



## **The Evolving Role of Philanthropy in Global Problem Solving**

### ***Transcript of Interview with Sarah Borgman***

#### **Participants:**

**Joan Bigham**, Ed.D., Executive Director of Global Solution Networks

**Sarah Borgman**, Director and Curator of the Skoll World Forum of Social Entrepreneurship

#### **The Interview:**

**Bigham:** Sarah, please introduce yourself and describe your organization and your role at Skoll.

**Borgman:** Sure, my name is Sarah Borgman. I'm the Director and Curator of the Skoll World Forum of Social Entrepreneurship, which is an annual gathering of our grantees and other innovators and thought leaders around the world each year in Oxford, England. The Skoll World Forum is one of two major programs of the Skoll Foundation, the second being a funding mechanism to awardees who become part of the Skoll community for life. So they become something like fellows, and receive anywhere from \$1 million to \$2 million grants over three years.

**Bigham:** It is an unusual foundation. You are a private foundation, right?

**Borgman:** We're absolutely a private foundation with a living donor, who is very young, and is fairly active. It is Jeff Skoll, although he has lots of other things to take interest in, in a coordinated fashion, with media companies, direct investment firms, online activism, organizations and another foundation, called the Skoll Global Threats Fund, which operates inside major areas of issues, which are different than what the Skoll Foundation funds, and much more nimble and quick with their operating funding. Ours takes about, oh, you could be in a pipeline of ours for well over a year or two, depending on what level of impact you're having.

There's a whole constellation of organizations that Jeff has structured to help push social change in new directions, some obvious and some less obvious.

**Bigham:** Pushing social change in new directions, it's a great mission. Sarah, how many years have you been involved with philanthropy?

**Borgman:** Oh, let's see. If you add up all of it, probably about ten years, with the balance of the career in both corporate and government.

**Bigham:** That's ideal, because, as you know, our lens is looking at the power of collaboration between multiple stakeholders, but let me stay with philanthropy for a minute and ask you what changes you've

seen over the past ten years in the philanthropy world. What changes have you seen taking place there? What do you think is causing those changes to happen?

**Borgman:** Well, specifically in the last ten years we've seen a lot of living donors who are very active in their philanthropies. In the past it's typically been people at the very end of their lives who are interested in giving back, and then they typically pass away, and then their heirs or others administer their funding in ways that they directed before their passing, and oftentimes it's a massive chunk of money that takes years and years to spend down, if ever.

But now, especially given I'm in the California region, where Silicon Valley seems to be producing multitudes of multimillionaires and billionaires who are very interested, in their young lives, to see their money make a social return on their investment, and are very active, and they are looking to their networks to find out how... and lots of times these folks don't have a history in giving money away, so they look into their networks, whether they're the business community, the tech communities, whatever community helped them to raise all that money, and they're looking for advice, solutions and ways to differentiate themselves. They're also trying to push the boundaries... because they're aggressive and they want to find new ways of making a difference, whether it's with impact investing, whether it's with traditional philanthropy, whether it's annuities or investments that are just burgeoning right now.

I've spent half my career on the east coast and half out here, and it's really fun to see the demonstrable differences between them and how they operate.

**Bigham:** So, having said that you had this network, and of course you do, how do you work, for example, with the corporations? I ask that because this is an area of interest to other philanthropies. They're interested in developing their corporate relationships. How do you go about working with corporations at Skoll?

**Borgman:** A lot of times we think about our mission with different lenses and one of the big lenses that we have is in leverage. We use the Skoll World Forum each year as a magnet to pull odd bedfellows together, to make those connections. So, because it is a globally recognized event that is prestigious, it's easier, potentially, to bring them into that environment, and then be able to make the private meetings happen that can connect, say, a Hewlett Packard, or an Apple, or, you name it, you know, Walmart, to other social innovators who are trying to make change in that space, whether it's fair trade or supply chain or straight up funding for CSR.

The Forum provides a platform to bring these folks together and we call it "Skoll leverage," and everybody's responsible for it at the Forum, so there's no one person in charge of it.

We do have a division, called Strategic Alliances. There are some specific organizations that we cultivate that we think are right for change or for partnership with our social entrepreneurs. We don't partner for ourselves, per se. There's no inherent reason for Skoll to be partnering with a particular company or other funding entity, only in service to... and bringing together... others for the purpose of their partnership.

