

Arthur Jones (00:05):

Driving more social value for people, communities, and investors is not a corporate checkbox exercise.

It's a vital element for organizations that must increasingly demonstrate their purpose beyond profit, generating greater value for stakeholders and shareholders. Creating meaningful social value requires integrating a tailored social value strategy and iterative mindset.

To do this, you need the right mix of leadership, data-driven solutions, and cross-sector expertise. When organizations make and form responsible choices, they can drive growth, improve efficiency, and enhance their reputation, all while creating long-term value for society and the environment.

(00:50):

The two guests on this episode are celebrated for getting this mix right globally. Dr. Mary-Kathryn Adams, who is known as MK in this podcast, is the chief executive officer of Simetrica-Jacobs. And Toyin Ogunfolaju is the director of social value and equity Americas at Jacobs.

(01:09):

You've both got fascinating backgrounds, with anthropology for you MK, and community outreach and program management for you, Toyin. How have these different foundations equipped you to become leaders in the social value space?

Toyin Ogunfolaju (01:22):

Sure. I actually started my career working at a law firm. For me, that left a significant imprint on me, as far as not only communication, effective communication, but the difference between the law versus the spirit of the law. The idea that there's a gray area within things and sometimes we have that understanding in the social value space as a whole.

(01:52):

I then moved on to be a manager in operations for a public transit system. Specifically, manager operations for their para-transit, providing transportation for people with disabilities. That was a significant exposure to understanding what it is to be not only providing public service, transportation being a significant public service to people, but also those individuals who are attempting to still navigate those systems even though sometimes those systems aren't necessarily built for them. That also then pushed my involvement in community engagement.

(02:35):

That's spurred my love and talent around operations, what it means to be on the ground. What it also means when policymakers make decisions and how that impacts the folks on the ground. I would say everything about my jobs, my roles to now has really allowed me to be in this particular role that I sit in today and try to move forward with that powerfully.

Dr. Mary-Kathryn "MK" Adams (03:03):

Yeah. I think what's interesting is I've had a similar wiggly line, if you will, in career terms to where I am now. Very few things are a straight path. I'm an anthropologist, but when I went to university, I'd never heard of anthropology. It wasn't something that had been offered at secondary school level.

From the first course that I took, I was absolutely hooked and fascinated by the study of people. I couldn't believe it.

Almost like, "I can do a degree in this? People do this? This is a real job?" I've always really been fascinated by that, and also by really specifically urban anthropology. So the relationship between people and space, between place and space, between people in place and space and how we interact. And really, the power of good urban spaces and how they can affect people's lives.

(04:06):

That led me to the decision that most take when they finish a doctorate, where they have to decide if they want to go into academia or they want to go into practice. For me, I wanted to go into practice. I started my career really in working actually in the social housing sector. Which again, didn't know an awful lot about when I started.

But it was a really fascinating insight and a steep learning curve into really understanding the pressures that a lot of our public sector services face with really finite resource, organizations really trying to make a difference, but not being sure how to or how to communicate the difference that they're making. That fascination continues for me today, continues to keep me motivated and keep me interested.

Arthur Jones (04:59):

That's fascinating to hear. You talk about squiggly lines, how you both have squiggly lines. I found that a brilliant way to describe both your careers, but there's lots of parallels as well. Social value in ESG are terms that seem to be defined differently globally. How would you define social value and what is its relationship to social equity? MK, could you please start us on this one?

Dr. Mary-Kathryn "MK" Adams (05:21):

It's such a big question, isn't it? Really, there's such an interesting and varied vocabulary, certainly that we hear in the measurement space and interacting with clients, and partners, and organizations in the UK, but also globally. It can feel a little bit like a word salad. We've got social value, community investment, community benefits, CSR, sustainability, sometimes all used interchangeably. Sometimes used very deliberately and with difference.

(06:01):

On top of that, to confuse matters even a little bit further, we've got different frameworks to help us understand, help us understand social value and social impact. We've got the UNSDGs,

we've got ESG frameworks, we've got, in some sectors, different kind of particular regulatory frameworks as well.

(06:25):

If we really boil all that down and we set that to one side, in really simple terms, social value is purely about understanding the net effect of something. It could be a project, a program. It could be a whole organization. But what's the net impact and effect that that's having from the perspective specifically about the people who are experiencing that project or that program. Then the impact is actually about, well, how do we quantify those benefits? How do we understand in relative terms those benefits and actually how they are either greater than or less than other benefits?

