

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Saket Soni

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Saket Soni, executive director of [Resilience Force](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

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Transcript begins.

[Saket Soni, a South Asian American man with black hair and glasses in a blue shirt, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a khaki vest and silver earrings.]

[on-screen text: Saket Soni, Executive Director, Resilience Force]

SAKET SONI: Within a year of a disaster, a clock starts running. And in that year, if you can hold on to your people and keep them there, then you have a city, then you have a town. If many of them start to leave, the entire place collapses. And it really is the case that everybody depends on each other. We have this opportunity to reveal that interdependence, to translate the applause people are getting into the systems that they need.

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

HILARY PENNINGTON: And this is, I think, to me, the brilliance of the Resilience Force idea: “Let’s protect them. Let’s make sure that their working conditions are what they need to be.”

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Saket Soni]

Hi, Saket. Thank you so much for joining me to talk this afternoon. I really, really appreciate this chance to catch up with you. You are incubating something called Resilience Force, which will be a new organization that is mobilizing to strengthen America’s—what you call, brilliantly, I think—resilience workers, who work on disaster recovery responses. And if there was ever a time where we need to lift up those workers and understand better what they need, it is this time. Hi.

SAKET: I was so thrilled to get your email, Hilary, and just really happy to be here.

HILARY: There is a strand of thinking and argument that says that disasters are actually one of the very few times where communities can actually still come together across difference and work together. So I'm curious how you feel about that, um, hypothesis.

SAKET: Disasters can bring us together. It's not inevitable. We have to, um, enter the openings that disasters present. Fundamentally, disasters are tragic. That's all they are. And, um, there's nothing you can say about them beyond that. They're not opportunities. But they do present openings. Just like in our lives, when we go through great crises, we reevaluate our priorities. As a society, when we go through extraordinary disasters, we ask ourselves, "What's really important to us now?"

When COVID happened, it plunged us into our future. And we were really clear that a way of life was ending. New signs of life started blooming, despite the disaster. And one of those was, you know, at shift change—seven o'clock, eight o'clock every night—there was applause raining down for workers. People who were not seen as valuable were suddenly reappraised in the American imagination—because of a disaster, because of the role they played, the essential role they played.

So these are the kinds of ways that disasters do bring us together. Not just doctors and nurses but grocery workers and janitors being celebrated—when they were, you know, close to the bottom of the American labor caste system, you know, and deemed unskilled, and overnight, um, you know, reappraised as essential. Not supported with wages yet the way they should be, but nonetheless achieving this cultural breakthrough. So the speed of possibility really accelerates on all of our issues.

HILARY: Let's stop on that for a second, right? That very, very powerful image of people coming out to clap for essential workers. You know, yes, that was a broader society seeing those people and honoring and valuing them, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, it has not really turned into a force mobilizing to say, "Let's pay these people well. Let's protect them."

What are you seeing in terms of progress? And what's working best to try to get from the opening to really the place that we want to get to?

SAKET: Within a year of a disaster, a clock starts running. And in that year, if you can hold on to your people and keep them there, then you have a city, then you have a town. If many of them start to leave, the entire place collapses. There's no economy to speak of. Schools that are funded by property are no longer running. And it really is the case that everybody depends on each other. So we have really a year after these disasters to reveal this, you know, this interdependence. The same way it was revealed to us, those of us sitting at home, you know, thanking those of us in the hospitals and the grocery stores. We have this opportunity, um, you know, to reveal that interdependence.

And then the other thing we need to do within that year is to translate the applause people are getting into the systems that they need. At the bottom, we need to create

these beautiful bonds. On top, we need to create these systems that continue to incent, you know, cooperation.

There's this story that I always hear, every time I fly into a disaster zone. There's always a power outage, and darkness all around. And people are afraid of coming out, out of their homes, onto their balconies, out on the streets. The flood waters haven't yet receded, so there's still a palpable sense of danger. But how long can you stay inside? Right? And so there's a moment, and it turns like a wave, and everyone comes out. And because of the power outage, all of a sudden people can see the stars. And people will remark on that in amazement. "It had been so long since I saw the stars. I can't think of the last time I saw the stars." And for a moment, you just enjoy the stars. It doesn't make the disaster any less tragic.

But there's a certain clarity we get, um, and a sense of wonder. And the job there is to follow the wonder all the way in. That's the journey we're on. And organizations like ours, our responsibility right now is to be ready with the big ideas, because people are going in. And if we don't follow them with these big ideas, then what happens is that inevitably they will retreat. "It was wonderful to clap for essential workers, but I was so silly to have thought that anything would change for them."

HILARY: You're trying to break through that opening, which you just beautifully characterized. How are you doing that with this big idea of the resilience workforce?

SAKET: We have to show that, no, you were right to applaud. You did what was right. We're there with you. We have these big ideas—now we're giving you something to fight for. We're giving you something to dream about.

Our big ideas are two simple ones that are huge but perfectly logical. One is legal status for all resilience workers. Essential workers should get citizenship immediately. The second big idea is a little larger, and in a way it's what the first makes possible. In America, given the disasters that are coming, we need a publicly funded workforce that people can join that builds America, builds society, but also builds cohesion.

In the 15 years since Katrina, there have been over 200 disasters that have caused over a billion dollars of damage each. You step back and you really appreciate that the pandemic is prologue. This COVID-19, as difficult as it's been, is really a dress rehearsal for a much bigger existential threat to our people and our planet, which is the threat of climate change. And, in the middle of it all, just as there is a set of people essential to COVID recovery, there are these people—a rising force of resilience workers—who are going to be essential to our climate recovery. These are people who are talented. These are people who are necessary to rebuild cities, but they also—I think, Hilary, they hold a key to actually moving beyond the divide that we have in America.

HILARY: We all have to pay attention to this because, as you started, you know, this is going to become a new normal, and we know it's going to keep happening. So how can we, how can we be prepared to break through with those kinds of big ideas?

SAKET: I appreciate so much your taking the time to, um, to just build connection, and I hope this is the beginning of a lot of conversations.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

End of transcript.