**Bigham:** And for the corporations to provide funding to the social entrepreneurs, perhaps?

**Borgman:** Yes, funding's really only one tool in the toolbox. A lot of these companies are looking for ways to clean up their supply chains that are not public. Some of the largest companies in the world are

not proud of how they're sourcing their labor, how they're sourcing their materials, their minerals, and so there are many folks who are trying to help them do that in a way that's equitable and fair to the host countries where they're getting their source materials or labor. Companies are looking for ways to give back in humanitarian purposes that aren't necessarily cash. They're trying to use their technologies to make it easier. Great examples are in the mobile space, where people are making money hand over fist. But there are so many humanitarian applications, from healthcare to banking, where mobile, either companies who are making the actual technology of cell phones, or the carriers, can make a real difference, with not a lot of effort on their part, because they're just taking their product and using it for a different purpose.

So I would think money is one of the least useful - that sounds odd, but least useful mechanisms for change, I think, with these larger corporations that have so many other ways to contribute to society.

**Bigham:** That's so interesting. Now, let me talk a little bit about government. I know you have government participation at the forum.

**Borgman:** Yes.

**Bigham:** What are some of the partnership ideas that you look to from government?

**Borgman:** For us, there are several layers. There's the Kofi Annan, Al Gore, Mary Robinson level – the elders who are shaping a coordinated narrative around a specific topic, whether it's refugee status, whether it's climate change, whether it's slave labor, health education. They're creating an uber conversation around which we can coalesce.

We bring those folks to the Forum to create that tent pole or that umbrella conversation, but where the rubber meets the road is with the health ministers in Africa, or the transportation organizers in Central America, and they're looking for fresh ideas and innovations to help them reach that last mile, whether it's for healthcare education, water sanitation. They're looking for ideas. They're looking for best practices. If a health minister from Rwanda has cracked the nut on a specific transportation issue to remote villages, there's no reason why Uganda can't use that same example, or Afghanistan.

So there's a lot of cross purposing that way, which is really neat and that happens a lot, a fertilization of ideas, and typically the Forum is a wonderful platform to do that, but that really happens year round, as you can imagine, and that cultivation of that relationship has to happen months, or even years before we may even see them in person.

**Bigham:** You described your funding mechanism as fairly uniform. You're not looking for lots of new models for providing funding? Are you doing any innovations in how you deliver your funding to your grantees?

**Borgman:** We're exploring the opportunity now. We've always had different kinds of funding tools. One of the mechanisms in that leverage bucket is working with multinationals, or the USAID types or others, to expose them to new opportunities that they may not see within the beltway.

As an example – collaborating on mutual funding streams – if we put a certain amount of money in a pot, and they do too, and then we jointly source where that should go – those are opportunities that they wouldn't necessarily come across, because, in a lot of ways, we like to think of ourselves as social

entrepreneurs that support research and development and the cutting edge of solutions and innovation. We can provide operational funding.

It gives those organizations the freedom to explore the outer edges of that and then, through that, then expose those ideas to other funding streams that may not have the authority to grant, in an exploratory kind of way, if you know what I mean. We give loans. We help other organizations get loans from banks or other funding entities, where we provide backing for them, should they default, that kind of stuff. We certainly have all the tools that any American private foundation has, and we explore all those as well.

But our main... Yes, our main dollars are in operational funding, between four to six organizations a year.

**Bigham:** These social enterprises, do they have the characteristics of a start-up? Do you see them as having viable business futures?

**Borgman:** There are different parts to that question. I would say, at the moment, we fund non-profits, and those non-profits are at the mezzanine level, so they have proven innovations, and they're ready to scale in a way that they can absorb \$1 million plus, because the first rule is, do no harm, and you don't want to flood an organization that's not ready to take that money and use it efficiently and effectively.

**Bigham:** Good point, yes.

**Borgman:** So we don't fund any type of start-up. Even though I said R&D, it's more about taking a proven model and bringing it to a level that they can receive \$20 million or \$30 million from a government, which is probably one of the smaller grants they would give out. Start-ups are a different sort of beast that we leave to other wonderful organizations like Ashoka, or others, but for us it's at a mezzanine level – organizations that have a proven innovation, within a country or a region, they're hitting an inflection point, and they just need an influx of resources to get them to prove their concept across a region or to tip a country in a direction.

You know, back to one of your original questions about how funding has changed, because I only answered one piece of it. I think, in the past two years there have been major changes in how big foundations are funding, and that's in the area of equilibrium change or systems change.

In the past, you may have gotten some grants for a project in Africa or a demonstration. I think a lot of foundations are now moving toward aggregating those into how you're going to change a system in a country and what kind of actors do you need to bring them in?

