

Champions for Social Good Podcast

Fighting Global Poverty Through Impact Investing & Partnerships: A Conversation with Yasmina Zaidman of Acumen

Jamie: Hello, and welcome to the Champions for Social Good podcast, a podcast for people dedicated to social impact. I'm Jamie Serino, Director of Marketing with the MicroEdge Division of Blackbaud. We're here today with Yasmina Zaidman, Director of Strategic Partnerships with Acumen. Welcome, Yasmina.

Yasmina: Thank you. Nice to be with you.

Jamie: So can you tell us a little bit about yourself and a little bit about Acumen?

Yasmina: Sure. So I am at Acumen since 2003. I've been with this organization for what seems like a lifetime, and I've had a chance to see it grow and evolve. I think Acumen as an organization has really been known to be kind of a pioneer in helping to develop new solutions to global poverty. When I joined, my background was in working both in a sustainability space with corporations for a time, and also in the social entrepreneurship space. And so I was sort of thinking about how do those things come together? How do we use tools of business to create really outsized dramatic change in the world? So Acumen has dedicated itself, since we started 15 years ago, to investing in businesses, investing in leaders, people who can drive change in their communities, and also in ideas. What are the big ideas that focus on new models, innovation, business models, that can really create that outsized impact in the lives of the poor.

Jamie: Great. So it's sounding a little bit like what we hear more of these days of like, would you say public private partnership kinda model?

Yasmina: That's become a big part of what we do. I think we're probably better known as being a pioneer in the impact investing space, thinking about ways to deploy capital that can help to seed and spur new business models. Over the past few years, we've learned about the power of partnerships, both through the work that we do directly, but also by the entrepreneurs that we support. More and more of them are looking to partner with governments, with corporations, as a way to scale, as a way to increase their impact.

Jamie: Okay. So can you tell us, maybe provide some examples of people or organizations you've worked with?

Yasmina: Yeah, absolutely. So we kinda see ourselves as part of an ecosystem of different kinds of organizations, but the one that is at the heart of what we do is the work we do with entrepreneurs. So we invest patient capital, which means capital that is not focused on short-term profit maximizing return, but really long-term support that helps these companies to stabilize their business model to grow, and ultimately to get access to new forms of capital. So one example of that is a company we work with in East Africa called Sanergy. And they have a really exciting business model that looks both at the issue of sanitation, ways to make sure that people have access to clean, dignified toilets, but also to remove the human waste from low income communities, which is a huge problem in terms of the spread of disease and lack of dignity, and to convert that into a valuable product. So they've created a whole revenue stream around sale of fertilizer, organic fertilizer that can help improve farmer productivity. So really cool, sophisticated model that they have been developing and expanding. And what we're seeing is with their model partnerships are really important. So the ways that they work with investors, like Acumen, the way they work with local governments to help bring these services into communities, and the way they work with corporations that are interested in the agricultural side of their business, helping farmers get access to fertilizer.

Jamie: Okay, That's great. So would you say most of the organizations you work with that are almost like a B-corp, they are businesses? Are there any non-profits or...

Yasmina: We've worked with a few non-profits but they are the ones that are kind of building a business within the non-profit, and are able to take either debt or equity. 'Cause our investment comes in the form of debt or equity. And that's something that we do see as a trend, but most of our companies are for profit.

Jamie: Okay, cool. So I liked hearing about Acumen's model, the virtuous cycle of growth with impact. Could you talk to us a little about that?

Yasmina: Yeah. So that's something that we've been thinking a lot about, because we've worked with so many great entrepreneurs who see a convergence between the growth of their business and the impact of their business. We feel like we have something to say to the broader business community about what a great business model can look like. And so, the work that we're now doing with about a dozen major global corporations, taps into that idea; that a great business model, not just a social enterprise, but any business achieves both growth which is an objective for a business, but also impact. And so the virtuous cycle is something that we talked about in a report that we published that actually looks at how you can feed those things in together. So how do you create an opportunity for a great employee to join your company and attract the talent you need, to create great products that people wanna buy, but that also create social value? And in terms of sourcing, how are you sourcing the materials, agricultural materials or raw materials in ways that enhance communities? So in every part of the business you have an opportunity to both strengthen the business, but also have a positive impact on communities.