(07:07):

There's lots of ways to do that. But certainly, we at Simetrica-Jacobs focus on well-being. We focus on measuring the impact of a particular outcome, or set of outcomes, or project by really focusing in on how that intervention affects subjective well-being of the intended beneficiaries or the intended stakeholders.

When we do this well, this actually should enable us to move beyond standard economic approaches. And that helps us help clients to directly inform their investment to really measure what matters, and to take a really deliberate and strategic approach to social value.

Arthur Jones (07:51):

Toyin, I saw you nodding your head a bit there. How would you relate to what MK said there? In terms of what's the impact on project delivery?

Toyin Ogunfolaju (08:01):

Yeah. MK said it brilliantly. It's that net impact on society. From my experience, I also see social value, and depending on your global geography, it's really this aspirational attempt here because I don't think in current society, in current ways of thinking of investment. We don't necessarily think that it's the bigger vision, the bigger picture, the bigger connection across economics. Across social, across environmental, you can go through the list of different subjects or focus areas.

For me, thinking of social value and infrastructure, understanding the infrastructure is built, developed to function for some sort of purpose that we give it, but inherently, on its own, it doesn't create value. It stores value, it helps distribute value, but we, depending on how we strategize, plan, design, and deliver that infrastructure, have the opportunity of creating the benefits that MK mentioned.

Arthur Jones (09:23):

What would you say to a client delivering a project who wants to implement social value and its measurement well? Where should they start as a company?

Toyin Ogunfolaju (09:31):

I would say first thing's first, educate yourself. Educate yourself on your organization.

Sometimes organizations or maybe even leadership within organizations perceive that their organization is X because maybe their mission statement says that this is what they are. But in actuality, when you do a little bit more digging, the organization might be slightly different from that perception. Educate yourself through engaging with employees. Thinking inside that particular box. Employees across the board within your different business units. What are their day-to-day functions? What are they like? How are they delivering on the goals and missions of the organizations?

(10:22):

Then take an opportunity to look outside of that box. There's a whole world, there's literally a neighborhood, there's a community outside of your particular organization. Whether you have one location, whether you have 10 locations across a geography, who are those individuals, who are those community members, who are those organizations? What's that network, what's that ecosystem outside of your organization? Because that needs to be reflected in again how you move forward, as far as evaluating what type of social value or how do you want to measure social value coming out of your organization.

(10:58):

Then the last thing I would say is just understanding your systems. There is the difference between wanting to do good, and then actually doing good and impacting in a positive way. You're best capable of doing that if you actually understand the systems to which are operating within your organization. If your organization only procures in a certain sort of way, if your organization doesn't engage with the community outside of its four walls, then you need to start with addressing those particular tangible right within the systems. Whether that means your policies need to change, whether that means identifying where there's lack of resources. Do you have folks who are leading this? Does your organization? The environment, is it fruitful in a way? Or rather, does it have the foundations that allow for you to truly evaluate, assess, develop a plan around how you want to create and then deliver social value?

Arthur Jones (12:12):

MK, what's your take on that?

Dr. Mary-Kathryn "MK" Adams (12:14):

I think Toyin's just summarized that really eloquently and articulately. I suppose the only thing I would add to that is that for me, I think it's about being cognizant of the fact that although we can have a high level definition of social value as this net impact on people and on society.

Actually I think what a lot of Toyin is saying without putting words in her mouth and the way that I interpret it is actually that the organizational or the project level of definition of social value really matters as well. And working out, for this project, for this community, for this organization, what are we focusing on and why?

(13:04):

That's the measuring what matters piece. Measuring what matters has to matter in the right context.

Everything has to be context-driven. Really genuine, really authentically curated. Which sounds like a lot of work because it is. It does require a lot of resource to do that and to do it well.

Arthur Jones (13:27):

MK, I'm so glad you brought that up because it does sound like it's a very complex task, and it does take a lot of work and preparation. How do companies get it wrong? And more importantly, how can companies get it right?

Dr. Mary-Kathryn "MK" Adams (13:39):

Yeah. I suppose without focusing too much on the negatives, I'm an eternal optimist I think. I think the biggest mistake is actually in both of the extremes. By which I mean getting really excited about the prospect of all the good work that you're doing that you try to measure everything all at once on the one extreme. Or on the other side, being so overwhelmed at the task ahead that you get stuck. You get in a position of inertia. I think it's important to calibrate that approach.

