

Remarks by Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter:
2008 Skoll World Forum Awards Ceremony
March 27, 2008
University of Oxford, Saïd School of Business

President Carter: Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much, thank you. Thank you.

My favorite cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine is of a young boy looking up at his father and he says, "Daddy, when I grow up, I want to be a former President". Well, one reason that the little boy said that -- and I agree with him -- is to be able to participate in a program like this in this historic place, where I visited not too many months ago to be honored myself, and to be a partner not only in this transient moment but, I hope, on a permanent basis with The Skoll Foundation. I've looked forward to being with all of you tonight, ever since Jeff first invited me. And before I accepted, though, I asked him, what is a social entrepreneur? And his answer surprised me, and I say honored me. He said, you are one. Well, I did some research and I found some inspiring definitions, and let me read just a few. Someone with new ideas about some of humanity's oldest problems and willing to take risks to implement those ideas. Another one is, someone who is willing to learn and eager to teach, someone who looks at problems and crises and sees only opportunities. And another one -- I don't know if it applies to me or not -- someone who is abnormally persistent, stubborn in fact.

Well, I thought about the social entrepreneurs in my life who have meant something to me and helped to shape my life. As a matter of fact, some of them are completely unknown, and some of them later became famous. Among the five people who shaped my life was Willis Wright, a Black sharecropper who had never had anything under his control in all his life except 35 acres of land and two mules. But he was a leader. He was courageous, stalwart, intelligent, admirable in the times when I grew up in South Georgia, when racial discrimination prevailed, the so-called separate-but-equal policy that was established by our own U.S. Constitution and prevailed in discrimination against our Black neighbors for about a hundred years. Willis Wright was asked by his fellow church members in a remote little church if he would represent them and become the first Black man who ever registered to vote in Webster County, Georgia. And he was not a political activist but he said, yes, I'll do it, so he went to the courthouse. And there was a trick in the South then. There were 30 questions that had to be answered before someone could register to vote if they were Black. Even an accomplished lawyer couldn't answer all the questions. He didn't answer the questions. He came to see me and asked me what he should do about it and I said, Willis, I think you

devoted to five so-called neglected diseases -- that's a definition imposed by the World Health Organization -- that afflict tens or even hundreds of millions of people every year. They are diseases that most people in this audience probably have never heard of -- dracunculiasis, onchocerciasis, lymphatic filariasis, schistosomiasis, trachoma. You see, we don't know them. But hundreds of millions of people know them, which is a proof that rich people have already eliminated them and they can be eliminated. We go into their most remote villages and into the most remote homes on earth in the deserts and jungles of Africa and Latin America and we give them a chance to learn how to improve their own lives. We give them the responsibility and the knowledge and a little bit of assistance to make changes in their own communities. We have at The Carter Center the International Task Force on Disease Eradication, the only one on earth, charged with analyzing every human illness that exists and ascertaining which ones might theoretically be completely eliminated from a given country or region

about 20 years old. I saw her holding what I thought was her baby in her right arm, and I went up to ask her what the name of the baby was. It wasn't her baby, it was her right breast, terribly elongated and swollen. A worm was coming out of the nipple of her breast. I'll never forget it. I learned that she had 11 other Guinea worms emerge from her body the same year. I finally convinced the chief that our facts were accurate and that the only negative allegation we were making, we were not against their sacred pond but just about these worms that were in the pond, and he finally let us help. He only did it because I said, look, we will not do anything except under your control, and in fact we'll let you do all the work. Rosalynn and I and Don Hopkins came back a year later -- zero Guinea worms. And those people, since that time, have never seen and will never see another Guinea worm.

[Applause]

Pres. Carter: Well, we've done the same thing in 23,600 villages -- I'm an engineer, so we count everything -- in countries across Sub-Saharan Africa and three in India--three in Asia -- India, Pakistan, and Yemen. We've found 3.6 million cases of this disease, and in every case the villagers worked heroically, and some had very difficult times. South Sudan, for instance, was in a war. Two million people had been killed in the revolutionary war. We couldn't get into the south. We finally negotiated a peace agreement, a cease fire for six months, that let us go into the southern part of Sudan. And in all their nations, there are now less than 9,000 cases left, a reduction of 99.8 percent, and we know every case on earth and we're taking care of it to the best of our ability. And I'll be going to Africa next week, as a matter of fact, to Ghana and to Nigeria, to honor four countries that became Guinea worm-free last year, and we'll soon have it eradicated, the second disease in history, both of them orchestrated directly by...

[Applause]

Pres. Carter: ...both orchestrated directly or indirectly by a social entrepreneur named Don Hopkins.

The most powerful tool we have is not food or money or medicine, or even the necessary filter cloths. It's the dedicated work of people who, for the first time in their lives, understand that they themselves can take charge of a difficult problem if given the means and information and correct the problem. The Carter Center, like the Skoll Foundation, is an action agency. We rely on people, on experts like Don Hopkins and Dr. Borlaug. They communicate with people in need and give them a chance for self-respect and hope for a better future.

When we go into villages, we often find other serious health problems. I've seen neighborhoods have onchocerciasis or river blindness. And I won't go into detail

Borlaug has been the guiding light. We've finished treating 9 million African farmers, and they are able to double or triple their production of food grains.

Well, it's easy to become discouraged in the face of the world's tragedies, which are voluminous. I'm sure that everyone in this room has felt the pain of discouragement and know its debilitating power, at least if not in you then certainly in those whom you know. But heroic social entrepreneurs are not daunted by intractable problems. I'm now 83 years old and my wife, Rosalynn -- well, I won't go into Rosalynn's age. She's a good bit younger than that. And our staff, for some reason, has never been comfortable talking about our deaths, so they refer to the prospect of reducing my level of participation. But I can tell you that we've made careful preparations, and when this time comes, then the work of The Carter will continue, and obviously so will yours. I know that Jeff Skoll feels a sense of urgency, and so do I, as we assemble in this beautiful and historic place. People are dying, children are starving, our planet is in trouble with Mother Earth betrayed by her own children. Ignorance festers in the human race, just as Guinea worms fester in some human bodies. Creating understanding among people, I would say, is the most pervasive need in our world and the most effective solution to its problems. Communicating with an African chief or convincing the leaders of major countries, especially my own, just to talk to each other is a notable challenge and achievement.