Jamie: Okay. Yeah, we're seeing a lot more of that as well. Do you feel like Acumen is seeing the growth of that concept?

Yasmina: Yeah. I mean I think there are frameworks out there that we've certainly learned from and benefited from. Shared value is one. I think a lot of people are still feeling their way. How do you build that kind of business that's not just business as usual. And we think there's gonna be a lot of learning experimentation before people really get that right. So, it's one of the reasons why we're excited to build bridges between the entrepreneurs in our portfolio and large corporations, because the entrepreneurs we work with are very comfortable with innovation and experimentation, and they can maybe help larger corporations to see what's possible in terms of innovating their business models.

Jamie: Okay. What other parts of the world do you fund organizations in?

Yasmina: I feel like we're everywhere, but we're not obviously everywhere. Our focus has been in East Africa and West Africa, as well as in India and Pakistan. We've been in both regions for a very long time. We more recently expanded into Latin America. We have an office in Columbia. And just this year, we started doing investments in the United States. And so here, we're looking at ways that businesses can reach communities that really have been overlooked by either government, or traditional businesses. And again, very much in partnerships. So how could entrepreneurial solutions help people gain access to the market, gain access to government services? So we are feeling very global these days.

Jamie: Cool. Are you across the spectrum in areas that you help in? I know it's directed towards poverty, but you spoke a little bit about sanitation. Do you also go into maybe health on those areas?

Yasmina: Yeah. So we have four main focus areas for all of our investing. Energy is a big one for us. We've invested close to \$20 million in energy companies, and those companies have cumulatively impacted about 65 million people.

Jamie: Wow.

Yasmina: So really excited about the potential for impact there. We've also been doing a lot of work in agriculture, as well as health, which is our oldest portfolio, and education where we look at both ways to support innovation around primary education as well as workforce development. So people who are looking to get into the formal economy, but need to have a different set of tools to help them do that.

Jamie: Okay. And your work in the US, does it focus on any of those four areas more particular than others?

Yasmina: Yeah. So the big focus areas in the US are around access to healthcare, workforce development, and another one which hasn't been a specific focus internationally, but financial inclusion which we see is underpinning a lot of the work that we've done globally, but is another area of innovation in the US.

Jamie: Okay. And when you work with organizations, do you find that you have to continue to fund them, or do you prop them up until they can maybe find another funder or be sustainable on their own?

Yasmina: Yeah, it's a great question. The relationships that we form with the companies we support are definitely long-term. So we would imagine that we might be participating in more than one round of financing, but ultimately our goal is to help them graduate to other sources of capital that may be slightly more commercial. And in that case, it may be that we have a chance to exit, or we may stay involved to really be a clear voice for the focus on poverty, and to support them in other ways. So we do a lot beyond just investing that looks at how can we help them address their business challenges, gain access to the networks that they need, and also how do we measure impact because ultimately, our supporters wanna know that the support they provide to Acumen does achieve really outsized impact in the lives of the poor. So that ongoing relationship allows us to learn more about the impact they're having, whose lives they're touching, and what that impact really means.

Jamie: Okay. And do you have an example of any of the innovative organizations you've worked with in the energy portfolio?

Yasmina: Sure. So one company that we've been working with, again in East Africa, is called Burn. They manufacture cook stoves. And the idea there is that most people are relying on charcoal to cook their food. It's expensive, and it creates smoke, it creates a lot of indoor air pollution which is a huge health challenge in the developing world. So this stove allows people, from the day they start using it, to dramatically cut down how much they spend on charcoal, and also the amount of smoke that they're dealing with indoors. So we've worked with them for several years. They are the bestselling cook stove in Kenya, and they're really ambitious in terms of thinking about how to serve more of the market.

Yasmina: So along the lines of the partnership conversation, we had an opportunity to work with Unilever, who's really interested in supporting the hundreds of thousands of tea farmers they work with in East Africa in ways that will help them improve their lives, improve nutrition, and they honed in on Burn as a potential partner. So we worked with them to help them launch a new product that would be suitable for people living in rural areas who collect wood to cook their food, rather than using charcoal. So they're just in the process of launching a new product, with support from Acumen and Unilever, that will be distributed to tea farmers in the Unilever supply chain, through their local distribution networks as well. So really exciting coming together of a lot of different players to leverage the strengths of each of us, and ultimately have a great impact for tea farmers.