(14:23):

I think the second-biggest mistake, and it's my personal pet peeve, is in over-claiming. It's where organizations become driven by this need to report the highest number, the biggest ratio of money invested to impact-generated. It's so easily done. It's really easy to fall into that trap. If we remember that the aim is to understand the net benefits from a user, from a community perspective, that we're trying to improve society, we're trying to improve people's well-being.

We're trying to measure the extent to which they have better life chances, improved health, better educational attainment. If we remain focused on that, we can avoid gaming the numbers because that really fundamentally contradicts what we're trying to do. It fundamentally contradicts what social value is about. When those sorts of behaviors, that over-claiming goes unchallenged, it really undermines the good work that organizations are doing who are trying to measure robustly and rigorously, and report well. That erodes trust, and diminishes confidence and credibility in reporting, even when it's done well.

(15:44):

I would say the flip side to that, that all sounds quite doom-and-gloom. Is that if we keep it aligned and we're really pragmatic about what we do, we're really deliberate about what we do, we recognize that we can't measure everything all at once, we stand a lot better chance of staying focused again on that piece about what matters most here. How do I focus in on measuring a smaller number of things, but measuring them really well?

That could be by linking it to your corporate objectives, to your strategic objectives, looking at how those align to local needs analysis. Again, that often means focusing on measuring fewer outcomes, but measuring them really well.

(16:26):

I think here, this is where the real strength and the partnership between Simetrica-Jacobs and Jacobs comes into its own. Where we've got a real breadth of market and sector insights, which we can combine with unparalleled depth of technical expertise in terms of measurement to really help clients navigate this whole process, which can be really nebulous.

Arthur Jones (16:54):

Toyin, do these notes, points resonate with you?

Toyin Ogunfolaju (16:59):

Absolutely. Absolutely, MK. Spot on. I would add perhaps even before all of that is the idea of getting entrapped in the bigness of it. You mentioned it, MK. There's so many ways to go about peeling back the onion layers on really trying to create impact, create that value to society. For me, what I've observed with clients across different infrastructure programs and projects is the fear of not doing something right the first time. My recommendation would just be just start. I would say don't have the fear or that anxiety around there's just so much to do here, where do we start. Quite frankly, when you start, it's okay to stop, calibrate, and look back, figure out what was missing and keeping it moving. For me, that's been a big observation.

And like MK said, not to focus on the negative, but really focus on the opportunity, what's possible here. It's okay to start small and scale.

Arthur Jones (18:25):

Toyin, I'm so glad you brought up the stop and collaborate. Would you say that companies and organizations that then test and learn are more effective with social value?

Toyin Ogunfolaju (18:34):

Absolutely. Again, the idea of starting. If you're going to do a test, that means you're going in a forward motion. One size does not fit all. It's extremely important that, whether it's you decide to develop a particular group, focus group, a particular enlisting of experts to come in and weigh in on what that first or the next two or three steps might look like. But understanding that your organization, as much as it's unique and everyone wants to be unique, is not also that unique in terms of understanding that there's nuance.

(19:22):

Again, developing a culture around testing, potentially failing. I don't like to use that word, but failure is okay in these cases. Calibrating, leaving room to assess, like I said, what's missing. What we did well. What did we do well? What actually worked here? Getting that feedback from the community, from community partners, from organizations, quite frankly, from investors, some of these benefactors who are funding some of these programs and projects. Leaving room

for where new technology can help you take it to another level or create of efficiency. Efficiency is extremely important. I want to emphasize that.

Social value does not mean we're just hugging trees and kissing babies. We're also looking to make sure that organizations are working effectively and efficiently.

Arthur Jones (20:28):

MK, how does the lesson's embedding into the approach, how does that work on your side? How do you feel about that?

Dr. Mary-Kathryn "MK" Adams (20:39):

I think absolutely. I love that Toyin talks about resilience. We talk about resilience and agility an awful lot. I'm also not personally averse to the word failure because I think test and learn, the clue is in the name actually. If we're not testing things out, if we're not trying things out, if we're not willing to fail, then we're actually probably not going to learn an awful lot.

(21:05):

I think the corollary to that is that we want to fail fast. We don't want to fail and not know about it because actually, we weren't capturing the right information. Because we don't know why it failed.

