point someone will come on who can speak a language that you can speak, and I cannot speak, so I'm, I'm not gonna play that game with you.

Jan: Okay.

Paul: We're joined by Chiara Donelli, and she's going to be talking to us about cultural heritage and how that ties in with sustainability, which is something that today, Sreevas mentioned very briefly actually in cultural heritage organisations.

Jan: Yeah. And of course, um, as you'll find out when we come onto that podcast, she works for the University of Venice. I can't imagine a place where there's poor cultural heritage just oozing out of your every turn of the canal.

Paul: And there's very few places in the world where issues of, um, climate change and, uh, rising sea levels are more important as well.

Jan: Exactly.

Paul: Until then, thank you very much for listening. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]