Jamie: Yeah, that's great, and a great example of doing something for good, but also for the business, and to benefiting both. Do you have any other examples of when a company noticed what you guys were doing, like Unilever did, and stepped in? Do you have any other examples of that?

Yasmina: Yeah. Absolutely. So we've just started working with Barclays for the Acumen America Program. It's a company that's been really excited about the role of entrepreneurship in driving economic growth, in driving employment. And those are both things that are really important to them. So they've come on board to be the

anchor partner for workforce development in the US. And what's exciting about it is they're not only helping us to find and develop these innovative companies here, but they're really committed to bringing their non-financial assets, their capabilities. And so we've had members of the Barclays team working with us to really help us strengthen our due diligence process, the way we work with these companies to get market data. And we're in the early days of that relationship but really excited to see how we can build both from a partners perspective with the financial support they've offered but beyond that with the capabilities that they have and ultimately ways that can help inform the way that Barclays engages with these communities.

Jamie: So when it comes to workforce development, do you have any advice for organizations that maybe haven't even begun that, they don't know where to start, they don't know how to start?

Yasmina: Yeah, it's a hard question. I think it depends a lot on what the goals they have are, but we've talked to several companies that, particularly in the international context, they're thinking about the people that are in their supply chain. They may not even be direct employees of their company, but more and more corporations are really aware that anyone in the entire supply chain in some ways they're accountable for. So what they're looking at is ways to both help people get into that workforce, so how do you train people to participate, and then people who are in the workforce already, how do you look beyond what happens inside the factory or inside the company, what are they going home to? And how are they using their hard-earned income to make their lives better? And I think that expansive view of what it means to be a producer or an employee is really important. It's like a re-definition of employee accountability, or compliance, or sustainability. And so we learn a lot from the corporations that we talk to that are getting very creative and thoughtful about how to engage with the people throughout their supply chain.

Yasmina: And a lot of them are saying, "We could do a great program, we could get a great NGO and we can help these people, but what if we could find a way to bring an entrepreneurial approach to this and see this as a market that we can help support? So if someone is working for us, they're earning income. If we can help them use that income in ways that are more impactful in their lives, then they've created an added benefit, but without having to fund it with grant funding, in perpetuity." So that's where we think entrepreneurs can play a big role in bringing products and services to these different kinds of workforce communities that allow them to access health, allow them to access education and start to really move out of poverty as opposed to just getting a little incremental income.

Jamie: Right, right. Do you find that you end up connecting the dots and connecting people and organizations? 'Cause one of the things that we sometimes hear is that there might be a lot of organizations or people who are working on a problem and they may not be talking to each other, and do you find that all of a sudden now you're engaged with someone, you get dropped to the situation you find, and do you find yourself connecting these people and stuff like that?

Yasmina: Yeah. Well, I think because of where we sit, working with so many of these amazing social enterprises and increasingly connecting with folks in the corporate space, a lot of requests for matchmaking, and we would have to be a team of nothing but matchmakers, I think, to make that work efficiently. So what we're trying to do is create really strategic convenings and resources that kind of help people find each other and spark that connection around collaboration. So we've been organizing pretty selectively convenings that we do either here or in Africa or in Europe that bring together people that are increasingly convinced that corporations and social enterprises can benefit from working together. So we've had this event in Oxford, which is what helped us create this new report called 'Beyond Dialogue' and in it, we really try to push people to be honest about what their gaps are, what their needs are. Because if you show up and everyone tells a great story about how successful they are, then it's like, "Yay, let's pat ourselves on the back and go home."

Yasmina: But if you can start to have a conversation about where things are hard, where people don't have the knowledge or the relationships they need, people can start to connect the dots themselves. And we think that's a better way to spark that rather than to try to manage it. And we've seen some real success. The partnership between Burn, the cook stove company, and Unilever came out of one of those discussions. And it was a

brainstorming conversation about, "Here's what we need, here's what we need and here's what we have to offer," and then them kind of joining forces.

Jamie: Right, nice. It's actually gonna be another question that I had that when I have conversations like these and filled with optimism and, "Wow, there's so much good going on," so where are you running into roadblocks and hurdles, and what is... You know there's so much work still to be done and what are your thoughts on that?

