“Confronting those that are most responsible for causing harm is important”: Mike Davis of Global Witness on investigative campaigning, collaboration with local partners, and the power of compelling storytelling.

Rollo Romig
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Rollo Romig: Could you introduce yourself and give an overview of what your work has been?

Mike Davis: I'm Mike Davis, I’m the CEO at Global Witness. Global Witness is an investigative campaigning organization, an international NGO. And our work is all geared towards helping to avert a climate breakdown. But the particular piece of that issue which we focus on is what we see as the power imbalance within the climate debate internationally. What we see here is an imbalance of power whereby large polluting industries profiting most from climate breakdown have quite a lot of power over the debate, and the capacity to manipulate it and obstruct it. Conversely, people most adversely affected, including climate justice activists, environmental defenders, affected communities, literally and figuratively do not have a seat at the table, do not have a voice. So all of our work is designed to help shift that balance of power.

We work across five main issue areas. One is curbing the political influence of very large oil and gas companies, the five supermajors in particular. Then we have a campaign which is about protecting climate-critical forests, and particularly looking at ways of taking the finance out of

deforestation, because at the moment, a lot of the most destructive, large-scale agribusiness developments, which are destroying forests in places like the Brazilian Amazon, Congo Basin, Asia-Pacific, are underwritten by very mainstream and very large banks and asset managers. Our third area has to do with protection of what we call land and environmental defenders. These are activists or just ordinary folk who find themselves, wherever they are around the world, facing off against predatory resource grabs, attempts to seize their land and their forests, and they take a stand, and they're very often threatened, attacked, even killed as a result. We started doing this work in a sense because of what we previously did in Cambodia. A former member of our staff, a guy called Chut Wutty, who I worked with in the early 2000s, was murdered in 2012 while investigating illegal logging. And that spurred us to start to look at this phenomenon of killing of environmental defenders at a more global level.

The fourth area deals with the scramble for what we call transition minerals, or some people call critical minerals. These metals are now in very high demand for clean tech. We need clean tech, but there's a very high risk that the materials will be extracted and exploited in a very inequitable way, which follows very well established colonial patterns of resource extraction, particularly in the global south. And a fifth area is with big tech and social media, and trying to stop social-media platforms from profiting from the proliferation of disinformation about climate, hate speech, and disinformation which undermines elections as well.

All of our work is based on a methodology which is grounded in investigative research. We do investigations of various kinds, and compelling storytelling, and also targeted advocacy, which for us usually means direct engagement with decision makers in legislatures and governments and governmental bodies, sometimes companies and investors as well.

Rollo Romig: What do you think makes Global Witness's work distinct among different groups that are working on the same problem?

Mike Davis: We'd like to think there are a few things which we add. One is our investigative approach. We do a lot of work which serves our campaigning but also, we hope, the efforts of others to use investigative methods to document the issue, put the evidence on the table, so that it can't be ignored, it can't be denied. And then that creates space for us but also our partners to start to campaign for a change to address whatever the issue is. That investigative component is something we bring, which is not unique, but it's fairly distinct amongst the organizations that we work with.

Another element is the way in which we are willing to take risks. We don't hold back from naming powerful companies and politicians who are, based on our evidence, responsible for the problems that we're uncovering. We think it's very important that we do that. Again, that can stretch out the debate, it can be space not just for us but for others to then perhaps a bit more safely engage on an issue and get some elephant in the room flushed out into the open, you might say.

Another thing we do, which I suppose is more to do with the campaigning style we bring, is that we focus everything we do on climate, but we always try to put the human experience, the human story at the center of what we're communicating. And we do that for a couple of reasons. One is a bit more internal facing, in terms of playing to our strengths. We're an organization which has 30 years of experience of uncovering and campaigning on issues to do with conflict financing and corruption and human-rights abuses, all connected with natural resource extraction, but very much with that human story front and center. And we try to apply that to our work on climate as well.

We do that because we like to think we're good at it, something we can add. But also we think it works. We think it works better than some of the more classic climate campaigning, the packaging of polar bears and icebergs and scary graphs—things which might engage some people, but just not get through to others who can't really see anything related to their own experience reflected in the story.

