

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Birgitte Bischoff:** We cannot wait for governments to tell what you should do. I think it's up to us to collaborate and don't really wait for anything. You don't need to be with a new title or to be a humanitarian to be a human. That's something that we can all do and make those decisions and not wait for for someone to decide for us.

[00:00:20] We are not bystanders. It is our story that is happening right now and it is a critical moment in time where we want to create that hope for all of us.

[00:00:33] **Nate Hagens:** Today, I'm pleased to be joined by the director of the European sector of the International Federation for the Red Cross Brigitte Bischoff Ebbeson for a conversation on the potential role of the Red Cross in navigating future global crises and conflicts Like the ones we discuss on this program.

[00:00:52] Brigitte is responsible for overseeing operations in Ukraine Ukraine, as well as other impacted countries where the Red Cross offers millions of people relief in the form of health, shelter, monetary and mental health support. With more than 15 years of experience working with the IFRC, Brigitte previously was the International Director of the Danish Red Cross as well as the co chair of the IFRC Reference Center for Psychosocial Support.

[00:01:18] The International Federation of the Red Cross has a unique opportunity to act as a united coordinating between multiple humanitarian crises at once, as we are increasingly likely to see in coming decades. In this discussion, Brigitte discusses her hopes and plans for how to make this possibility an impactful reality.

[00:01:42] With that, please welcome Brigitte Bischoff Ebbesen. Brigitte, nice to see you.

[00:01:49] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Nice seeing you, Nate.

[00:01:51] **Nate Hagens:** And I know how to pronounce your name, because I saw the Scandinavian drama Borgen, where the main character was Brigitte. So, we

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have, a lot of, things to discuss. You are the European Regional Director for the International Federation of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies.

[00:02:10] And I think for people that follow this podcast, who are aware of the meta crisis, the poly crisis, the human predicament, The Great Simplification, looking not too far in the future, we can see a huge intersection between your work, and, and the work of, of this podcast, but, but let's start here. you're working for the world's largest humanitarian network.

[00:02:36] Why, how, what inspired you to get involved back in the day and create a career at the Red Cross and, and doing humanitarian work more broadly?

[00:02:46] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, that's a big question. Thank you very much for having me here. And, to answer that, I think the honest answer is that one, one thing kind of leads to the next, and, and I've never had like the big master plan, but, but the, the truth is that it all started with a student job, in the Danish refugee council.

[00:03:10] And I think what started me and, and has kept on being the, The guiding light was that the job that I found there already as a student was meaningful and it was fascinating what was possible to do. So I think with time I became a humanitarian and, and this about having a possibility to work with something that has a purpose, that still is what gets me out of the bed.

[00:03:40] in the mornings. And of course, I mean, I've, I've been working in this sector for a really long time now and, and the last more or less 20 years, with the Red Cross. And, and I've seen that after I, I had children, that it became, that purpose became even more. it became stronger. I've been working in many different contexts.

[00:04:05] I've been working in Asia. I've been working a lot with Middle East. I've been working in Somalia, in Africa. And I think seeing that many people are treated in an unfair way because they don't have sufficient income, they're not able to access public basic services. That kind of thing is, is something that, that you think, okay, we can, we can make a difference to that.

[00:04:31] And, and that is really what is getting me out of, of bed in the mornings.

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[00:04:36] **Nate Hagens:** So, everyone, watching this program is aware of the Red Cross, but maybe you could give us just a brief summary of how many people, how is it affiliated with governments, which countries, how big of an organization is it, type, type things.

[00:04:54] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, so just before starting the podcast, I think you said, the NGO and, and, the, the Red Cross is not an NGO. The Red Cross is, like, you can say it's, it's not the UN, it's not an NGO, but something in between. And, and what is really important about the Red Cross is that each of the national societies, there would only be one in each country.

[00:05:18] And in each that national society would have a, a contract, with, the, the government in country. Those contracts are often really old. I've just been visiting Iceland. They just celebrated their hundred years anniversary. In some countries, we have 150 years anniversary where the Red Cross Society has been working in its auxiliary role with the government for all those years.

[00:05:45] And with a lot of changing, regimes, you can say, but, but still the Red Cross has been there as an auxiliary doing, following the seven principles, that, that is like the basis of a Red Cross society where neutrality, impartiality, humanity, And, voluntary service are some of the, really, key principles for a national society.

[00:06:15] So we're not an NGO, we're not the UN, we have a special agreement in country, and we work independently from the government, but in an understanding with the government. It's always a balancing role, but, but that is what is, the, the, the role of, of a Red Cross in our Red Crescent in country.

[00:06:36] **Nate Hagens:** And, and what was the initial, mission statement all those years ago?

[00:06:41] And is the mission statement still the same or is it evolving with, Red Cross, international and, or does, does each individual country have their own version of that or is it, is it, integrated across the whole world?

[00:06:55] **Birgitte Bischoff:** No, so I think the beauty of the Red Cross is that we base the work on people at local level that are volunteers to the Red Cross Society.

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[00:07:04] And then we build it on a very, very strong network. And you asked about numbers. I mean, we have a around 16 million people across the world that are working with either Red Cross or Red Crescent Society. And, and the mission is still the same. I mean, we are based on, on the, on the fundamental principles and, and we are, working from them.

[00:07:30] So it's, it's quite simple. It sounds simple. And, and that is on that basis that each national society has this contract you can say with the government. I come, from, from Denmark and the Danish Red Cross has a letter, that they base their whole function, in country. oh pardon, because it has not been needed really, is, is the assumption to, to change that, because it's a good contract, so no, the, the basics are, are the same, of course the evolving world is, is, is letting us to, to do new things all the time, but, but the basis is the same.

[00:08:09] **Nate Hagens:** So, speaking about the evolving world, the last five years have been full of, of world changing events from the COVID pandemic in 2020 to ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. Have these things changed, the way that the Red Cross, operates in any way?

[00:08:28] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yes, because as, as I said, we are, we are a network that, that, that take pride in, in evolving alongside the, the societies that, that we're working in.