Because we don't know what to do differently next time. I think the test and learn, they have to go hand-in-hand. We have to try things out. We have to be willing to really look and listen as we're learning and to ask questions. I think it goes back to that old adage, "If you ask why enough times, you often get to the root of the problem." Why isn't that working? Would it work differently if? What if we delivered it in a different location, worked with a different partner? Made sure that there was better childcare provision, better transport access.

Whatever the barriers might be to success, you've got to do a little bit of a root cause analysis sometimes to figure out why something isn't working so that you can design it differently next time. Or to put different metrics in place.

(22:07):

I think that's it. You have to have a plan to capture evidence as you go. And a willingness to pivot, and that has to happen at the start of project delivery. You have to go in with that mindset. And really deliberately say to your project delivery team, to your partners, to your beneficiaries, to whoever you might be working with, "We're going to test this out. These are our parameters, these are our guardrails. If it works, great. If these things don't seem like they're working, then actually at this point in time, we're going to reassess and we might want to change what delivery looks like."

And making sure that everybody's on board with that at the start. So it's not a nasty surprise then when you do decide that you might want to change something, or pivot, or mend how things are going.

Toyin Ogunfolaju (22:54):

I just want to add, MK, to something you mentioned about pivoting. But also, understanding that really identifying your goals around social value, and planning it, and delivering it does not mean that your bigger program or your project can't be done on time, within budget. It is not meant to slow down what is typically the process. It's actually quite frankly to enhance the process, as well as creating a more impactful program or project at the end of the day. Because again, the infrastructure itself is functioning for a particular purpose as we designed it. The value is everything else.

Arthur Jones (23:54):

You both mentioned some interesting points around pivoting, learning, having that kind of culture on improving on the way. What would you say are the most promising trends you've seen in social value from a project delivery perspective?

Toyin Ogunfolaju (24:07):

Yeah. For me, two things stick out as far as some emerging trends. One is talent acquisition. Then two, big data. I so appreciate the talent acquisition piece. I was reading a World Economic Forum report not too long ago in which it was a report looking at basically jobs, the job forecasting between 2025 into 2030. Basically, what they saw in a survey of thousands of organizations across the globe is that employers are looking for talent that is highly analytical in thinking, creative thinking, they're looking for employees who are resilient. We know if you're an engineer, whether you're electrical, whether you're mechanical, there's just things that are just what they are. There's no pontificating on it.

I love the idea that the workforce of the future is about taking those very hard and almost scientific, there's no ifs and buts around it, and marrying that with folks who can really take that to a different level and bring global, local context and texture within organizations and then eventually, obviously through delivery of programs and projects.

(25:54):

Then the other area is big data. AI, and that's what I like to say another talk show, maybe that's another segment we can probably have around AI, but just to use that as an example. But data is important. In social value especially. While there is obviously an importance around qualitative data, the quantitative data is quite as impactful as well because there's so many things going on. Whether again, it is in that social context, environmental context, in the economics of things that you do, there's so much that we're collecting that that is an important aspect to really looking at bigger picture, as well as more local context.

(26:52):

What I find in some of our programs and projects, especially when we've been commissioned to do social impact assessments or neighborhood needs assessments is that sometimes we tend to want to take that data, do some averages, and then call almost no impact to communities because 92% of the community is located on this side of the project, therefore the impacts to that community are nil. Well, there's still 8% of the community right? Who's in that 8%? What about the impact of your program or project, the right type of talent acquisition, and the right

resources to look at that big data can really help you figure what are the nuances and what are the true impacts.

Dr. Mary-Kathryn "MK" Adams (27:46):

I think some of the most exciting trends on our side that we can see are the emergence actually of well-being frameworks that are emerging at local and even national government levels. We have, for example in Scotland, this taking the form of the National Performance Framework. We have several state governments in Australia which have introduced different versions of well-being frameworks.

(28:16):

I think that the reason this is so exciting and important is that it sends a really strong message. That while we, for a long time, looked at really traditional economic measures of success, take GDP for example.

There's a recognition actually that that really doesn't cover everything, and quite often can actually mask issues that are happening and that are emerging. There's a real challenge I think from organizations and from state governments and to federal government to reassess actually how are we defining success for people, for the citizens that we govern for whom we deliver public services. And actually, how are we ensuring that we are delivering good public services, which should improve well-being? They should improve life satisfaction. They should improve health outcomes. They should improve access to opportunities and remove some of those barriers to opportunities.

(29:32):

It's putting that focus on well-being, on the things that drive it, on understanding the things that drive it.