Rollo Romig: For those audience members who might not be as responsive to those narratives or maybe have become inured to them, what narratives have you found are more effective?

Mike Davis: We think about this a lot and we try different approaches. They don't all work. But quite a few of them do. I can give you an example or two.

I mentioned earlier that we do work on oil and gas, and the focus there is to try to dismantle what some people call, using a bit of jargon, the social license: the reputation and public standing of large oil and gas companies to present themselves as acceptable participants in or even shapers of debates about policies and laws that govern the way in which approaches to climate, the environment, and energy at large, are managed. And where, of course, they have a huge stake and a lot to lose if the rules are actually designed to address the fundamental problem of climate breakdown.

We think hard about how best to get through to policy makers and also members of the public. We're not a mass mobilization organization, but we try to get through to sections of the public who politicians have to pay attention to. We've done that in a couple of ways which don't really make a lot of reference to the global climate crisis. One is a focus on the war in Ukraine. We set up a team just ten days after Putin invaded Ukraine at the request of a network of Ukrainian diaspora activists and figures who asked us to intervene. And what we've done there is really focused on telling the story of how oil and gas is so essential to paying for Putin's war crimes. It's only possible because it's enabled by very large multinational oil companies like Shell, like BP, like Exxon, like Total.

We think that it's very important that people know that, and that when we have these public debates about things like, say, energy security, people are perhaps a bit better informed that, actually, dependence on oil and gas is a fast ticket to a complete lack of security, because it ties us to despots and autocrats and gets us, as consumers of these fossil fuels, indirectly connected to the most vicious conflicts in the world. So we've used that quite effectively.

Another thing that we've done, which I think works well on this side of the Atlantic—it probably makes a little less sense in North America—is that, in the year and a half following the invasion of Ukraine, we did a lot of work around the energy crisis here in Europe and the UK. [Talking about] the difficulty that people had accessing affordable heating because the price of oil and gas had shot up. Now of course, this connects back to the fact that there was this war which was funded by oil and gas, and the main oil and gas companies are making record profits. We were trying to convey a rather simple message that this is just terribly unfair.

How can it be right that these monstrously rich and powerful companies are recording astronomical profits on the back of their connivance in the most dangerous war in the Northern Hemisphere? While, at the same time, people can't afford to pay their heating bills. So we tried to present this as a simple but powerful question of equity and fairness. That's another example of where we've kept the ultimate goal in mind, averting climate breakdown, trying to take the malign influence of oil and gas companies out of the debate, but approaching that in ways which members of the public might feel they could relate to a bit more than perhaps just talking about carbon emissions, for instance.

Rollo Romig: How do you think about the balance between having a message that you want to get across in a universal way, but needing to tailor that to particular local contexts?

Mike Davis: We have to think about that a lot, because our work is done in partnership with other organizations. In the example I gave [it was] Ukrainian civil society groups. When we think, for instance, about our work on protection of land and forests and environmental defenders on the scramble for transition minerals, we're working a lot with counterparts and communities in Global South countries. And we have to work really hard to make sure that the campaigning we are doing is not just broadcasting their experiences but actually centering their agenda and building their capacity to make change in the way that they want.

And it's a balance we have to think about quite hard. To take a rather simplified example, in a partnership where we're working with, for the sake of argument, community CSOs [civil society organizations] in the Brazilian Amazon, and we are very reliant on them for data and for guidance. Our contribution might be getting attention on their experience with international media, and getting attention from policy makers, let's say in Europe, who might be in a position to change the laws that govern the conduct of companies that are active in that area or source products from there.

We need to apply the best of what we can bring in terms of our familiarity with those international media and international policymaking environments, while being faithful to the experiences, the demands, and the agendas of our partners. We work really hard at it. I think it's necessary to say that we have also made mistakes at times along the way.