Yasmina: Yeah. I love that question 'cause now I have to like walk the talk. [chuckle] So I think that people are very excited about partnerships right now. Everyone understands that the work we wanna do, we can't do it alone and I think there's a lot of enthusiasm behind it, but the work of partnerships is very hard. And so a common refrain of what makes it work is we have to align our incentives, align our goals. That's like 101. And so we've had those conversations where it's like, "Well, it seems like we could really help each other based on what we're each trying to achieve," but the next level is, what I call leadership work, it's recognizing that not all the incentives are always articulated, it's getting a little below the surface, so what are the different drivers that companies might have? They're not just driving towards one thing, and really encouraging people, and these are individuals, whether they're in a social enterprise, or in a corporation, or even in a government agency, to be as honest as they can about what their limitations are and how they define success.

Yasmina: And I find that getting to that point can take time, some people don't wanna get there, they'd rather stick to the party line, and it gets in the way of partnerships coming together. So I think for us, as a relatively small organization, we wanna hone in on those individuals and organizations that are willing to have their hard conversations as early as possible because we don't have the bandwidth to spend years and years talking to someone who's not really willing to get real. So we talk about that in our meetings that we're asking people to take risks. We're asking people to be vulnerable, and they're individually in their organizations driving change. They have to figure out, "How do I change my company or change my organization?" so that we can actually come together. The status quo isn't gonna cut it anymore, and so everywhere we go, we're looking for people who really believe in change and the kind of leadership that that requires.

Jamie: Right. Do you have any advice for... This is also probably a hard question, but do you have any advice for the person in the organization that's trying to make that change? 'Cause as you're talking about that, what's going through my head is that I think some of the larger organizations have made that change because they get called out on it. They can't go around denying that maybe something's wrong 'cause they're so huge. And they are successfully, I think, maybe making some changes, but then it's maybe if you're under the radar a little bit, you're not getting called out on it, then you have to come forward and admit certain things. So do you have any advice for the people in the organizations that wanna do that and they're worried about the c-suite or the board or something like that?

Yasmina: Yeah, I love that question, and I talked to quite a few people that are in that position, and they're like, "Where do I begin?" I think like any... Again, leadership work, I think it starts by recognizing that you can't just do it on your own, so I really encourage people to find like-minded communities, to be around people who've gone through that process, to hear their stories and understand what that journey looks like because no matter how courageous and enthusiastic you are, there's so much to be learned from people who follow that path. So there's... Communities I would say... Like the work that we've done to bring people together. The shared value summit is another one people are very honest about the challenges they face building these kinds of partnerships. And there's something called the League of Intrapreneurs, and so the intrapreneur is like an entrepreneur, but they're driving change within a big organization. And I always encourage people to read what it is to be an intrapreneur, to find other intrapreneurs because that comradery, that shared learning can really help people on their journey, and they don't have to do it alone.

Yasmina: But I always tell people, "Just begin," because as soon as you start to reach out in your own company or in your industry, I think you'll find a lot of affirmation of what it is you're trying to do. And you're talking about, like you said, changing the way the board thinks, changing what's going on in the c-suite. That does take a 'C' change within an organization.

Jamie: Right. Yeah, and there's some risks there, but I think that's great advice to find like-minded people, and I love the idea of the intrapreneur. I think a lot of people wouldn't think of themselves like that, but they are that, so that's really cool. Shifting back to... I'm curious about your work in education, and what some of the things that you've seen there maybe in Africa or in India or even here in the US, and what are some of the changes that you're seeing happening there.

Yasmina: Yeah, education is a really interesting space because obviously there's a huge role for the public sector in education. There has to be, to create a level playing field. Where we've been excited is to see things that can supplement what the public institutions are offering. In India, for example, we work with a company called LabourNet, and they're really helping people to get into the formal economy, that maybe haven't had a lot of education that has allowed them to easily get jobs in the formal economy. They really meet people where they are and help them go from, again, being part of an informal economy doing day labor or not even working at all, to getting their first job in construction or doing data entry.