[00:08:42] As regards COVID, we saw huge challenges, that were related to logistic supply chains. We saw, Many people having reduced earnings for themselves, for their families. We saw loneliness and mental health problems, remote working constraints. I think we all remember all of these things. So those were some of the challenges.

[00:09:07] Did they change the way we work? Yes, because we became I think as the rest of the world, very digital, we became dependent on, on, on new solutions. so, so yes, that alone changed a lot of, for, for how we worked.

[00:09:23] **Nate Hagens:** So I have so many questions. It's obvious to my viewers why I would invite someone who's the European director of the Red Cross, because there, I don't think there is a government entity I mean, I live in the United States.

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[00:09:37] There's health and human services. There's homeland security. I don't think there is a cabinet position or an area of the government that is uniquely qualified to deal with the things that you just said. supply chains, loneliness, people not having enough, to eat, kind of emergency sort of, of things.

[00:10:01] I guess there's FEMA, but it's not quite the same. So I'm, I'm very curious as to how much of your work is like, situational whack a mole, that things happen in the world and you respond, and how much of your work is envisioning scenarios that aren't for sure, but may happen in the future, and building up capacity ahead of those potential events?

[00:10:32] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, so that's a really, really good question. I think we have always been, a network that wanted to, to, to be prepared for what, what might be hitting at, at local level. And, and always been very concerned about what, what volunteers at local level, needed to be prepared for, because they are always the, the actors on the ground.

[00:10:57] They always the one responding first, then there might be, more support, from within country. And if it's a really big crisis also from, from global level. So. So that is also, that is always something that we have been doing. But what we saw, for example, with COVID was that this This is so big, and this is so global, and we need probably to start, preparing in a, in a different way, and, and we saw a phenomena that, that, that needed more time.

[00:11:33] Thank you. attention to the different dots. We can see in Europe very clearly, as I said, that there, the financial crisis that came, the logistics crisis, all of this, it, it needed some new tools and we, we needed to see all of those challenges as one challenge and try to work with them in in that way rather than as individual, isolated challenges.

[00:12:01] So, so that is why we started working, on, on poli crisis as a phenomena that we, we thought was, was an interesting way of, of looking at this. So have we done it all the time? I think we have been more, a little bit more siloed in our approach and we are now starting to, to, to grasp it in a different way.

[00:12:22] **Nate Hagens:** Did you ever see the movie Jaws back 50 years ago?

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[00:12:27] **Birgitte Bischoff:** No, I'm afraid not. I can't compare with that.

[00:12:30] **Nate Hagens:** There was a scene where they were out to hunt this killer shark and then Roy Scheider on the boat actually saw the shark and how huge it was and he turned around and said, We're gonna need a bigger boat. And I wonder if you as someone who works at the Red Cross, who is becoming more fluent and aware of the polycrisis, climate migration, economic hardship, geopolitics, all, all the things.

[00:13:01] If you have that feeling that you as the European director or as someone connected with the international Red Cross is going to need a bigger boat. I mean, I, I think the Red Cross could be the single most unique and uniquely capable organization to get a head start on, on what's ahead, but it's, it seems huge.

[00:13:21] what, what are your thoughts and, and how are you approaching that, that issue?

[00:13:25] **Birgitte Bischoff:** No, indeed, a bigger boat would be nice. more resources. and, and that is not the humanitarian reality. The humanitarian reality is, is vice versa. So I'm trying to, when, when we discuss this, and, and when we're trying to figure out the approach, of course, We always look for resources.

[00:13:47] We are always negotiating resources, but we also, I think, have to be smart about what is happening in the world, and, and smart about the, the way we work. so to optimize as much as we can, the resources that we have available and think about solving, problems rather. in, in bundles than a separate entity.

[00:14:11] So I think that's also some of the, the logic that lies in, in the poli crisis. And what we're also seeing is that whatever happens, it will be the same, people on the ground that have to be prepared for multiple, crisis, not, only, What can I say, a water crisis or a water event. So, so we have to be really smart about how we are making use of our resources.

[00:14:37] But yes, a bigger boat would be really, would be extremely welcome.

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[00:14:41] **Nate Hagens:** I don't know about your job specifically, but people in your position in the Red Cross is a large part of their job, just trying to get more resources, financial resources from government and, and maybe human resources.

[00:14:55] **Birgitte Bischoff:** from governments.

[00:14:56] We are, we are a very active network, with, with a lot of activities and those activities need resourcing, even though you work with, with many volunteers, the training, the, the, the, The preparedness doesn't come out of the blue, it, it requires resources at local level and it requires resources to, to societies.

[00:15:20] And then of course in, in times of crisis, much more than that. So yes, we do, we do advocate for, for the work that we're doing and, and we do engage with, with all sorts of stakeholders that, that might be able to help us, finance the work we're doing.

[00:15:36] **Nate Hagens:** So you, you mentioned 16 million people, affiliated with the Red Cross.

[00:15:41] How many of those are volunteers? And does that number fluctuate if there are natural disasters or humanitarian situations that, that require more help?

[00:15:51] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah. So, The 16 million is a number we have for for only for volunteers. And then we have a secretariat and we have also staffed staff in in each of the countries where you have Red Cross societies.

[00:16:07] So it's a mix. But the 16 million is is the big number. of people that are volunteering for Red Cross or Red Crescent Society. Then we have the IFRC, which is the umbrella organization of all the national societies. So we are their reference, you can say. and, and we, our, biggest job is to help national societies work, in the best way possible, and, and have the, the most like powerful and, and engaged national society at local level.

[00:16:39] And we, do all sorts of activities to, to help that.

[00:16:44] **Nate Hagens:** So in your experience with COVID, in the recent wars and your knowledge of the, the poly crisis, and a little bit of, of my work and The Great

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Simplification, what is your, Speculation or feeling about the role of volunteering in the future. and what is your experience?

[00:17:08] Do you see that people volunteer because it's the right thing to do and gives them meaning to contribute to a difficult situation or they feel guilty or They just are good humans and want to contribute. And how do you see the role and the idea, the concept of volunteering evolving as we head into a more uncertain, unstable world?

