

Interview – Mukesh Kapila

Written by E-International Relations

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This feature is part of a series of interviews with the contributing authors of *Foundations of International Relations*.

Mukesh Kapila CBE, is Professor Emeritus of Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Manchester. He is also Chair of Nonviolent Peaceforce, Chair of Manchester Global Foundation, Adjunct Professor at the International Centre for Humanitarian Affairs Nairobi, Associate Fellow of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Special Representative of the Aegis Trust for the prevention of crimes against humanity, and Special Adviser to Syria Relief. He was Special Adviser to the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016. He has extensive experience in the policy and practice of international development, humanitarian affairs, human rights and diplomacy, with particular expertise in tackling crimes against humanity, disaster and conflict management, human rights and global health. He maintains a blog (Flesh and Blood) and is the author of 'Global Health', in McGlinchey, S. *Foundations of International Relations* (2022: Bloomsbury).

You chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* deals with Global Health – how did you first get involved in thinking about this particular issue?

When I was born, my mother commissioned my horoscope – a common practice in India. When I was old enough to pore over the mystical symbols on that impressive parchment, I understood that it was my fate to wander the earth. It seemed somewhat impolite not to fulfil the astrologer's predictions. Thus it was that my future vocation in international work emerged. Some 120 countries later, I am still engaged in international relations

When I was about 11 or 12 years old, my father subscribed to the "Readers Digest" and I used to devour all the health related articles in every monthly issue. The more gruesome the articles, the more my young interest was piqued, especially if they concerned exotic tropical diseases. And so it was that I had to study medicine.

Mark Twain was right when he said that the two most important days of your life are when you are born and when you find out why. Combining my cosmically-bestowed international orientation and acquired health expertise took me into global health (before the term was even invented).

In terms of your journey from one-time student to the academic and professional world, how did you find your way, and can you give a brief summary of your career thus far?

I studied medicine at Oxford and practiced clinically in Cambridge but then got bored with the neuroses of my relatively well-off clientele. I realised that doling out pills and potions all day long did not seem to do much good. That insight took me into public health to better understand the reasons behind peoples' illnesses – real and imagined.

And with the start of the AIDS pandemic for which there were no pills and potions at that time, I had the chance to test my theories of life and death by directing the UK's first national HIV and AIDS programme. That enabled me to visit many countries in Asia and Africa to help the World Health Organization set up the first generation of national AIDS control programmes.

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But then I discovered that acquiring HIV and then dying from it is just the subsidiary outcome of wider social, cultural, and economic processes that shaped personal risk behaviours. Public health bureaucrats did not appear fully equipped to manage this through their rational and reasonable exhortations in a fundamentally irrational, unreasonable world.

So, I came to the international development phase of my career, initially by dishing out large volumes of funds as an official of the British overseas aid programme (now, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office). That also brought me in contact with, and eventually to join the United Nations system. It meant pitting my wits against the Taliban in Afghanistan, as my first UN assignment. That was the start of numerous other international assignments.

Afghanistan triggered my interest in human rights that took me to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and assignments to diverse settings such as Burundi, Cambodia, and Guatemala, to see how human wrongs could be converted into human rights.

But then, I became the Head of the then largest UN programme in Sudan, I witnessed the 21st century's first genocide unfold on my watch in Darfur – having already personally experienced what genocidal violence feels like in the 20th century's last two genocides – in Rwanda and Srebrenica. Speaking up bluntly about this embarrassed my bosses at the UN and death threats from the genocidal regime in Khartoum hastened my exit from there.

I found safe haven in Geneva, slumbering in the ivory towers of the World Health Organization. But when the Indian Ocean Tsunami struck, my PTSD from the Darfur genocide was miraculously cured through the necessity to go and be useful by handling Tsunami relief operations.

From WHO, it was then just a short walk across to another Geneva-based organisation, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – the world's largest humanitarian network. My role there was to focus on humanitarian work across scores of countries in all continents. This was a masterclass in studying the human impacts of the world's conflicts and disasters that, inevitably, affected the poorest and most vulnerable most of all.

But then I started asking too many questions about why people had to suffer so much. I soon learnt that many humanitarian organisations don't like you to speak up or to question the humanitarian business model that garners the millions that a kindly public gives.

I never thought that I was cut out to be an academic but clearly being a questioning type, someone thought that I should be made Professor (now Emeritus) in Global Health and Humanitarian Affairs at the University of Manchester. I find that my students are not interested in the theory part of my lectures but most eager to listen to my underlying stories and experiences from which they can distil their own theories.

There were several other side tracks, and twists and turns of a somewhat accidental career that, for the curious, can be found in my bio on my website.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I have always had a restless mind and my thinking has evolved over many decades of witnessing some of the most defining global events of recent decades. And struggling to even shape some of them – for better, if I could. How and whether that made a difference can be judged by anyone wanting to peruse my books, *Against A Tide Of Evil*, and *No Stranger to Kindness*.

Do you think it is more important for academics (and students by extension) to dedicate most of their time to understanding the world, or instead actively to working to change it?

I think that this is a false dichotomy. Anyway, the traditional sequencing of first 'understanding' the world and then

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‘changing’ it is all wrong. For me, first comes the desire to seek a better world and then to envision – on first principles – what that would look like. That provides us with a worthwhile destination to aim for as well as point towards the direction of travel. Along with that comes the essential motivation and energy to embark on any journey of change-making which is always fraught with risks and hazards. For that we also need to build up sufficient courage and resilience. Then, and only then, is it worth seeking to analyse and understand the forms of the world that are impeding our journey, so that we are better able to overcome them.

My other writings, on my blog, *Flesh and Blood*, illustrate how this process works for me in relation to a diverse range of world challenges and issues that capture my interest or imagination.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in and around the discipline of International Relations?

I think that there needs to be much more debate around the optimal balance between the ‘local’ and the ‘international’ when it comes to tackling common or shared problems. Perhaps a new form of globalisation has to be invented which is more efficient and reduces the harms caused by the present version that depends too much on the hyper-connectedness of our societies and economies.

What is the most important advice you could give to students who are starting their journey with International Relations?

Go out and see the world with your own eyes and not just read about it in textbooks. I would also be content if readers of my chapter are left with a nagging doubt that all that glitters when it comes to global good is not gold. And, finally, to ask: what is better at shaping more effective international relations: selflessness or selfishness?