On understanding how we make well-being and a focus on actually those outcomes for people part of the decision-making process, rather than making it about purely measures of is this driving economic growth.

Not saying that the latter isn't important, but a recalibration I think, and that's really exciting. We haven't yet seen that happening in a really widespread way, but it is emerging and it is happening in different geographies.

Arthur Jones (30:12):

MK, you've spoken a bit there about policies and frameworks which are putting people at the center of the outputs from what I understand. And also, Toyin spoke about big data and how important it is to have the talent making the right decisions with that big data. With those two points, why should humans remain at the center of social value decision-making and strategy?

Dr. Mary-Kathryn "MK" Adams (30:35):

Yeah. I do think they need to. I think there's some points in there around the rise of AI and the rise of new technologies, which we would be really foolish not to really capitalize on as much as we can. Where there are opportunities to use big data, to use predictive analytics, to use AI to

enhance what we do and to compliment what we do, we should be exploring that. But I think given that we're making decisions for people and to benefit people, we also need to make sure that we're conscious that actually anything that we filter through a big data lens or through an AI agent needs to be tested by real people. I think making sure that everything is really still filtered through real people who can sense check, who can understand the realities. Does this triangulate? Does this actually match what we're seeing? Is this acceptable? Is this ethical? Those questions all really matter.

(31:50):

And being transparent I think about how we're using new technologies in all of this is just incredibly important. It's part of the ethical piece. But I think sometimes we certainly get a little bit nervous about some of the things we see. We think, "Has somebody used an agent there?"

We've all read the essays or read the blogs and you think, "It doesn't sound like a person has written that." I think we need to advocate for and insist on transparency in all of this as well.

Toyin Ogunfolaju (32:22):

These tools are here obviously to help us be efficient, to enhance information and knowledge that we already know. But AI and/or any other technology or tools is not the thing that delivers the impact. These tools, the technology is not the thing that is going to reach that child who lives in the most rural part of a village in Africa. Is not the thing that's going to understand the lived experience of a single mother who's using the subway system in New York City and how X number of circumstances, or barriers, or systems, or the broken systems are not helping to improve her quality of life or to benefit her well-being. You need people to put those connections together. Again, to keep it simple, the impact comes from people connecting with other people.

Arthur Jones (33:35):

What is the art of the possible when it comes to social value?

Toyin Ogunfolaju (33:39):

I've been reading up on the idea of innovation ecosystems. The idea of innovation ecosystems is really, really looking at how do you get partners, whether those are investors, those are service-providing organizations, whether those are local governments, how do you really get them to come together? To not just collaborate for sake of collaborating, but to really decide, "This is the challenge in a particular community." A particular challenge might be lack of transportation. So, "This is the specific problem that we've identified." And this colation, this ecosystem of organizations, and thinkers, and investors are hyper-focused on solving for that challenge and that challenge only.

Arthur Jones (34:41):

Amazing. MK?

Dr. Mary-Kathryn "MK" Adams (34:43):

The really ideal future of social value for me would be for it to be recognized for its intrinsic and transformative value. That might sound a little idealistic, but actually for a well-being informed assessment to be a requirement of public spending would completely shift the way that we look at things.

I'm not an economist, but we're going back here to the very basic principles of welfare economics, that actually, when we spend public money, we should judge performance of policy by the extent to which it improves well-being.

(35:23):

In that sense, I think if we moved beyond this standard economic standard GDP understanding of success and really measured success of what we're doing by well-being, we would be able to understand what was actually delivered. Was it effective? We would be able to use those insights to inform really significantly better decisions in the future.

Keeping in mind that we're talking about major projects here. We're talking about, Toyin's mentioned major infrastructure projects. We're talking about things that aren't just going to affect communities today, or for the next five years, or for the next 10 years. We're talking about decisions being made today that are going to affect generations to come. If we haven't factored well-being into that, I just think we've missed a massive opportunity.

Arthur Jones (36:21):

Thank you both. I know it's always been a good interview when I've got lots of notes and points to recap.

But I think that it started with the power of your squiggly line careers and your parallels. There's a number of lessons I've learned here. I loved the talk about the texture between hard and soft, the skills that you brought in there, Toyin. I loved how you spoke about just getting started, MK. Not dealing on the extremes, but just finding something to measure, starting small, but then working up, iterating. I loved the talk about innovation ecosystems as well. I think there's so much to learn.

Thank you both so much for the discussion today, I found it fascinating.