[00:17:33] **Birgitte Bischoff:** For me, volunteering is about taking responsibility at local level. And, and, and to answer the second part of your question from before, do people volunteer more when there is a crisis? Yes, indeed. that's when they say, Oh, I feel that I can make a difference. We saw lots of that during COVID, where people felt, well, but I cannot just stay home in, in my chair and not do anything when people may need me.

[00:18:02] So I think, going into, a a more uncertain world and, and, and the less stability that we're seeing at the moment. We see more people volunteering and more people wanting to make a difference, but also more companies wanting to make a difference and offering to their staff that they can volunteer for work one day or two days per, per year or, or something more organized in relation to a particular campaign.

[00:18:30] And I think all these, These activities are a sign that, that, that most people would like to make a difference, and they would like to make a difference also with the knowledge and the capabilities that they have. But they would also like to pack boxes if, if that was what, what was needed. So I think Most of us would like to do, make a difference if, if you can see the clear purpose of it.

[00:18:58] So, so I think that volunteers are on the rise and I think COVID has really proven that, in, in, in many countries, we, we got lots of volunteers also more than actually could be absorbed by, by the, by the national societies.

[00:19:15] **Nate Hagens:** 90 percent of what I know about your work, I've learned in the last 15 minutes, so I may be ahead of my skis here, but you and I, talked once before, before this, conversation, and you can envision challenges ahead, multiple,



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threads under the polycrisis, and I think you feel deeply that the Red Cross, is not prepared and could play a huge role in, the, the unfolding future.

[00:19:51] Presumably that when the crisis hits a community, a nation or a world, and there are lots of people that their natural pro social tendency is to volunteer and contribute, that would be much better. And I would argue, essential, that there's an infrastructure already existing where, Oh my God, look at what's happening.

[00:20:17] I want to help. And then there's a vector for them to do that. So how important is the Red Cross and the Red Crescent as such a structure, for, an undetermined, but, but risky future ahead of us.

[00:20:33] **Birgitte Bischoff:** I think it's really important to have that network, to have somewhere, where you feel comfortable going if, if you want to volunteer.

[00:20:43] And that was, if I refer back to COVID again, because that was such a good example. Many feel like going to. to something that they know already. And the Red Cross or the Red Crescent in country is a natural place to go. Also because in every state and in every municipality, you will find a Red Cross entity very often.

[00:21:06] and, And therefore it would be easy to find at local level. but, but what we also saw is that many would go on their mobile phone, find out ways, what can I do? And, and they would go in and be, volunteering just to maybe signing up to an app or whatever is, is available. And, and they would want to, to do something that, that really makes sense for them because they have particular competencies that they can offer.

[00:21:37] And I think it's our role to be able to also when, when we don't have a big crisis, to, to get on board these people so that they can actually be, contributing meaningfully and, and perhaps better when, when the crisis is happening. And that is what we have. been trying to do for decades already to, to help, volunteers be prepared for the crisis that are, predictable in, in their area.

[00:22:09] So many weather related crisis or, or health crisis, if we talk about a malaria area or a cholera, an area where cholera is, is, is coming often, or in some parts of Europe, we still have measles. Like, what do you do when that is

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happening? What is, what are the measures we have to take. How do we engage people to, to minimize the effect of that and, and to mitigate that it, it doesn't spread.

[00:22:36] So all of these things we, we know in advance. What I'm seeing now with the polio crisis is that there are many more dots to be connected and many more consequences because some of these crises are, are, are bigger in, in, in scope. and in scale. And, and the consequences are more widespread. And that is what we also have to be able to prepare for.

[00:22:59] **Nate Hagens:** So, yeah, let's talk about that. I don't know how fluent you are in the metacrisis, the polycrisis, all, all the things, but, but I know, you're quite concerned based on our preliminary conversation, knowing everything you do about the Red Cross and your growing knowledge about the polycrisis. What keeps you up at night?

[00:23:21] Well, what are, what are your biggest concerns of things that aren't addressed and need to be?

[00:23:26] **Birgitte Bischoff:** First of all, I would say that I'm still a learner on the polio crisis and, and, and we are connecting now with a lot of, really smart people and organizations, universities that, that have much more knowledge than us.

[00:23:40] And I think, what is, What is making me optimistic but also awake at night is that we haven't cracked the code of where is it that the Red Cross should engage and where is it that we, that it's not our role. Right now I'm seeing like a lot of challenge and I see many, many opportunities for Red Cross societies to, to be involved and, and we can, through the poli crisis lens.

[00:24:12] help, national societies to, to be much better prepared and to be, having a much longer lens on, on events that may happen. And, and that I think is, is, is the knot that we have to crack. Like where, how, how do we make the best use of all the, the research that has been done and the, and the different tools that we can apply to make us a more effective organization at local and, and national level in the different countries.

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[00:24:45] **Nate Hagens:** Well, this is where leadership, and vision, and scenario planning, come to bear because there is not going to be anyone in the world, not the president of the United States or of the UN or of the EU is not going to say here, Red Cross, this is what you should do. It's an emergent thing. You have to do what you think you can and should do.

[00:25:07] So what role does, scenario planning, take in, in the secretariat? like of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. How can you, without predicting the future, how can you best understand the landscape that humans and our economic and social system face in coming decades to inform, which buckets you should work on and which, might be better worked on by other entities.

[00:25:39] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, so obviously we don't, we don't come from scratch. We, we have a long history. We, we have a lot that we already know. so for me it is how, how do we best put that into play and, and, and make use of some of these newer tools where we try to spot tendencies, signal spotting, Trying to, to, figure out what, what are the events, that, that possibly can happen, Because we see the interconnectivity of many events, such as weather related events, that can lead to conflict about resources, conflict about resources can also, and, and we see financial, effects on that.

[00:26:30] You see migration. I mean, all of these things that we have talked about, they interplay in a way that we have to be better at putting together and also then realize what could be the consequences in different countries and what could be the across the border consequences of that.

[00:26:52] **Nate Hagens:** So just looking at migration, migration alone, we're going to need a bigger boat, to mix metaphors because if current trends, are anything, to base decisions off, migration is increasingly going to be a critical issue, with pressure, both from climate and geopolitics.

