

Kelly Brownell:

Hello everyone and welcome to Policy 360. I am your host Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Today, I'm very pleased to welcome Maya Ajmera to the program. Maya is a social entrepreneur and the author of numerous books, including the recently released book, *Invisible Children*. She is also President and CEO of the Society for Science and the Public. Maya received her Master's Degree in Public Policy right here in the Sanford School and has served on the faculty, the Johns Hopkins University and Duke. In addition, Maya was the inaugural Social Entrepreneur in Residence here at Duke University. In addition, has served on the board of visitors of the Sanford School of Public Policy.

When Maya was in her 20s, she founded The Global Fund for Children. That nonprofit invest in innovative organizations working with some of the world's most vulnerable children. The fund has awarded more than \$35 million to 600 grassroots organizations in no fewer than 80 countries. They've estimated that this organization has touched the lives of nearly 10 million children. Welcome, Maya.

Maya Ajmera:

Thank you for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, you founded the Global Fund for Children when you were just 25 years old. No matter how many times I hear this fact, I'm impressed by it. What inspired you to do that?

Maya Ajmera:

Well, I graduated from college from Bryn Mawr College and got a fellowship from The Rotary Foundation to travel throughout South and Southeast Asia. I had a wonderful professor who said, "Maya, if you really want to understand people and understand their aspirations, get a backpack and start traveling for a year." So I traveled all the way from Thailand to Pakistan. During that time, I started seeing innovations taking place in people's own backyards, people taking charge of their own lives to make it better. It was in one place in India where I say I had my moment of obligation. I was on a train station where I saw 50 kids sitting in a circle, learning how to read and write in a town called Bhubaneswar. These children were poor and destitute, but there was a teacher in the middle teaching them how to read.

She had so much energy and she was using flashcards. I asked her, I said, "What's going on?" and she said, "Well, these children live on and around the train platform. They work, they play, they eat, they back, they sleep, but they don't go to school." So she started the train platform school and I said, "Well, what does it cost?" and she said, "It costs \$500 a year to teach 50 kids with two teachers in a hot meal." At 22, my mind raised, I said, "One, how come I don't see more train platform schools all over India? And two, how can I help?" I think that became the seed for the Global Fund for Children.

Kelly Brownell:

Then, this help take shape, as I understand when you were here at Sanford?

Maya Ajmera:

Absolutely. So I was planning to go to medical school, but I decided to go to the School of Public Policy. I started taking courses in International Development, and Economics, and Education, and it's where the idea came together for the Global Fund for Children. I was very, very fortunate that the Center for

International Development then led by Professor Bill Lasher, seated the organization, with giving me a desk, a chair, and a telephone for a year to get it started. I actually got my seed capital from a social venture capital group called Echoing Green that has funded some of the most extraordinary social entrepreneurs in the world, including Wendy Kopp of Teach for America, Andrew Youn of One Acre Fund, and many Duke alumni have gotten Echoing Green Fellowships.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, what an amazing story from an observation that you had in your life to pursuing the idea in school. Then getting that initial seed funding, and then into this multimillion dollar organization that's helped so many people. It's just an amazing experience. So your new book entitled Invisible Children. Let's talk about that.

Maya Ajmera:

Sure.

Kelly Brownell:

So the full title is Invisible Children: Reimagining International Development at the Grassroots. What do you mean by invisible children?

Maya Ajmera:

What I mean is that there are 500 million children who live in extreme poverty and they are not being reached by government. They're being reached mostly by local grassroots organizations led by extraordinary social entrepreneurs on the ground. These children are in very deep pockets of society, hidden, they are street children, they're aids orphans, they're children who are part of minority groups. They are child laborers. They are refugee children, as we know the massive refugee crisis going on. Or if you think about what's going on in Syria, these children become invisible. I felt like I needed to write a book to give a voice to these children, but also the voice of the groups that actually support these children. They are not your large INGOs, they are most likely not major UN agencies. They are really the small organizations. Even the churches throughout the world are really taking care of the most vulnerable.

Kelly Brownell:

So we hear lots of stories about children in need and children in poverty. What is the sort of, and I know it's hard to draw generalizations, but what are some of the life course issues that these individuals face as they grow older and does the poverty then create the sustained poverty? What happens as these children grow older?

Maya Ajmera:

As the child grows older, right, then they become part of what we call the youth bulge. The youth bulge is quite big, because the youth bulge is a billion young people and they need to find jobs. If they keep growing up in desperate poverty, that cycle just continues with the next generation. But the other piece we're starting to see is desperation can lead to desperate things happening in communities, right? If children are not getting sort of the resources they need, the education, protection, healthcare, livelihoods, then you're really bringing them down a road to where adulthood becomes a pretty shaky prospect and that cycle is actually repeated. So how do we actually take a child who may be

impoverished, get them through, and get the services they need, and actually have hope? I believe education is one of the biggest determinants of getting yourself out of poverty, right?