To give an actual example, we've worked over the past three, four years, [and that work] has just concluded, to persuade the European Union to introduce a law which compels all companies operating in Europe to do checks—"due diligence" is the term—on their supply chains to make sure that they're not contributing to or causing human-rights abuses or environmental damage. The idea was to try to reduce the harmful impact of the supply chains of certain companies which operate in Europe. In that case, I think we did a reasonably good job of building a relationship with the European Commissioner for Justice who was leading the file and having him in a public forum speaking directly to activists, partners of ours from Columbia and from India. Later we worked to set up a visit by members of the European Parliament to communities in Brazil. Those are some of the small examples of what a partnership working well might look like. But we do have to really work at it, because there are also a lot of ways of getting it wrong.

Rollo Romig: It sounds like you have a huge variety of collaborations around the world. How do you initiate these collaborations? How do you cultivate them? And what are some of the ways that the collaboration can go wrong, and maybe pitfalls to look out for?

Mike Davis: The collaborations come about in quite a few different ways. The best ones are built up over quite a long period of time. I mean, they only work where there's trust. And that's something you can't create by just pitching up somewhere out of the blue, from the perspective of local people and local groups, and saying, "Oh yeah, hey, we're here to contribute." A lot of it is about investing time in those relationships that in turn might build us a good reputation in the eyes of the wider community in whatever places we're operating in.

And then, doing our best to work with would-be partners to get on the table what their needs and expectations are in a partnership with us. That is really important. And it's quite easy, particularly when we come in as passionate campaigners driven by a sense of urgency, to think that we've done that, that we've understood what the expectations are and what people want, and move into action mode. So that is a risk—that you just don't take the time and you misread the situation. You perhaps overestimate your own capacity to understand, perhaps, the signals that are being sent and a context which you are never going to become fully familiar with.

Another [area] which can go very well or sometimes generate tension or disappointment is around getting messages across publicly. This comes back to the point I mentioned a moment ago. We use the international media and we use our own publications. Both tend to transmit best when they bring the highlights of the issue to the very top. And then you have to work very hard to make sure that you do that [in such a way that] your and your partner's story gets attention, but you're also making sure that the nuances are there.

And for that matter, making sure that as perhaps the internationally better well-known organization, you don't deliberately or unconsciously present this as being all about Global Witness, as though it's just our work and we don't properly credit our partners. I would add further thing that we have to think about, a question within the question in terms of attribution, is what our partners might want in terms of exposure to international attention from a security point of view. Sometimes it really is our role to use the relative safety we have as an international organization, staffed by people with foreign passports, to get the story out.

Just to give you a quick example, I was doing investigative work a few years ago in Myanmar, working with a range of partners. There was one particular partner who we were working with, this was an investigation into the jade business in Kachin State in North Myanmar, and initially, their idea and ours was that there would be a joint publication. But it was only at the point that the thing was fully drafted and fact-checked and laid out and ready to go, [when] they really had an opportunity to fully absorb what it would look like and what the consequences might be, that we had a discussion and we changed that plan. [The publication] went out under our name, but

sections of it were contributed by them, and that seemed to be what they felt was the best balance in terms of credit where it was due to them, and also the relative safety of not being the name on the report cover.

Rollo Romig: I imagine questions of safety come up a lot. What risk does that approach bring both in terms of safety and in terms of legal risk? And how do you navigate those risks?

Mike Davis: The main risk is to the safety of partners, and sources, and our staff, in that order. We are most responsible to our staff, of course, but the reality is that, where something does go wrong, the likelihood is that the risk will fall more heavily on those we've worked with in a particular country who don't necessarily have the option to get on a plane and go somewhere else. And it's their home. So even if they can, with our help, relocate in the short term, they're going to have to come back, because that's where their families and their lives are.

That is the most acute risk, and we do have processes for managing that as best we can. And those are easier to implement when it comes to our own staff, because there we can, in a sense, be a bit more prescriptive about what level of risk we are willing to have for our own team. This question of varied risk appetites is something that we have to think about quite a lot, because our partners and their own networks might have a very different sense of what the risk threshold should be. That's the one where the sleepless nights are most likely to come from.