Yasmina: And even for women who may have a really hard time getting a job outside of their homes, finding ways to develop skills that allow them to start their own businesses at home. And so it's had a huge impact, and really getting people over that hurdle often being the first people in their family to be participating in the formal economy. And again, this is an organization that has all the challenges of figuring out who to partner with, how to create the right revenue model, and they have been working quite a bit with government which again, has all of its pluses and minuses. It's a great way to scale, but how do they maintain the same kind of quality, attention to the impact for the people in the organization. So it's a company that we're really excited about, and the impact that they've had in the lives of people who are truly marginalized has been extraordinary.

Jamie: That actually brings me to a question that... Do you see a model, and then look to scale it or do you try to get that person or organization to scale it? I don't know if that's possible, or do you then look for similar things in other countries? Because if you work with a community, that's great, but how can you make that happen across a whole region, et cetera? Do you look for those types of opportunities?

Yasmina: Well, there's sort of two models for scale. One is a company can just get huge, and they can distribute their product or make their service available. One of the companies we work with D.light, is one of the pioneers in solar lanterns and solar lighting, and they've really scaled globally. They sell their product in over 40 countries, and they've impacted something like 50 million people with access to this product, so that's one model. The other is replication, where a company may not solve the whole problem, but they might demonstrate the potential for that model to work and then be replicated either in their own region or outside of it.

Yasmina: We've worked with a company called WaterHealth International that really explored for the first time how you could build a market-based approach to providing safe drinking water. And there was so much skepticism when they started. We made our investment back in 2004, and people said, "Poor people won't pay for water, when they're getting it for free everyday. Poor people shouldn't be charged for water. It should be free," and again, the free water that they had was not potable. And so they said, "We believe people will pay for water that tastes great, that is healthy, that keeps them from having medical bills." And that was the big experiment. And now it's 12 years later, they've provided access to water to millions of people, but more than that, they've catalyzed a sector. So people now recognize that there is a market for this. And they've imitated it, or replicated it, or expanded it in other geographies.

Jamie: That's great. Well, how did they get them to pay for the water?

[laughter]

Yasmina: The things that I think people responded to were the reliability of the quality to know that it's being tested every day. The experience of collecting the water, so thinking about how to make it convenient for

people to get the water they need. They added in delivery. So instead of having women spending hours a day collecting water, instead you had water showing up at home. People weren't necessarily that worried about what was in the water they were drinking that was unsafe, but to have a step up. To have the dignity of knowing that you're giving your children safe water, and to have the convenience, was something people wanted to pay for.

Jamie: Yeah, so there were few factors... You've kind of packaged a bunch of factors in there for them. That's great.

Yasmina: Well, and it took them time to figure that out. It's not like they walked in and they had the idea. It's been iteration, testing, and different things in different markets. So that's what excites us about the entrepreneur at the heart of this is that they're willing to test and refine all the time to get it right.

Jamie: Cool. And so when it comes to something like education, really probably any of the areas you work in, but with education, do you find yourselves running up against governments or cultural barriers that may be risky, that need to be challenged, like sending a girl to school for example. Do you find yourself in the middle of those types of things?

Yasmina: I think the biggest issue we see, and we definitely have seen this with education, and probably every area where we work, is the issue of trust. So I don't think we would ever try to overcome a cultural barrier and convince people to do something that they don't feel is in their interest or aligns with their cultural priorities. But even when people are looking for a better alternative in terms of water or education for their kids, a lot of them have been so disappointed in the past. They've been offered something that wasn't the quality or reliability of what they wanted. So for example, there's been a lot of bad cook stoves in Africa. So our cook stove company needs to not only provide a great product, but overcome the mistrust that is there. The same thing has happened with solar lanterns, the same thing has happened with water.

Yasmina: And so promises that have been broken, so say, "We're going to deliver this to you," and then it hasn't been, means that they have to overcome that. And it took us a while to understand that this patient capital has to be even more patient than we thought. Overcoming that mistrust can add years to the ability of a business model to succeed. And again, that's where we feel like helping these companies to leverage the insights, the knowledge, the capabilities potentially of corporations who may have great trusted brands, or may have already built pathways to engage with consumers, could be a really interesting way to support our entrepreneurs. But we would say trust is one of those huge issues that you can't underestimate what it takes to overcome that.

Jamie: Right. And a similar question, and it may be a similar answer, but like the way a cultural barrier could get in the way of sending people to go to school. What about competitive barriers? So you're funding someone who's coming in and disrupting a market. So kind of being silly here, the company that was providing the coal for those stoves, do you find yourselves in the middle of that type of argument?

