Priya Vora: Five months ago, I became a mom, and I suppose like any new parent I'm absolutely obsessed with trying to understand this little girl and her development. Science tells us that the neuropathways in her brain right now are more open and adaptive than they

[00:00:30] ever will be again in her lifetime. As humans, we basically go through this kind of reverse metamorphosis where our brains start out and these wild butterflies with beautiful imaginations. Then, as adults, we become these kind of caterpillars where everything slows down and becomes more rigid and fixed.

[00:01:00] Today I'm going to ask you to try and tap into that inner butterfly and imagine with me the way in which technology will change our future in development. Imagine, instead of being here today where 60 percent of humanity is offline, let's instead travel to our imagined future where every person on the planet is online and everyone has access to the world's knowledge. Let's imagine that every woman, she was getting paid, let's say

[00:01:30] fairly and equally to men, and she's getting paid electronically. She has the piece of mind that her cash bills won't be lost or stolen. Let's imagine that, through biometrics, she's able now to prove she is who she says she is, so it's easier for her to vote or to finally inherit that land that is rightfully hers. Then let's imagine that all this data is being processed around her, so she's instantly alerted whenever there's any danger to her,

[00:02:00] her family, if there is an earthquake that's being detected or a disease outbreak.

That is one future to imagine. If there's only one thing I want you to take away from this morning, it's this. There's absolutely no guarantee that with advancements in technology we will achieve that future, because we can just as easily envision a more

[00:02:30] dystopian future. One where billions of people who are offline, they stay offline, and research tells us their lives are worse for it. Or those who are less educated, frankly you and I when we're careless, we're subject to scams and misinformation, privacy breaches abound. That data algorithm that had been used for tracking diseases, it's now just a tool for government control. They're tracking the movements of minority populations.

[00:03:00] Then this term digital economy, it's just code for jobless growth. Companies are becoming more productive and wealthy and people aren't.

Some argue that these two futures, that they actually exist today, they're just unevenly distributed. Some of us are benefiting from technology, while others are suffering as a consequence of it. What I've learned at USAID in building our digital practice is that we

[00:03:30] collectively have an enormous role to play in determining which path we go down. This concept requires us to first be able to imagine the way in which the future could unfold so we can be smart about mitigating risks. But then it takes the hard work of influencing systems and policies that ensure that technology is creating opportunity and not stifling it.

[00:04:00] This equation here, this is actually one that is quite personal to me and starts with my mom. I'll see if I can do this without crying. My mom, she graduated from college with a degree in Indian art history, and she became a weaver. So to say that she didn't have very marketable skills is an understatement. She and my dad divorced when I was just a

[00:04:30] baby, and she had no money to her name. She intended on going on welfare but she couldn't afford the welfare application fee. A local community bank then took a bet on her, and with a loan from them she was able to go back to school. She and I lived in

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public student housing and just about every night she and I would walk to McDonald's and we would share a 19 cent hamburger. She struggled, we survived. She graduated with an MBA and a job at IBM. In those days, my mom had to imagine the future she was trying to create for me. But imagination without the hard work and the opportunity, it's just wishful thinking. She had the hard work. My mom is tough as nails. It was the system around her that offered her the opportunity. It was the bank, the university, the job market, the subsidized housing facilities.

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At USAID and among our family of partners, we're in the business of thinking about enshaping systems and policies that create opportunity. So when it comes to technology, we needn't be mesmerized with the technology. Of course, the connections and the devices and software and servers, those matter. But our role can be and should be in thinking about everything that wraps around that: the privacy policies, the business models and sustainability plans. What creates value for users? The motivations of governments and companies? Everything that wraps around the technology.

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So let's get back to the butterfly and caterpillar, and I'm gonna talk about an example where we helped create a biometric ID system that tracks the nutrition performance of women, and it was great. We're able to more accurately understand the lives and the changes in the lives of these women. But what if I then told you that we also, and I'm talking about the royal we, there's nobody I'm calling out here, we then created seven other biometric ID systems in this country tracking seven other dimensions of their health.

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This is the caterpillar where we are narrowly focused on our project outcomes, that technology we want to create alone not recognizing there's a whole world around her. You can imagine, instead, taking a step back and recognizing that these women are actually multi-dimensional people like you and I. We need or we have the opportunity to create one ID that allows her to register at all health facilities. That also allows her to vote, to get a bank account and get all sorts of other services. That approach, it's harder. Trust me, it's harder. It requires working across sectors, getting messy and working with partners. It requires taking on really sticky issues like data privacy. But, now, I'm very happy to report that, at the end of the year, these women should have exactly that ID system I'm describing.

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Today you're gonna hear many more examples of this more evolved approach of how we can innovate in our role to expand technology and make it useful for even the most marginalized people on the earth. So I will end where I began, and just say that I'm now in the position where I'm trying to imagine the future I'm trying to create for my daughter as my mother did years ago for me. What I realize is that my personal endeavors here are totally intersecting with my professional goals because this issue of how technology will unfold and which path we'll go down, it matters not just for development in developing countries. It matters for my daughter, for your daughters, and for all the daughters and sons around the world. Thank you.