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Get To Know Our Guest

GOPALAN BALAGOPAL

Gopalan Balagopal, ***former officer of the Indian Administrative Service***, brings over four decades of experience spanning district administration, child protection, and community-led climate resilience.

His work took a global turn when UNICEF drew on his services to help develop the State Party Report after India ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. ***He continued with UNICEF in Bangladesh, rose to serve as Global Adviser for Child Protection at its New York headquarters, and concluded his career as UNICEF Representative to the DPR Korea (North Korea) at the end of 2009.***

Retirement was only a new chapter. For a decade, he supported several countries in Africa, along with the Economic Commission for Africa, in strengthening their civil registration systems. Following the floods and landslides of 2018 in Kerala, India, he turned his attention closer to home. Working with the Hume Centre for Ecology and Wildlife Biology, an NGO working in the Western Ghat mountain areas of Kerala, and with the help of local government and young people, he supported the documentation of every damage site across the district. That effort laid the foundation for vulnerability maps and a district-level weather forecasting and disaster warning system, a model now being replicated in nearly all districts of Kerala and in other parts of India.

Since 2022, he has helped coordinate the ***Climate Smart Coffee Project***, an initiative of the Government of Kerala to provide better income to small coffee farmers in Wayanad while mitigating the impact of climate change with the support of science and knowledge. He holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University (Class of 1988-89) and was the first Mid-Career Student in KSG to win the Marcel Carbello Award for development of teaching material.

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HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- ***DR. KG: Share a little bit about the various roles you've held so far because you're still continuing to do tremendously exciting work and how do you squeeze in so much in the same twenty-four hours everyone else has? But walk us through a little bit around all the different reports you've had, what you're currently doing, and what's the driving force behind all that you do?***

- ***BALA: I started my sort of professional work career by joining a public undertaking owned by this government of India, which was the first industrial unit manufacturing chemical fertilizers to improve productivity of food crops and so on in Kerala. In the northern West Bengal districts of Jalpaiguri and Jajiling. I was the head of the local administration in those places.***

- ***BALA: I had an opportunity to go to Government of India to work in the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, at which time I had an option I had an opportunity to come to the United States and take a year of study as a mid career student at the Kennedy School of Government of at Harvard and then i returned back had an invitation to join the united nations children's fund UNICEF where I worked briefly in India and then in Bangladesh. I had an opportunity to understand the culture, the language, the people in these places. and then I went on to head the work on protection of children as a senior advisor with UNICEF at its headquarters.***

- ***BALA: I opted to go to North Korea, the DPR Korea to head UNICEF's work. And I was lucky to be there for a period of time which is longer than usual, three and a half years, and that I think helped me. To develop a certain, what shall I say, trust and confidence with the people who worked with me, and we could introduce certain innovative interventions which had not been possible in the past.***

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- ***DR. KG: Was there a red thread, a driving force, a compass that served as the driving force for all the decisions you took, all the career pivots that you've undertaken?***

- ***BALA: It was to strive to be as ethical and as much focused on integrity as possible in this journey. I believe also that there were certain values or learnings which I think are quite significant that came to me.***

- ***BALA: I think one of the critical qualities which I had found in people in various situations who did better in tougher surroundings where lots of negotiations and persuading people to take a particular path of development, it is the quality of emotional intelligence and empathy particularly.***

- ***BALA: Unless you are really able to stand in the shoes of someone else and see the world as they perceive, you cannot make a change there. I think the single most important attribute I would see in anyone who I would select to a leadership position is the ability to listen. And to listen. And very often to also back that up with a summarization of what you think you heard and get validation from the person who listens to you before you come up with you know your answer or something like that, you know. So that these things have been very important. And it is not only in the work sphere. It is equally important, and I cannot say that I've succeeded all the time, but I've learned the importance of this in in within my own family to when I'm negotiating or talking to my my wife or children, and now with grandchildren as well to in a societal context equally as in the workspace.***

- ***DR. KG: Share a little bit about how you have used this emotional intelligence that you just shared with us successfully in perhaps this part of the journey or really any story you want to share around how led from a place of integrity with difficult trade-offs, constraints of resources, different priorities of stakeholders, and leading and navigating through that?***

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- ***BALA:*** **I must say that in my journey, a lot of lessons came from a boss who came from the country you're now sitting in the Netherlands. The UNICEF program in Bangladesh was led by a charismatic Dutchman. His name is Rolf Kerr, and he's the one who recruited me to UNICEF. He had an ability to understand complex issues very clearly to come and he very very much wanted to count to concentrate on the best way of communicating what we are trying to do in the country.**