But there's some very basic things in Maslow's theory of hierarchy that you need to be able to survive, right? So you need clean water, you need food, you need all of these things, and that is in the first zero to five years of brain development, right? Then you get to the education piece and if you could get that, that's great. Then you get to the cultural and social norms of a country, and for girls this can be incredibly difficult if you're in a country where child marriage is okay. Or there's a large issues of violence against women and girls. That can really push prospects way back.

Kelly Brownell:

As you think about the NGOs and the various organizations that work on this issue, you think of them being specialized, that some might work on the food related nutrition part of things, and others might work on jobs and yet others might work on education. Is that a problem that you have so many organizations?

Maya Ajmera:

Yes. I think they're siloed. I think it's the way our foreign aid and resources get pushed out, is that I think children have been cut up and sliced up in terms of these very narrow ways of supporting a child. For me, one of the most interesting things that have happened, at least in the area of research is about malnutrition. In India, the high rates of malnutrition even though there's not a food shortage. It wasn't until this past year, last year when there was big studies came out that maybe the malnutrition is because of poor sanitation, right? You put one plus one, ah, there's that maybe is the reason. I just want to say that a child laborer can also be a girl, can also be a street child, can also be an orphan, can also be a minority. But they may be put into these different buckets and not get the full help and support that they need.

Kelly Brownell:

Okay. That makes sense. Now, you've argued for years that governments, large organizations, and private donors have channeled billions of dollars seeking to help these children in conditions of poverty, high disease rates, and having neglect and abuse. While much good has been drawn from this, the impact of these investments, some would say, perhaps you, that it's been less than the sum of its parts. How do you come to that conclusion?

Maya Ajmera:

I think foreign aid and UNICEF and all these groups have done an extraordinary job. I mean, there are some really great things that have happened. For example, infant mortality rates have dropped, but I can point very clearly as why that happened is because of the enormous resources that was put into that by the Gates Foundation. Singularly, the Gates Foundation made a very big impact in wanting to reduce that and it made a lot of sense because very replicable and scalable. You create a vaccine, it takes a lot of money to do it, then you replicate it, which is really cheap, but then distributing it you can scale it out. So you can actually see impact.

Where it becomes really hard is when you're talking about the scalability of changing a child's life. This is where it becomes really difficult and one has to go very deep into these communities. I believe social and cultural context matters a lot when you're going to change the lives of children and families. I think that's where I think we have not done the best job. That's what I call top down

development, as William Easterly says the planners versus the searchers. It's been mostly about planners and not mostly about the searchers on the ground who actually come up with those solutions.

Kelly Brownell:

So what you're arguing for, I think is that there have to be individual community oriented solutions. How's it possible to do anything on a broad scale when every community is different?

Maya Ajmera:

This is where one says, President Bush, the first President Bush said something very important called, a thousand points of light. I think there's billions of points of light. I think what we have to see is that galaxy of lights and some shine brighter than others, but how do we connect them into a large constellation to give them a big voice to the governments and to the UN. I think that's missing actually is that voice.

Kelly Brownell:

So what are some of the primary recommendations you make in terms of international aid and how it can be better used to help children?

Maya Ajmera:

So there are a couple of ones. One is community based organizations are capital starved, and it's not a lot of capital we're talking about. So small amounts of money can do very big things if targeted well.

Kelly Brownell:

[crosstalk 00:11:12] \$500 to educate 50 children for a year as an example?

Maya Ajmera:

As an example, right? So capital is one. The second one is really... There's an extraordinary opportunity for global philanthropist right now to really do something about supporting grassroots organizations globally, really to support children. I think there's a really huge opportunity. Second I'd like to say for the US government, I think there are couple of things they could do. One of my dreams is I would love for them to create a global children's trust that actually gets a separate appropriated amount of money for 20, \$30 million, where they can actually make grants that is not mired in sort of the paperwork and bureaucracy. They can be mirrored after the Inter-American Foundation, that's a separate agency, as well as the African Development Foundation. These are separate agencies, the United States government that gets 25, \$30 million and gives them to development projects. Let's do it for children. The other thing I would say is when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, she actually created an Ambassador-at-Large for women. I would love to have an Ambassador-at-Large for children.

Kelly Brownell:

Oh, what a wonderful idea.

Maya Ajmera:

Right.