[00:27:14] So what do you think, just on the migration issues, are the most important factors for addressing, potentially overwhelming migration in the future, and is that, presumably, from my, naive vantage point, seems almost too huge for the Red Cross, alone to, to engage with, but could you play a leading role in, in those issues?

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[00:27:38] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Maybe it's not so important if we play a leading role, but, but, coming from the Europe region, we, we work a lot, on, on migration, and we have been dealing with internal migrants in Ukraine and a lot of the, the six million people that, that left Ukraine and have, spread around in, in Europe.

[00:28:00] countries. The Red Cross has been a very key player in receiving the people both in Ukraine and, and, and around in, in Europe. So it is a very, very big part of, of, of what we're doing. also, you may remember, Last time when there was a big outflux from, from Syria, I mean, Red Cross societies, and Red Cross societies have been, enormously involved in, in, in helping these, people to, to find their way in, in the new countries.

[00:28:32] Do we need a bigger boat? I mean, I think we need to look at the big picture with, a wider perspective on, on migration and the potential. Perspectives that can be multiple, because these are real human beings that are leaving a country, coming to a new country, we need to, well, I just say Red Cross and Red Cross societies are always part of, in many cases, part of the equation when people are moving across borders.

[00:29:06] **Nate Hagens:** So here's, here's what I'm thinking, listening to you. So the Red Cross has been around long time. I was a kid and I remember, you know, seeing things for donating and, and hearing Red Cross activities. So you're uniquely positioned in, in three areas. Number one is the knowledge on how to do the stuff that you do.

[00:29:31] Number two is the network. which is vitally important to connect, people on the ground within and between countries, but number three, I think you might take for granted it's, it's the brand. and it's the trust in an increasingly polarized and politicized and fractioned world because of social media.

[00:29:57] Red Cross, Red Cross is something that is on behalf of all of us and trying to help the marginalized and the suffering. So you've indirectly, but Over decades built a credible brand, that is post partisan, and goes beyond any, whoever won a recent election. So I think, I think your challenge, if I may, is integrating the knowledge and skills with the networks, with the, the credibility and trust in your brand and merging that with, A whole lot of things coming our way.

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[00:30:39] It's a big challenge and a big opportunity. what are your thoughts on that?

[00:30:45] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Maybe I hire you as a, as a, as a key promoter of the, of the Red Cross, because I, I, I very much agree, that, that we have, we have, a very strong brand and, and it's a brand that I can tell you we every day, protecting.

[00:31:03] we, we want to be seen as neutral and impartial in whatever, whatever task we are, we are getting on with because that brand and that reputation, you can build up for years and years, but you can lose with one wrong doing, you, you can lose it all very fast. So, so we collectively are putting a lot of emphasis in that.

[00:31:31] And, and in, in terms of, the communication streams as, as they're going now, it, it can be extremely harmful when, when Red Cross or Red Crescent is, is challenged on our neutrality and impartiality or just misquoted, or, or being used. People don't necessarily know how, how bad that can be, but being used in, in some kind of political campaign or, or as, as an example, that that doesn't really, belong to reality.

[00:32:07] So for us, the use, of our reputation, our global network to champion rights based politics. People centered approaches and leveraging our, our global, work is, is really important. It's not only to alleviate suffering that we're living, but also to foster systemic change and addressing, addressing vulnerabilities of the people that we are helping.

[00:32:39] and, and if we go back to migration that we talked about before, I mean, we, we, we always advocate for migration policy for policies that are aligned with our humanitarian principles. And, and really, so that was one point I wanted to make when you asked about migration, but also, I think it's also really important to state that most migrants.

[00:33:04] would probably prefer to stay at home. But conditions where they are has changed so much so they don't see, staying as an option, but then they go. And I think that's also, when I said looking at the big picture, I think that's a really important part of that big picture.

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[00:33:21] **Nate Hagens:** So when you talk about, migrants, are there internal models and, and you don't need to share any, any details or anything, but there are, are there models showing by 2035 there'll be X amount of migrants due to geopolitical displacement or climate scenario, X, Y, Z, or are you just kind of looking ahead the next quarter or two based on information you see on the ground?

[00:33:47] Or is there a, looking two or three steps ahead, aspect of the secretariat or the leadership at, at the Red Cross.

[00:33:56] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, I would love to have a, I don't know if I would actually, but, but looking ahead so long, I, I don't think it, it would be meaningful. I think the aspirations that one can have is to, to look at a different context and that we do and say, what, what are our expectations?

[00:34:14] Often, most of the time I, I, I can see that whatever we plan for, something else is happening. I mean, the, the last, events in Syria, we had been talking about that perhaps some, return would start to happen now because of different developments in the neighboring countries. And boom, something else is happening.

[00:34:39] And I, I, I think we, we, We have to be prepared for a lot, but preparing for very specific scenarios of very specific numbers, it, it, it honestly, with, with my many years in, in this sector, it, it doesn't necessarily make so much sense.

[00:34:57] **Nate Hagens:** How, how many years have you been at the Red Cross?

[00:35:00] **Birgitte Bischoff:** around 20 years in total.

[00:35:03] I started just before the tsunami in 2004.

[00:35:06] **Nate Hagens:** And. Has your personal temperament and response to uncertainty or confidence of outcomes, has that softened over two decades? Are you now more uncomfortable with dealing with uncertainty? what's on your plate today. And if there's a fork in the road, then you go down the new fork.

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[00:35:31] I, I think a lot of people would, would be uncomfortable with the vast amount of uncertainty and, and daily changes that, that must come across your desk.

[00:35:40] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, but I think it is my mentality to, to. Probably thrive with that. I don't have, I mean, of course, the better prepared you are for the uncertainties that can happen.

[00:35:55] So you know which toolbox you have to rely on and what team you have behind you. That means a lot. And that is what I'm investing in every day, so that when this comes, you can feel, pretty comfortable and say, if we don't do this, we do this. if, if we can't fly, we, we, we roll in a car and, and if you can't do another thing, then, then we find solution.

[00:36:18] So I think that's, that's what you learn to, to, to live in. But, but it comes, I would say pretty natural to me.

[00:36:27] **Nate Hagens:** That's good. so over 20 years, and most recently as the European director, which is a pretty senior position, how much of your job has to do you have to naturally be a diplomat because you've got elections that swing left and swing right and the Red Cross stays there no matter who wins.