- ***BALA: What we do here must be on the principle of leverage, you know, like a lever applied to a small gear, which in turn works on a larger gear and then brings change. So he brought change makers into this country who were able to not only inspire in the immediate UNICEF team around him, but also go outside and work with a community which is very conservative, very paternalistic to help them realize that the situation of women and children within the society needs to be much more equal in terms of decision making, in terms of communication, and so on.***

- ***DR. KG: If you were speaking with leaders and professionals who look at this and say there are some similarities in our workspaces today, it's volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous in many ways. In a sense, that was also what you were faced with. When they think about what we can learn from Bala's experience, how can we create cultures of integrity and trust? Create teams where everyone's speaking with a united vision for the future in a way that can help us persuade our stakeholders to go with the plan, create trust. how would you advise them? What are keys to create those inclusive, inspiring, ethical cultures in workplaces that are so uncertain, so volatile, so ambiguous? and how did you do it? What can they learn from that?***

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- ***BALA: A team building approach is critical here. And it has to be a very inclusive approach. And you know, especially for an organization which draws people from all over the world, there are certain cultural perceptions and so on. And I remember and you need some assistance to be able to do it.***

- ***BALA:*** **We were lucky that UNICEF was very open. Open to learning opportunities.** ***And I'll take two examples. One was about a team building exercise for which we were encouraged to work within the sort of work sub-teams in which we have we do every everyday things together you know and then every member of the team was sort of encouraged to make a confidential communication to the leader of the team about anything that they feel uncomfortable or difficult to express directly in form of a note.***

- ***BALA: You'd be half sometimes your eyes go into your computer and you see something there, and and then, and these are all problems of being an Indian bureaucrat, who is is always in a multitasking environment where you know your office is a walk-in space and you know people would not even take a by your way to just come in and grab you and speak to you, and there'll be usually a number of people hanging out to you for various things. And so you know you necessarily have to survive in that environment of doing all this. So fully that really went home. And then I changed my way of functioning. And I think that helped me very much to bring about a different way of functioning.***

- ***BALA:*** **UNICEF permits you know growth-oriented HR opportunities. One of which was couple of them used to do, we had a training for using mind mapping as a technique for planning and which we did internally.**

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- ***BALA:*** **I had to go to New York for a training of UNICEF representatives globally, and we had a few sessions on negotiation skills, which was facilitated by the director of the Oxford program on negotiations. So he came and before that was the negotiation that I had to go through. Because we had a small compact country team, very informal, we used to meet all the time. I suggested to my you know representatives of other agencies, why don't we invite the Korean TP, national staff for work? To come into this. And they were horrified. They said, How do you even think of this? You know, because we spend all the time negotiating, and you want them to learn negotiation techniques so that they can beat you at this game.** ***I said, I know that we keep on banging our heads quite a lot without reaching anywhere. Probably if they learn efficient negotiation tactics, maybe both sides will save time. Finally they agreed. And unfortunately, when this was happening, I had to go out for some meeting. But later on, this man told me that it was a remarkably successful experience.***

- ***BALA: Knowledge is always free when best shared and most effective when well shared broadly.***

- ***DR. KG: For the young people out there, what are your observations on real world ethical dilemmas most relevant today? And for the young people out there who like yourself in that early stage of your career wanting to make a difference, wanting to do the right thing, what would your advice be to them on what the real world ethical dilemmas are that youngsters or people in the world should pay attention to? How to start making a difference?***

- ***BALA:*** **It's a very different, dark, foreboding world, especially if you are young. And I had this conversation with one of my grandchildren.** ***She said, everybody keeps telling us there is no future. This world is not going to continue to exist. How do you expect us to process this? And they're very, very disturbed about it.***

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- ***BALA: Giving or even for our own mental health, we need to hold on to some hope, which is maybe very local, very specific in some areas where you can touch lives and create some opportunities by helping others I think would be one way to cope with it.***

- ***BALA:*** **When the news around me, you know, of children being killed almost every day, and you know, it's it's sort of impossible. I spent a career trying to help these kids and mothers, and you get these this information and images, and it's intolerable.** ***Try perhaps selfishly, I try to focus not so much on that, but on what I can do. And I've been very blessed, to be having this opportunity. I think primarily the health and ability to to do this work and this entails a lot of traveling in the rural areas and so on. But it's giving so much of joy to me. Sometimes it's something you can do as an individual to someone in dire need that gives you that opportunity.***