But we face other risks. You mentioned legal. Our main office is here in the UK, which is an absolutely marvelous jurisdiction in which to sue people if you don't like things that they've said about you. So we have to be extremely diligent there. And what that means is that when we prepare a publication which names companies or public figures, we always write to them in advance. This is what we call an opportunity-to-comment letter. We typically give them a couple of weeks to reply. Sometimes it's a shorter timeframe if the story is a more immediate reactive one. And we say, "We've done this investigative research, and these are the things that we found that relate to you, and these are the assertions that we're planning to make. If you have any comment on these, we will incorporate the gist of what you have to say in our publication." That gives us a level of protection. It's not foolproof. It does also quite often give us extra sources of information as well. Sometimes these letters come back and they're clearly drafted in polished terms by a lawyer. But sometimes people respond and say things which implicate themselves further in the story that we're telling.

There's also, of course, the risk of cyber attack these days. We've experienced those a handful of times. When you do work, for instance, on Putin's aggression in Ukraine, you have to brace

yourself for that sort of thing. We also have to be the very best that we can be in order to protect our reputation because if we don't have a good reputation, then people won't want to work with us. Partners won't want to work with us. People won't listen to us. People won't want to fund us. So we have to take that slightly less tangible form of risk quite seriously as well.

Rollo Romig: You mentioned that you sometimes try out different narratives to see what works, and then go with the one that is more successful. Can you give an example of a time, either with a narrative or with any other strategy, where you tried a particular approach and it didn't seem to work, but you learned a lesson from that?

Mike Davis: Yes. I could give an example that relates to the work we do on protection of land and environmental defenders. We document killings of defenders and publish on this annually. The evidence comes through a network of partnerships that we have around the world. And that data enables us, to some degree, to discern patterns, including which industries are most implicated in killings, where there is a degree of causality that one can report on with confidence. And one of the sectors which repeatedly comes through is large-scale agribusiness—the creation of plantations, and then the sourcing and trading of agricultural commodities that come from those. And that brings into focus very, very large international trading companies which specialize in agricultural products. For a while we did quite a lot of work which focused on them. And we thought that given the strength of the evidence that implicated them in human-rights abuses and environmental damage in various parts of the world, that this would be sufficient to create some appetite for change on their part and a basis for us engaging with them directly and getting some results.

The companies we're talking about here are primarily a small number of American firms. We're talking about the likes of Cargill and ADM [Archer Daniels Midland]. And I think our assumption was misplaced, because some of the largest of these firms are actually privately owned. They're not publicly listed, and that means that they have less of a reputation to protect; they're less susceptible to public pressure. To cut a long story short, we eventually concluded that good-faith efforts to have conversations with them were a bit of a waste of time. They would just field their CSR [corporate social responsibility] team and go through the motions of listening to the concerns from our partners and the evidence that we had collected and nothing would change.

So we changed our strategy and put more focus on efforts to build regulations, which would compel companies like that, or perhaps other companies that they depend on as providers or clients, to change their practices. And that brought us around to this piece of work that I

mentioned earlier on this EU law that was recently passed called the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.

Rollo Romig: It sounds like there are a lot of specific objectives that you're working on, but there's an ultimate objective of shifting cultural norms around how people think about and approach this problem. Are there lessons that you've learned about how to shift cultural norms in a bigger way?

Mike Davis: Yeah, we tussle with this one quite a lot as well. I would say that over the course of 30 years, we have found it relatively easier to record wins that involve changing policies, changing laws. And the more deep-rooted cultural piece tends to follow, or sometimes remains out of reach. This brings me back to, I would argue, the role of oil and gas amongst the fossil fuels as being so very successfully embedded in our economies, but also in our societies.

What we note there is that with these industries which are unusually powerful, even by the standards of large influential corporations or groups of them, that if you go directly to get the laws changed, it's relatively easy for these companies to obstruct that, because they have such a high degree of influence over people who make the decisions. We did a piece of research recently in the UK on the level of access accorded by the conservative government, which just lost power here, to energy companies over the last two years of its tenure. And we came to conclusion that an accompanying piece of that work needed to be more about trying to contribute to—because we can't do this on our own—a broader cultural change, in terms of just persuading people that these industries are not just a necessary evil, or something that we may not actively like but we have to accept, but actually something quite dangerous and harmful that we need to move away from as fast as possible. And this brought us around to the idea that as well as work on, yes, the norms, and standards, and the laws, we needed to invest more time in investigating and telling stories which showed the full range of impacts of dependence on oil and gas and of the activities of these particular companies.