Kelly Brownell:

Will you be a terrific person to be that ambassador?

Maya Ajmera:

Well, it would be fun to do.

Kelly Brownell:

So what would you say to organizations that tend to have the siloed approach that we discussed a few minutes ago? So an organization, for example, that just tackles a particular disease, or just tackles nutrition, or true job training or whatever it happens to be.

Maya Ajmera:

I think they need to network together and to understand how it all fits together. I think a lot of community-based organizations at the grassroots are actually have a very holistic model, it's wraparound services. We see this at charter schools in this country now, and schools that you go to school and you get fed, you can actually get health services. You actually have social workers dealing with issues of societal protection. I think CBOs are doing a really good job of that, but the bigger NGOs that are tackling some of this, I think it really comes from the people who are providing the resources to actually create the mandate. Let's look at this from a more holistic and interdisciplinary perspective. So I think from the top, it's like reimagining how we want to provide aid and how it can be more intertwined to the organizations that are actually working in these areas, and how they work more together.

So the World Food Program is a beautiful way of how they've... They've actually created a program where food... They have the food program that goes to schools, which is a great feeding program, right? But they've actually started thinking about, well, how does this go to other places where children congregate? That's something quite interesting to me, because they're thinking outside the box, and food's really important. If you are hungry, a kid can not do anything, and a school is a great place where you can bring those wraparound services together.

Kelly Brownell:

You were mentioning before we began the podcast that your publisher is not only distributing the book in its entirety, but chapter by chapter, which is a pretty unique approach.

Maya Ajmera:

Yes.

Kelly Brownell:

You said there was a chapter on scalability and we talked about that a little bit, but describe what you mean more by that and what can be done to enhance it?

Maya Ajmera:

Sure. So scalability in a lot of ways have been talked about organizations that replicate their services throughout their state or the country or countries. I want to just actually push back on that and say, scale can go actually down. You can very deeply in your community that you were actually serving 200 children, now you're going to serve a thousand children in that community and you've scaled your work. Scale also means going up, meaning scaling your idea from a place of public awareness and advocacy, which influences public policy. I think that the scaling up and scaling down have not been talked about

as much as the scale out version, which is more of a franchise model. It's really tricky to get that right because of the social and cultural contexts that we talk about. The scalability of immunizations works really well.

The scalability of a center for the children of prostitutes, a night care shelter, where one of our social entrepreneurs said, "I've been told by so many cities to come open another night care shelter for the children of prostitutes in this city, in the city. And I can't do it because it took me 20 years to gain the trust of this community. I can't go in and replicate that in another community. People should come and learn from me and then go figure out how to make it work in their community itself." So, but this social entrepreneur actually scaled up because she's taken the small gem of a program, and has actually influenced public policy in the state around this issue. So scale is a really hot word, but one needs to be very careful of it.

Kelly Brownell:

It's interesting, the idea of scaling things down is a fascinating concept. I guess in some areas like, for example, immunization is you'd need to do this because you can't just immunize some people in a community, you need to capture everybody after you prove it effective with a smaller number. But it sounds like the drive is to not do that typically with programs that are effective, but to do what the person mentioned with the children of prostitutes program is take it to other places and scale it that way.

Maya Ajmera:

Yeah. Have people come and learn. Don't ask me to do it, because it takes trust of building trust in a community, being part of that community, and understanding everything from language to cultural context, social context, political context of what you're working in, and not one size fits all.

Kelly Brownell:

Are there examples of places or programs where you think that it's being done especially well?

Maya Ajmera:

Of Scaling out?

Kelly Brownell:

Or just using your approach in general, providing comprehensive services for children.

Maya Ajmera:

Yeah. So Afghan Institute of Learning started by a social entrepreneur named Sakena Yacoobi. She started with the secret homeschools under the Taliban where girls would be killed if they were caught learning how to read. She ended up founding an organization very small. Today, she serves 450,000 women and children with the education and health care services over a 20 year period in Afghanistan. She is Afghani. She was born, brought up. She came here for a PhD. She went back. She is the consummate person to scale something like that out, who understands the social and cultural and political context of what we're working on. She's never taken any aid with the billions of dollars that have moved of aid in Kabul, into Afghanistan. She has done this through private philanthropy, on a budget of no more than \$3.5 million dollars.

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Kelly Brownell:

What a remarkable story. Well, that's on such an optimistic note. It's a good way to end this podcast. So thank you very much for joining us today.

Maya Ajmera:

Thank you so much for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

So I've been talking today with Maya Ajmera. She's the President and CEO of the Society for Science and the Public. Her latest book is called the Invisible Children. She has written numerous books for children as well. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.