- ***BALA:*** **We had somebody in this environmental NGO that I was working, who comes from a very poor family, and her father was diagnosed with a very serious heart condition that needed a total valve replacement, which is a very expensive procedure anywhere in the world, you know. I managed to help them do a fundraising drive, and also engaging groups of retired civil servants with whom I'm anyway connected. I was moved by the responses I saw. We found that people, there was a man who's a senior police officer who retired after being a governor of a state called this gentleman and spoke to him on the phone and said asked him how is he doing and we are trying our best to help. And there were people who were outside the country, even generous amounts, more than one person gave 50,000 rupees in one shot.** ***And before we realized we met the demand, and it gives you such a feeling of elation and joy.***

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- ***DR. KG:*** **Tell me help me understand a blueprint for how miracles happen, it's good people emotional intelligence, creating opportunities for everybody as you go around go along using your experience to hone an internal radar for spot potential gray area ahead of. And you've talked about clarity of communication in creating this teams, right?** ***Is there anything else you would add to this blueprint for other people to learn how to do this with you?***

- ***BALA: Being as open and transparent as possible with the people that you work.***

- ***BALA: Experience and enthusiasm make a big good combination. We've managed to do things which have now brought us to in fact getting gaining some international attention from three or four agencies: the World Bank, the German International Development (GIZ), an NGO with a footprint in more than 100 countries working on sustainability and climate change called Preferred by Nature. All of them have come together to make a consortium to help what we're doing with a grant which is quite significant.***

- ***BALA: What I was coming to was this thing of having an as open a means of communication and letting people because each person within your team has a personality, and if they are doing good, will have strong feel you know opinions and I've had experiences of a particular person who's very devoted, very interesting, but extremely opinionated and energetic, which the other people find very difficult to take. So one of the skills is, it's more like shepherding cats a little bit.***

- ***BALA: It's a skill which is difficult, but you must let them go and let them be together at the same time. This thing we started off the integrity and ethics of what you do is an absolute given that we must ensure at all times, despite whatever, you know, it's bound to happen in situations that there'd be some pressure.***

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- ***BALA: I think in integrity and ethics, and I think that the core, it is your own sort of conscience which should guide you more than anything else. You look inside and you find that direction. And and that thing is something which I think for people starting on the journey to to find what what are they and what what is it that they're looking for to understand themselves to meditate on your own being, be in a quiet space and try to see what is it that you need or you're looking for, what is it what brings you the greatest satisfaction over time. So that process is very important and it's not very difficult. Once you get that and you have that true North identified in your journey, the rest of the things I think will fall in place.***

- ***DR. KG: Is everything you said today felt like a masterclass for me, but what's the code, book, or advice that had a profound impact on your way of thinking and being that you want to share with us?***

- ***BALA: I would say a writer called Joe Dispenser, and his books, they helped me to go inside to understand myself deeper and help me to deal with it. And it's not only helped me, but I have referred this to people facing a lot of trauma and problems, even medical situations in which they feel so helpless.*** **Autoimmune diseases, for instance, which I have friends who deal with it, and they have found this therapeutic.**

- ***BALA: You need to put that into some sort of an intellectual framework that you can internalize as to why your mind and brain will be functioning in a certain manner.***

- ***BALA: I mean whatever time that we have, if you can make the time that you spend on this earth meaningful, that is a much better lasting gift to yourself, if nothing else for anyone else, you know that conviction is something if we can try to impart, it would be very valuable.***

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- ***DR. KG: In twenty four hours, how do you squeeze in so much time? Because anytime I've reached out to you just because I want a little bit of inspiration, you always respond.***

- ***BALA: I'm also very keen that the work that we do with farmers, coffee is an international product and 88% of the coffee we grow in India goes to a market outside. And the special feature we are trying to do is to grow this coffee in a sustainable manner.***

- ***BALA: Following ethical practices, empowering the farmers to be able to sustain themselves from the current situation in which they find where they were not even looking at the quality of the coffee they were producing. But for the first time we've got equipment into their hands. We organized them into farmer collectives. We have equipped them or with connections to markets which can provide them a quality based price. So that may require another opportunity if people are interested to share this thing because we are looking like this preferred by nature who I mentioned as one of the NGOs who are re reaching out. These people told us it's great, your project is called Climate Smart Coffee Project.***

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