That's still at a relatively early stage for us. We've really been concentrating on that, I would say, for a couple of years only. And one of the things you won't be surprised to hear is that progress is harder to measure. A classic piece of Global Witness work is that we do an investigation, we build a case, and we then move in and concentrate on trying to shift a particular law or perhaps some other international standard. And that can be a long haul, but it's comparatively straightforward to see where you are on that journey. When it comes to fundamental narrative shift, in the best-case scenario the impacts you're having are just harder to measure. When we are at our very best, we are an important contributor, but alongside many others it is more

difficult. It's a really interesting challenge both to do the work and also to demonstrate how it's working. But we think we do see signs that it is.

One of our more proximate goals here, certainly on this side of the Atlantic, is to make it so embarrassing for political and public figures to be seen to be associated with the likes of BP and Shell and Total, [so that] there's just less access accorded to them, less of the revolving door, less ability of those companies to advertise and associate themselves with reputable social and cultural institutions, that kind of thing. I would say that we have some experience in terms of cultural narrative change, but we're also still very much in learning mode. I would certainly not say that we're the experts at this stage.

Rollo Romig: What strategies have you found effective in getting governments, both nationally and locally, on board with your program?

Mike Davis: I think a lot of it comes with the investigative aspect to our methodology. We apply ourselves to building what we call the evidence base, the case for why there is an issue which just cannot be ignored. And that, when done well, goes a long, long way to make it very hard for public figures to just say, well, I can afford to overlook that, or to perhaps dismiss it. But then to actually build the constituencies you need to get a change, perhaps in the form of a new law. Then, of course, things need to get a little bit more tactical. You need to find allies. People who really believe in the change, or sometimes, dare I say it, think it will make them look good to be associated with building a case for change.

Where we can, we try to mix it up. We try to make sure that our issues are not seen as divided along party lines. For instance, taking an example from here in the UK, the outgoing conservative government is not very supportive on many of the issues that we work on at all. But we did work really hard to shape a new UK law about Britain's impact on forest globally through its supply chains, and we built a small but influential core of conservative members of parliament to help us get over any sense amongst their colleagues that this was just some left wing or liberal issue that they should not be associated with.

Another thing, because a lot of the work we do relates to laws and standards that affect companies, is trying to find some companies, or at least their investors, who will support us. Investors are often easier to win over, and they are, in a sense, a step or two removed from the business model which may be causing the damage. They sometimes take a bit more of a longer-term view as well.

On certain issues, we quite often have success in persuading certain companies to back a change. And that can be very, very effective, because it then makes it harder for companies that want business as usual to present themselves and their argument as the view of the business community writ large. And where this can get really interesting is where enough momentum has built that you can almost see large companies weighing up whether this is the moment for them to completely do a U-turn and get behind a change, because they can see that it's inevitable.

I can give you an example of this. Quite a while ago I worked on the way in which the mining and trade of certain metals coming out of the eastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo were financing all sorts of different armed groups there, including sections of the government army, which was as abusive as many of the rebel groups. This was the trade in what's termed conflict minerals. The aspect of that that we were focusing on was trying to get companies which had these particular metals—tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold—in their products to take responsibility for cleaning up their supply chains, making sure that they weren't sourcing any of these materials that could be benefiting the various armed groups in this region. Initially, the overall picture was one where large western electronics companies who were important players in these supply chains took an approach which was more or less, "Well, we don't know anything about this. We can't see a connection with us. How could we even know?"

And then, over time, the case built that there really was a linkage, and the supply chains could actually be traced. I mean, if we could do it, why can't the companies do it themselves? Then some of them just switched and the debate moved much quicker. They switched because they could see that the case was powerful enough that there probably would be a change in the law, particularly in the U.S. And some of them evidently made the decision that it was better for them to be first movers, seen as good guys, but perhaps gaining some business advantage through just getting on with it more quickly and getting ready sooner than their competitors.