Yasmina: Yeah. I think a lot of our entrepreneurs have had to figure out how to work within an environment where they are coming up against competitive forces or just a structure that doesn't work. A lot of our agriculture companies, for examples, are trying to cut out the role of the middle man who can very easily manipulate markets. If they have access to transportation or storage, they can buy low and sell high. And that means that the farmer doesn't really get the benefit of the crops that they're growing. So if you have a aggregator who wants to work directly with farmers to help them capture the value, store their product when the prices are low, and sell it in a more steady way over the year when the prices are high, you're running right into the middle men.

Yasmina: And so what some of our entrepreneurs do is they look at those folks as people who are looking for an opportunity. So can they be part of the business model? Can they be part of the business? So they continue to benefit, but not to the detriment of the consumer or the farmer. And that, again, that takes a lot of creativity

and that doesn't always work. And not all our companies succeed. These are really significant, structural challenges that they face. And then all of a sudden there could be power outages, or violent elections, or... So it's one of the reasons why Acumen, as an organization, we stand with these entrepreneurs for the long-term. We're not looking to make money from the investments. Our supporters aren't looking to make money. The idea is, can we stand with these entrepreneurs in the hopes that we'll learn what's possible. And frankly what's not possible. Or where we're gonna need a lot of other kinds of support to come in before we can break through. So what could governments or other partners do to help break down some of those barriers, that's a big lesson that comes out of a lot of the work we do.

Jamie: Yeah, and I love what you said about cutting out the middle man, and that you used one example. But I think the past 15, 20 years we've seen, across probably centuries, we've seen a constant cutting out of the middle man. An acceleration of that I think with the internet, and access to technology and things like that. And just the notion in learning about, "Well I could go around this person, this organization." Do you find that a lot of your entrepreneurs, a lot of the organizations you invest, that a lot of times it's about that?

Yasmina: Yeah, I think sometimes it's about that, cutting out the middle man, especially if the middle man whatever it may be, it may be the distributor or the financier is really looking to take as much of the value as possible. What we see a lot of is this kind of radical vertical integration where entrepreneurs feel like they have to build every facet of their business because they're trying to build a new business infrastructure. And again, you can imagine for a small startup, that can be really hard, but where they themselves will figure out product design, product manufacturing, distribution, marketing, every piece of the puzzle. And our hope is that over time as you build a stronger foundation of social enterprises who are trying to create value for communities, that they can start to build a new infrastructure, 'cause it's just not effective for one company to try to vertically integrate when they are relatively small.

Yasmina: And so that was the starting point, these entrepreneurs saying, "If I'm gonna do this right and we're not gonna cut corners, we're not gonna sell a shoddy product, we're not gonna cheat the customer. We're gonna do it right all the way through," they vertically integrate. And then, over time, they're looking for ways to say, "Okay, maybe I don't have to do every part of this business myself." So what's exciting is to see entrepreneurs partnering with each other, governments looking to do more to support entrepreneurs so they don't have to do all the pieces themselves and even large corporations saying, "Wait, we could buy from you, or sell to you or distribute through you," but if it's based on relationships of trust that ultimately are thinking about the end user or the customer, then we see real possibility. If it's a traditional relationship of, "Oh, here's a new way to make money," and kind of get value out of the supply chain without giving anything back, then again, you see those challenges emerge.

Jamie: So you talked a lot about having an impact and developing good outcomes and stuff and so I was wondering what's your measurement tool and what kind of measurement structures do you put in place?

Yasmina: That's a great question for us 'cause I think impact measurement has always been really important to our model. It's the upside of Acumen's work. And so we've had to think carefully about how do we measure that, how do we articulate that. In some ways because we do invest the capital that we have, we have some easy financial metrics. We can look at the financial performance of the companies we work with and their ability to raise capital. So we measure how much new capital comes into our companies, and it's about 5x leverage.

Jamie: Wow.

Yasmina: So for every dollar we put in on average, our companies raise five times that much over the course of our investment.

Jamie: Great.