[00:36:47] And so how do you find, diplomacy with humans, being a really important, aspect of your job?

[00:36:57] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, so diplomacy can be many things, I think, and, and what, what we try to do, not only me, but, but me with the team is to have always a focus on, on the humanitarian issues, to deal not so much with the politics, but, but but synthesizing people around what, what is happening for, in, in particular cases that we are discussing.

[00:37:20] I mean, often it would be around big disasters, but it can also be the forgotten disasters. It can be, people that, that are caught in, in, in a difficult place, in, in their life, in, in, in their country and, and try to advocate for them. So always have that first and not be so interested in where the, the politics are going, but, but, but find decision makers that are able to make a difference for, for you.

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[00:37:51] And then I will also say that, that many countries have, Like, good humanitarian departments in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs that we can talk to and, and who, who, who is part of this, like, more humanitarian dialogue. So, yes, that's, that's a really big part of my job, to, to do that, and, and, and a part that I really like.

[00:38:16] And I think the more we can, refer those stories and, and tell about the situation of real people in real difficult situations and, and, and help change that, then, then we are good.

[00:38:31] **Nate Hagens:** So you may not know this, but I follow you on LinkedIn. And in a recent LinkedIn post of yours, you wrote, how can we be better at preparing and responding to multiple and simultaneously occurring crises?

[00:38:45] And perhaps more importantly, how do we strengthen local communities to be better equipped to deal with poly crises? what is your answer to that question, Brigitte? And what work are you doing as the regional director at the Red Cross to respond to what, what we're referring to on this conversation as the emerging poly crisis?

[00:39:05] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, so it's a work that we started, I think, a little bit more than a year ago. And, and it was based on like a Cascade Institute report that I read. And I thought, okay, this, this is giving some of the answers. the polio crisis is, is giving some, some, some good connections that I didn't find, elsewhere.

[00:39:27] So we started talking about how, how can we do this? And, and we have been developing in, in, in not only in consultation, but in close cooperation with a number of thought leaders, a PoliCrisis think and do tank. And we have done that, within the, the, the Europe region to, to try to start small and see, can this be working?

[00:39:51] So we brought, what can I say, thought leaders in PoliCrisis to, to help us identify what are the interlinkages between the systems and how can we better navigate the difficulties that we have talked about today ahead. And what, what, what are the, the first years of this journey? So we, we were looking at that and to do that, we realized that we have to be developing more rigorous tools, better analytical tools, and then help ourselves and the national societies we're working



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with to apply a more systems thinking approach, adapting like systemic risk mapping methodologies, and then start developing scenarios that are not one sided, not one scenario for how many people will migrate.

[00:40:53] And then at the other side is what will be the impact of the climate crisis in this country, but, but put these things together. And that is what I think is, is a new thing that, that we will, we will look across sectors, to look at. at a wider, aspect of, of scenarios and then apply this strategic foresight to explore what could be the scenarios.

[00:41:18] I mean, you asked before about the, the numbers, I mean, but what could multiple scenarios look like? What could be the opportunities there and what could be the challenges so that we can walk in better prepared? That was the idea that we put together.

[00:41:34] **Nate Hagens:** I like that strategic foresight. Let me ask you this.

[00:41:37] Increasingly on this channel, I don't talk about solutions because I don't think there are solutions. I think there are responses and there's a million responses that will make the future better than the default if we do nothing. So is that Kind of same logic, because the, the, the polycrisis is so huge, do you also, without using the same language I just used, but is there a, a, a directional, objective of responding as opposed to solving on, on, in your work?

[00:42:10] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Well, I would wish that I could say no, but I, I think it's, it's our job to understand what, response would be needed. And the more we appreciate the interlinkages between different events, the better we can be. responding. and, and yeah, I guess, I guess the answer is yes, that, that if, if you accept, I mean, it, it sounds a little bit, academic, but, but if you accept that, that you will not know exactly what it is you will have to respond to, but you'll know, like, the framing of it.

[00:42:47] And, and you'll also know more or less what we have available to, to respond with and what we can add to, to it if, if need be. Then, then I think that we are still an extremely relevant, actor and, and, and also one that, that can look more than, than one month down, down the road, which I also think is important.

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[00:43:11] **Nate Hagens:** A phrase that I've used, recently been using for my own work is be plus in service of life, because for me to be perfect and get all of the white and the references on everything I do. I can only put out a few things a year, but I'm putting out a hundred that aren't perfect. They're just generally directionally.

[00:43:31] Okay. So I'm just wondering on all the challenges that the red cross will face in coming decades. There's almost like a humanitarian power law that applies where you want to. Get 80 percent of the benefit to help people and, structures and, and regions with 20 percent of the resources. Because if you tried to do everything, it would be impossible and you would spin your wheels.

[00:43:57] So what I meant was, do you try to get, you know, a bulk of some help in an area without trying to be totally prescriptive and, and inclusive to do everything?

[00:44:10] **Birgitte Bischoff:** That's for sure. And, and that is our reality because we, we are never just, if you look at the resources, resourcing perspective, even if we could do everything we wanted, we, we would not be able to because we didn't have the resources.

[00:44:23] So we are always trying to optimize the way we're using our resources, but also, Knowing that, we, we don't have the perfect setup. We have a good setup. We have people with, with a heart and with competencies that will act. And we saw that, when, when people started, crossing the borders into many, many countries in Europe, at those borders, you would find people that stood up, that, either volunteered on the, on the spot, or had been part of a Red Cross, society for long.

[00:44:56] and, and been volunteering for long, but all of them together managed to make this work. So I think this is what happens in reality. It is this, it's, it's the best you can get at the, at the place and, and time, where, where something is happening. And the better we can prepare for those situations so that we can, integrate.

[00:45:19] even more people, resources in this, the better we will be off in the long run. But, but, but yes, preparedness is, is a really important part of that, but we will never get it 100 percent right, and we will never be able to, to, to, what can I say,

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to be very academic about it. We have to be extremely practical in, in these centers.