That was very powerful, because they then effectively turned the screws on their suppliers, metal smelters and traders, who, unlike the electronics companies, didn't have a public reputation and were much less susceptible to public pressure. It wasn't suddenly the end of the story, but it changed the dynamics entirely. I just offer that as an example where sometimes reasons of principle, and sometimes pragmatism, [moves] the business community, which initially seems quite hostile, to come around to the idea that they actually want to be part of it.

Rollo Romig: Could you name an organization or a movement that you've taken particular inspiration from, either in their tactics or in their impact, and why?

Mike Davis: First of all, that's a fantastic question and one which we need to make sure we are constantly asking ourselves, because there are a lot of other groups out there that we learn from and share information and tactics with. And that includes the ones that are more obvious—other organizations that work on similar issues, maybe using a slightly different methodology, and maybe doing things that they're better at than we are that we can learn from. Or even see there's a case for working together in a partnership on some particular issue. But then, of course, there are other groups, particularly those in the Global South, and I would say especially those that are working on issues to do with protection of forests and of lands that are at risk of abusive exploitation by mining companies. Environmental defenders who are hugely inspiring because they do things which we will never be able to do or even come close to in terms of sheer levels of courage and resilience and ingenuity in the face of incredible hostility.

Quite often, the people we work with, and I would say especially if they're women, face the overall challenge of confronting powerful companies and politicians but sometimes members of their own communities as well, who just don't support what they're doing or are even hostile to it. Not even necessarily because they disagree on the point of issue, but because they just don't want to see that person, perhaps that woman or this person from a particular Indigenous group, playing a prominent role, because that in some way threatens their own position. And so we are quite privileged to work with a wide array of people, and sometimes these are individuals rather than organizations who have these qualities, who are the architects of quite enormous change. When we're in a situation where we can support them even a little bit by amplifying what they do, that's very, very satisfying.

Somebody who I don't know well, but have worked with a little bit and am constantly in awe of, is Vanessa Nakate, the Ugandan climate activist. People like that, who just have this extraordinary blend of skill, intellect, courage, and humility are just so energizing to be around and listen to the way they present issues. And this comes back to the point that we were discussing earlier about how you talk about issues in terms which make people listen. There are always things that I learn from hearing her speak, and many of her peers as well. There is something there that cuts through so much more effectively that completely escapes our more deliberate or trained way of communicating.

Rollo Romig: Do you have any specific insights or lessons learned that would help others working to shift cultural norms or get governments onboard?

Mike Davis: Some of the simple things which, for our organization, tend to underpin our successes are a degree of agility and the ability to jump on opportunities when we see them.

And also to take risks, particularly when there's some shift in the landscape that we are operating in.

To trust one's instinct and be willing to try things out and accept that those things won't all work. And that's absolutely fine as long as you learn from the things that don't work out. Being willing to confront powerful interests is an important aspect of our work. As we discussed earlier, we've acquired the experience and the capacity to manage those risks to some extent. So I wouldn't suggest it's the right thing for all organizations, but I think confronting those that are most responsible for causing harm is important, and it gets people's attention.

It also helps to cut through the abstractions which some issues are sometimes discussed in, where we can talk very eloquently about a particular issue but shy away from using any specifics that give a sense of not only who should be held accountable but also who has agency to make a change. Centering the experience of the people most affected is hugely important, but I'm sure they don't need me to tell them that. And when it comes to the narrative side, what's working for us, is to think about ways of telling the story which remain true to the long-term objective and the values of the organization but are, perhaps, a bit unorthodox, a bit more creative, if that helps to get the issue through to people who otherwise might not pay attention.

I don't mean the way one spins the story, but rather the angle one takes on it. If your ultimate aim is to create a certain change, there might be a very direct logical pathway to that which you reflect in the story you tell. But sometimes the way of generating leverage over an issue is to pick out one aspect that is perhaps less obvious, less central, but maybe the one that will give more of the people we need to get through to an entry point, a way of feeling connected.

Rollo Romig: That's such a great point. Thank you for taking the time with me today.

Rollo Romig (he/him) is a freelance journalist who writes most often for The New York Times and The New Yorker. He is the author of the book I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India. He teaches writing at The New School in New York City. He was born and raised in Detroit.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*