Yasmina: But obviously, social impact is the key and it's one of the hardest things to measure. So what we've been focusing on lately is developing measurement tools that are really appropriate for social entrepreneurs. Rather than sort of using the traditional tools of what is it that donors want to see, we're thinking about what is it that communicates the value to a consumer of having access to this product or service, is it improving their lives, is it saving them money? And then what's the value to the entrepreneur to get that data? So moving away from the entrepreneur has to give us data because we invested, and it becomes a financial burden for them or takes time away from their business to what information could we give you as an entrepreneur that helps you do your business better? So for example, finding out exactly what the demographics of their customers are, helps them understand if they're reaching the right customer.

Yasmina: Finding out what the customers feel about the product, the experience, the after sale service, helps them identify gaps in their business. And so we're seeing a lot of excitement from entrepreneurs to work with us to help get this data. And we use readily available technologies that really bring down the cost of getting this information so we can use mobile phones, whether it's through text or through voice, we can have people on the ground that are asking questions, in local language, to understand with just a few key questions: Who the customer is, what kind of experience they've had and also get their feedback. And it's been amazing to hear the voice of the customer, people saying, "Here's what I love about this product," or, "Here's what I think you should change about it."

Jamie: Right.

Yasmina: So it's a different approach to metrics, it's less investor donor driven and much more entrepreneur and customer driven.

Jamie: Do you have a sort of playbook that you provide to the organizations that you fund? Be it for measurement or just maybe for finances, things like that, do you have a playbook?

Yasmina: I wouldn't call it a playbook, I think the things we've learned about the value of measuring impact, ways of sourcing capital, ways of scaling, it's something that we can provide as an investor plus. So we might work with them on ways to source talent. And there's some things we've actually helped create, like a diagnostic tool that an entrepreneur can use. But it's very hands-on, and for most of these companies, it isn't really one size fits all. So we bring our entrepreneurs together in every region to help them learn from each other, gain access to insights. But again, I think we haven't turned it into a playbook per se because what we've seen is that each of these companies is sort of struggling slightly differently with some of these questions and so we're trying to create, again, that kind of ecosystem of resources, input from our team, from our partners. We now work with several companies that provide advisory services to the top 100 companies in the world who are offering their services to our entrepreneurs. A great example is EY. They provide low bono, which is not free but very low cost, top quality advisory services to entrepreneurs around some of their key operating challenges. And it works for them because they're getting exposure to engagement with these entrepreneurs, but it has huge value for our entrepreneurs as well.

Jamie: Yeah, that's really cool. What do you do to manage your portfolio? 'Cause you're investing and like you said, some things work and some things don't. What do you do to manage that and do you find your investors are increasingly wanting more information about that and measurement and all that?

Yasmina: Yeah, so one of things that has worked really well for us is that we have local presence everywhere that we invest and our teams are almost exclusively local folks who know the region, know the issues there, are committed to the region. And so that's given us a great infrastructure to help identify investments and work with them over the long-term. And so the kind of support that they're able to offer is not just, "We've done this deal, here's the capital," but, "How do we help you with your next round of financing? How do we help you deal with these business challenges?" And now, because we're doing all this partnership work, "How do we help you link in to new partner opportunities?" So that's made a huge difference for us. And I think in terms of what our donors or our partners are looking for, they really are interested in learning from these companies, so data

matters to them, but often what they're more interested in is, "What are we learning about how people access healthcare? What are we learning about agricultural supply chains?" And so that's something that we've really started to focus on is building this capacity to distill lessons, to take the data, and communicate out to our community about what we're learning.

Jamie: Nice. Okay, is there anything you feel like you'd want to add?

Yasmina: Well, I guess just thanks for giving me this opportunity to talk to you all. The big themes for us as we grow have been around partnership and measuring impact. So I think it's just important to go beyond the initial excitement that I think a lot of people felt about using investment as a tool for change. That's one piece of the puzzle. It's kind of what happens after that.

Jamie: Right.

Yasmina: And that's become really important to us, so thanks for giving me the opportunity.

Jamie: Great. No, thank you for being on the show. This was wonderful. Thanks a lot. For our listeners, I hope you enjoyed this episode of Champions for Social Good. To learn more about Acumen, you can visit acumen.org and follow Yasmina @yasminajz on Twitter. And you can subscribe to the podcast so you don't miss an episode. And you can keep up with the conversation between episodes by following us on Twitter @jamieserino @microedgellc and @blackbaud. Thank you for listening.