[00:45:42] **Nate Hagens:** It seems like a small thing, but I'm happy that you say that because your organization, if someone said, we have to get this right, and it's got to be perfect, it would be a completely different organization. It would be unmanageable, I think, so, are there unique challenges or unique opportunities that come with functioning, as you said, as an international nonpolitical organization compared to other organizations that work within the borders of a, of a specific country or a specific region?

[00:46:12] **Birgitte Bischoff:** I think what fascinated me when I started working in the Red Cross was this, that there are always people. There are always people that, when you put your red vest on or, or your pin, when you come out, you always find someone who, who applies the principles in the same way and, and who, who will be there to, to help out.

[00:46:35] So that, that I think is unique. what is also Unique is our access. So whatever side of a conflict we are, we will be present at both sides and it will always be the Red Cross or the Red Crescent Society who will be able to, to, to operate also when things are politically really, really complicated.

[00:46:59] That I think is, unique.

[00:47:01] **Nate Hagens:** So We're at the tail end, in my opinion. I'm not entirely sure about that, but I'm confident we're at the tail end of a long, unique period of exponential growth in material throughput and, economic output in societies. So how do you expect the challenges and opportunities you just mentioned of an international, of any international organization, in coming decades as they're become.

[00:47:30] More resource constraints and conflicts globally as this unique period comes to a close, like what pressures or opportunities would that represent for international nonpolitical organizations?

[00:47:44] **Birgitte Bischoff:** If I start with the opportunities, I think we have huge opportunities. as, as I've said, I mean, we are a global network and we are

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operating, best, I would say at the, at the community level, and we are able to act immediately.

[00:48:01] We are not waiting to be mobilized by any headquarters. People see need and, and, and they would be sufficiently prepared to act. And at the global level, we, We are able to influence, to advocate and to mobilize and, and increasingly to connect all the dots that, that, that we have to connect. And, and then I think you said it yourself, we are globally recognized and, and seen as a trusted brand that we don't take for granted.

[00:48:36] It's something that we preserve, we protect, but we have really clear principles, by which we work. And in many instances that allows us to have. access to places where others do not have access. So I think that's, that's really critical in terms of, of opportunity. And then as we have also talked about, I mean, we have a, a cross section of capacities in both our staff and in our volunteers, and it's super broad specter.

[00:49:07] But if I should mention some, it could be emergency health, community health, Primary health care, water and sanitation, we have many people really good at logistics, and, and over the last five to ten years, the, the way we have worked with mental health and psychosocial support has really been exponentially growing, as also a recognized, challenge in, in, in most countries on, on the globe.

[00:49:35] We do. Thank you. Relief distribution, we, we can distribute cash really fast and, and through sophisticated apps, we do shelter management, so there is a lot of opportunities, that we already have, and, and that I think can, can be smarter in the way we, we work with them, but, but it's there.

[00:49:55] **Nate Hagens:** So I talked earlier about, knowledge and skills network and a brand, I guess a fourth attribute of what makes your organization special, is the speed, because from crisis to response, there's like one or two steps in the middle.

[00:50:15] There's not like seven steps. And so you can actually really respond quickly

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[00:50:21] **Birgitte Bischoff:** because we, we're there, we're already there. And, and that, right. For me, it was, it was amazing as to see how, how many, cups of tea and, and, and biscuits that were distributed and, and when they found out they were children and diapers and, for, for, for when, when people started leaving Ukraine.

[00:50:42] really, really fast. That was also a movement that I think very few had seen coming at the scale that it happened. But there we saw the power of, of the volunteers, not only in Ukraine, but, but, in Poland, in Romania, in, in Moldova, everybody wanted to help. And, and, and that is the power of, of having a network that can self activate.

[00:51:06] That's, that's really impressive.

[00:51:09] **Nate Hagens:** I just have too many questions for your time. I know it's probably approaching dinner time in Europe, but I'm just so curious about this. Do you as a European director of this major international org that has 16 million volunteers plus a secretariat and all this, is it?

[00:51:27] Like the bridge of the Star Trek Enterprise on a Monday morning where you're looking at all the crises that require humanitarian intervention and the Red Cross could do, I mean, is it like the humanitarian version of a hedge fund manager, your job, that you have to look at all these things, not to mention the in the future risks that you and I have been discussing?

[00:51:49] **Birgitte Bischoff:** So the very important thing is that, that, that we have an umbrella and then we have national societies in, in each country that are doing this. I think they, they are the ones who have a finger on the pulse on everything that is happening, at, at their country level and at their local levels. But of course, someone needs.

[00:52:11] to, to, to, to connect all these dots and, and, and be trying to be help being better prepared. And, and also try to, to look at, at the longer, with the longer lens. and then very often we get caught up in which this happened. We, we, we. We were not totally prepared, but now let's act on it in this way.

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[00:52:33] And let's get, there's pool resources. let's make sure we use our quite important search tools. let's, hire people for the right situation. So all of that is, is happening also within the network. So I will say my job is, is like a mega coordinator and, and connecting dots, job, that's, that's what I'm doing a lot of.

[00:52:58] **Nate Hagens:** I'm sure you're very good at it. how does the Red Cross, interact with other international organizations such as the United Nations? And what are your thoughts, on the future of the United Nations and its ability to act as a diplomatic bridge between countries in an increasingly uncertain world?

[00:53:20] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, so I just say that Humanitarian actors like the UN, like NGOs and, and the Red Cross. I mean, we, we deeply depend on each other because we are, we are always in crisis that are way bigger than, than what we have resources for. So, so we, we, we are always Thanks. When, when there is a bigger crisis coordinating with each other, and we have very big structures and systems for that, as you may imagine.

[00:53:51] so that with the un, they are special. Each agency is, is specialized and and the Red Cross is more across the board. Often the UN would work with national societies at the local level because they are the ones that are there. They're already there when. when the UN, starts to, to operate. So, so the complementarity is important.

[00:54:16] It's also important that we don't step on each other's toes or, or, or don't do, try to do the same thing in the same community, that would be really silly. So I think over, over the years, we have developed systems for, for how to avoid that and, and how to make use of, of the competencies of, of each of the organizations, and that again, requires a lot of.

[00:54:39] preparedness, in, in times that are more tranquil. and, and that's something that we invest in. And we, we do, communicate a lot, so that, that, that we are ready for, for when we do response together. Pete

[00:54:54] **Nate Hagens:** You're so diplomatic, Birgitte.

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[00:54:56] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Birgitte Yes. No, I don't know if I'm so diplomatic, but that's, that's a reality that we, that we are facing every day that we work in various, parts of the world.

[00:55:09] **Nate Hagens:** All right. So our previous 50 minutes, lead me to this central question of this conversation. How big is the mismatch between our current international governmental and non governmental institutions and what you and I speculate the world is going to need, given the topics of this podcast and your research with Cascade Institute and others, how big is the mismatch and how might we change that?

[00:55:42] **Birgitte Bischoff:** That's a very, that's a very big question. Can I start saying that? and, and I don't know exactly how, how to answer it. The, the mismatch is, is enormous. And, and as it seems like we, we are not, Engaging in some of the really big challenges that we have ahead of us, the, the increased climate driven disasters, the, the, the according migration, the climate crisis and environmental degradation, all of these things, we are looking at a world that is, having bigger crisis, less stability, for sure.

[00:56:21] **Nate Hagens:** Wearing your hat as the director of the European Red Cross, knowing that the mismatch is quite large, what can you outline as some steps that are important to, to expand the capacity of, not only the Red Cross, but, but similar organizations that are looking at the humanitarian interventions that are going to be needed in the decades ahead?

[00:56:43] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, so, As we talked about before, I mean, resources are always needed to, to be able to prepare better. But I, I think the consciousness of, of, of, of a world that is really changing in, in a negative direction, if you, if you look at, at the humanitarian perspectives alone, we will see a rising demand and we will see, limited resources.

[00:57:08] so, so what will be needed is to find ways of, of diversifying, our sources, to, to, to be able, to, to continue helping. And we will have to be able still to, to work in conflict areas, and in, in much more complex and interconnected crisis. So, We, we, we are, well, it's, it, it feels, hardening to say, but I mean, we're not looking at good scenarios for, for humanitarian work as such.

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[00:57:42] But, but we look at, at enormous needs to be, investing in that and, and also to, to invest at the local level so that, more people can, can help, at that level when crisis are happening because it will happen more and it will be more frequent.

[00:57:59] **Nate Hagens:** So building on that, dovetailing on that, in our initial conversation, I recall you using the phrase, proactive about being proactive.

[00:58:08] what does this mean, and what are some strategies that you believe could help us towards this, this way of being, and how do they interact with the things you've just outlined?

[00:58:17] **Birgitte Bischoff:** So, I think proactiveness is, is about being, Ensuring that, that we are being prepared, being, being aware of what may be hitting us.

[00:58:31] And, and, and there is, there are many ways that we, we can be better prepared. And, and one of them is, is, as, as we have discussed now, as if. in, in different ways, seeing that the crisis, are so interconnected and the more we prepare for, for, for seeing this and, and for, being able to react to that, will, will help us, and it will also help to not be as resource demanding as if we're preparing for, for, for 11 different scenarios, because as you say, we, we need to be prepared for, a lot, but look at that in, in, in bundles rather than in, in separate, working streams.

[00:59:19] So that is something about, being, being, proactive and, and trying to get a new lens on, on what it is that we're looking at.

[00:59:29] **Nate Hagens:** So let's put that in, in practical language, there are a lot of followers of this podcast who are listening to you. How, how might you suggest they become proactive about being proactive with the broader, umbrella risks, that we've outlined in their own lives and in their communities, whether it's in Europe or Asia or Australia or North America?

[00:59:53] **Birgitte Bischoff:** So for, for, for every person to be proactive, I think it's something about taking responsibility. it's something about realizing what, what is your own community about and, and can you help that community, the people that are living in that community in different ways than, than you're doing today?



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[01:00:11] can, can you help? the neighbor, the, the, the football club, whatever, but, but take some responsibility for, for, for what is happening at local level. And, and then I think many of us are, we know what to do better in terms of like mitigating, climate risk, but do we do anything about it? I think it, it's about being.

[01:00:37] More conscious about the, the world around you, but help, helping your network, be be attentive to your friends, to your family, to your neighbors can. is there anything you can do to, to be better prepared for, for a crisis that you know will happen in, in your neighborhood? Can you welcome people that have arrived recently?

[01:01:00] I mean, if they're maybe from another country? I mean, so all of these things are, are, are quite, Simple, but, but can help I think in, in, in, in creating a more positive environment that is also proactiveness.

[01:01:17] **Nate Hagens:** Is, is there any hope or discussion of the creation of a red cross or a red crescent for dolphins and hummingbirds and bonobos and forests?

[01:01:30] **Birgitte Bischoff:** I think there is something about taking responsibility for, for our own development, that, that will start, creating some hope. I think, yes, there is hope. we are all on the same planet. We have the same planet with water and air and animals and plants, and we, we have to share that. space. and, and we, I think what is important is that we cannot wait for governments to tell what you should do.

[01:01:58] I think it's up to us to collaborate and, and don't really wait for anything. and, and you don't need to be, with a new title or to be a humanitarian, to be a human. You, you need to be, I, I think, actively contribute to positive change. That's something that we can all do and make those decisions and, and, and not wait for, for someone to decide for us.

[01:02:27] And we are, I think, as, as you have also said, we are in a point of history that demands that we, that we are courageous and, and, and creative and, and have the compassion from all of us because we are, we're part of that story. We are not bystanders. It is our story that is happening right now. And, and it is a critical moment in time where we want to create that hope for, for all of us.

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[01:02:57] **Nate Hagens:** Thank you for that, that answer. if you could temporarily take off your Red Cross director of the European Red Cross hat and just put on your, Brigitte Bischoff hat, what advice do you have, to the individual human listeners of this show who are aware of, The Polycrisis and What's Ahead. Do you have personal advice, to, to people, watching this program?

[01:03:31] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, I think it'll be a little bit along the lines that, that I just said, but, but I think this You can't

[01:03:37] **Nate Hagens:** take your Red Cross hat off.

[01:03:39] **Birgitte Bischoff:** No, you know, it's, it's part of that. No, but, but But we all have to take responsibility for our own development. We, we do have to educate ourselves, and I must admit that I have, I've been shocked by seeing how mis and disinformation that we all receive, how much that influences the world, around us.

[01:04:02] And, and therefore I will say maintain healthy skepticism, look for your, your, information in one, in more than one source and engage in critical thinking, engage in dialogue with your fellow human beings and, and, and help, the logical connection between ideas and, and, and, and engage in, Reflective and independent thinking.

[01:04:31] I think this is more important than ever because we are in this sea of information, but we have to decide what, where we get it from and and also be critical about it. And then we can make decisions. engage in, what can you call it? a useful discourse, amongst our peers, but, but remain open minded.

[01:04:56] **Nate Hagens:** So I don't know how many of my episodes you've, you've watched, if any, but I ask, a short list of questions to all my guests. How would you, alter the advice you just gave for young humans, who are becoming aware of all this 15 to 25 year olds? do you have any advice to them?

[01:05:17] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, I think, well, I, I have myself, I have two daughters and, one is 16 and the other one is 18.

[01:05:27] And, and I see them wandering into the world with a lot of open-mindedness. And, and I'm very, worried sometimes, as I said about, about

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their, use of, of, of media, because I think that's where. That, getting information, learning things, I think they're extremely smart human beings, both of them, but how do you, how do you contribute to the world and, and how do I help them contribute to, to, to fellow human beings and, and, and to the world that they are soon going to be adults in.

[01:06:07] I think this about taking responsibility for, for not only looking for, the best and most well paid job, but, but, but where you can make a, a true difference and, and something that you believe is, is doing something with your life that adds value to, to the planet, if you want. I, I think that's important.

[01:06:28] **Nate Hagens:** What do you care most about in the world, Brigitte?

[01:06:31] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Wow, that's also a really big question. I think, if I could, I mean, we've talked a lot about this, the planet that we're all part of. I mean, having a planet with an enlightened civilization that, that would really, I think that, that I would care about, and, and maybe to rise above the current more self focused ethos where human life values, are more, more than assets.

[01:07:03] I hope that we can get into a kinder and more responsible civilization that respects both the humanity, but also the planet that we are sharing with. What is it? 8.7 million species. I think to respect that and, and, and think about that and, and do something about it. That would be my, my hope, maybe.

[01:07:27] **Nate Hagens:** It's, it's no coincidence that our mutual friend introduced us. If you had a magic wand and there was no personal recourse to you or the Red Cross, what is one thing that you would do with that magic wand to, improve human and planetary futures?

[01:07:44] **Birgitte Bischoff:** Yeah, so I was aware that you were going to ask me that question, but I thought I would like a lot of magic wands, but maybe one thing that would really help the world would be to decrease the gap between the very rich and the very poor.

[01:08:02] If we look at it as a zero sum, if we just decrease that gap so that some had a little bit less and many, many had a little bit more, I think that the world

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would be a better place to be. So that I would like to, to, to do with my magic wand. NM

[01:08:20] **Nate Hagens:** I would too, but then my systemic lens would, notice that if a lot of people had a little bit more than dolphins, hummingbirds and ecosystems would, probably have less.

[01:08:36] So it's a really complicated issue on where you draw the boundaries, of the impacts and the, and the benefits. But as far as. the wealthy having or losing, using less and having that reallocated. I'm fully on board with that.

[01:08:52] **Birgitte Bischoff:** I know it's not a simple math, but, but, but it, it just seems so obvious and, and, and seems more simple than I know it is.

[01:09:00] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, well, I mean, within countries and between countries, we know that inequality is a huge predictor of conflict and unrest and humanitarian crises that you are charged to respond to. So, narrowing that gap would make the Red Cross maybe less necessary in future decades or centuries or beyond. This has been very informative.

[01:09:29] Thank you for your time and for your ongoing, decades of work, on behalf of, of making our present and our future better than the default. Do you have any closing words for our listeners, maybe how they could get involved if they are interested in volunteering? We'll put, links to all your websites in, in the show notes, but do you have any closing words to share, Brigitte?

[01:09:52] **Birgitte Bischoff:** I think what, what I would like to say, I mean, it's not to be, very philosophical, but, but I think when you ask about what can you do yourself, I mean, we can all become positive change agent and not be followers, not relying on influencers or disinformation, but recognize and accept that change is, is our own responsibility as individuals and, and that we can use that to co create.

[01:10:22] as a global community, peacefully and with sound reason. And then I also would like to encourage to be bold and never give up hope.

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[01:10:33] **Nate Hagens:** That's great answer. But let me ask you one more question. Sometimes I ask guests if they were to come back on this program, you know, three months, six months from now, you've now given the overview of you and your work.

[01:10:48] And, hopefully planted seeds about the intersection of organizations like the Red Cross with the polycrisis and how important that is. But is there a topic that you have personal expertise and are passionate about that's relevant to, our common future that you would be willing to take a deep dive, on and explore?

[01:11:10] **Birgitte Bischoff:** So if you ask me six months from now, or, or maybe a year from now, I would love to come and tell you about what we have done with this poli crisis, how we have become better at connecting dots. This is something that I really want to, to be better at myself. and, and I think that we are in, in touch with so many interesting thinkers on this and, and, and they all seem so passionate about being able to help us in the right direction.

[01:11:38] So I would love to come and talk about that. And because that's, that's what, what is on my mind right now. I probably could, could talk about something else, but that I would have to think about. But, but this, I know that we're going to make a difference within, a not, too long, timeframe. And that I would really like to talk about.

[01:11:58] **Nate Hagens:** Let's do it. Gaia, speed to you on that. Let me know if, if I can help and thank you again for your time. Thank you so much. It was great to be with you. If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please follow us on your favorite podcast platform. You can also visit [thegreatsimplification](https://thegreatsimplification.com).

[01:12:18] [com](https://thegreatsimplification.com) for references and show notes from today's conversation and to connect with fellow listeners of this podcast. Check out our Discord channel. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Stinnett, Leslie Batlutz, Brady Hyan, and Lizzie Sirianni.