A non-profit working alone in a school district, trying to create schools may not get that funding right now, but if they're working in the school district with health and sanitation workers, which is key to getting people to be able to go to school, with other corporate entities who can provide the technology that those schools need... How to take a system and change it for the better, forever, and that's where I think a lot of Ford Foundation, Rockefeller and others, are excited to see those kinds of changes, and that's the approach that's been happening.

**Bigham:** Yes. I know Rockefeller cares a lot about the systemic approach, but I did hear, anecdotally, from an NGO that there's a box on a grant application that you check off that says, "collaborate with multiple stakeholders" and that often that box is checked off and it doesn't actually happen that way.

What are you seeing? Are you seeing people really collaborating... increasingly collaborating, or is it a goal that people have? What do you think?

**Borgman:** Well, for those who want to make sustainable change, it's 100% necessary. I mean, go fast, go alone. Permanent change requires lots of stakeholders, and it's going to take a lot more time. So I think Rockefeller and Skoll and others are... I mean, we've always had a three-year grant cycle because social change takes time, it takes patience, and by bringing multi-stakeholder groups together, that alone takes years.

**Bigham:** Yes, good point.

**Borgman:** It's too bad that it's just one box, because we don't even have a grant application process. We do due diligence in the field and we investigate all of that by hand. So we know when somebody just ticks the box or when someone's actually... We will meet with their partners to talk about that. Yes.

**Bigham:** Good point. Now, as far as technology – we talk a lot about technology enabling changes in delivery of services, in communication, and probably (you mentioned this before) technology is what a lot of your social entrepreneurs are exploring. Do you see any unusual emerging technologies that are making a difference, or plan to be, or for problem solving, from where you sit? We've had smartphones for a long time.

**Borgman:** Yes, I think that's the most burgeoning area, individual empowerment through smartphones, whether it's bypassing the middleman when you're selling your vegetables or fruit at the market, you no longer need a middleman. You can look at the rates and the pounds and the cost right there on your phone. Delivery of health care also.

Individual empowerment, for sure, is one theme. You know, I'm a little bit skeptical. I am not a believer that technology is a silver bullet. You always need that heavy lifting of human-to-human interaction and the trust that goes with that, before you even put a technology in somebody's hands.

Some of the best examples we have of real social change, sustainable social change happening, really goes on at that human-to-human level, village-to-village with the elders and the religious leaders and the moms and the dads. So if you put a cell phone in someone's hand and it tells them to take their prenatal pills, or it tells them to take some other medicine – well, for that condition, if they don't know why, if they're not educated, if they haven't got that training as to the why, anybody can ignore a text message. Just because you have a text message doesn't mean you're going to follow it.

So behavior change is not about the technology. Behavior change will always, always happen at the human-to-human level, and then, I think, technologies can help after that piece of it. But, you know, you're not going to bypass the heavy lifting with a piece of technology. You're just not.

The other place where technology has been really effective has been in the uber issues, like climate change, and other places where it becomes proven, where a series of ideas or measurement, data, is coming in that is proving intuition or addressing fears, and then giving people apps where they can ask for funds. So at that level technology has been extremely helpful and we're only at the tip of that iceberg.

**Bigham:** Yes, I was going to ask you about that, because, yes, big data, data sharing, having to do with measurement and impact in the climate, and water sensors, those kinds of technologies really coming

on stream. Do you... are you giving grants in that area? Do you have social entrepreneurs in the area of big data technology?

**Borgman:** We do – for example, Ceres and Mindy Looper out of Boston.

**Bigham:** Yes, I know Mindy.

**Borgman:** Mindy is checking water tables and other kinds of interesting things to make sure that Pepsi and Coke know how much water they're taking out of, the earth, and trying to measure those externalities so that we can start to factor them in. But it's only a piece of the puzzle, you know. It's never an end in and of itself. It's a vehicle for more information that live human beings then can make judgments.

We fund the entrepreneurs for whom that technology is helpful. We still are at a village level, a lot of times, working there, but, yes, we have Mobile Medic which uses cell phone technology in training. We have Foundation Capital, which uses tablets and banking systems to help take cash transfers to a new level for folks, and more safely.

**Bigham:** Good, and then there's this whole question of sharing data. I have a two-part question. One is do you see data being shared in your industry? That is, across the philanthropies, where there are people working in similar areas to your entrepreneurs? And is there an increase in sharing data, generally? Do you see that happening?

**Borgman:** Sure, yes. I think a lot of times it feels like apples, oranges, bananas. When it's apples to apples I think people in the community, in the shared sense of global progress, people absolutely want to share. Whether or not it's useful, because your data is couched in your own context, and other people's data is in their context, that language transfer can be really tricky.

We have always pushed ourselves to create platforms, technological platforms, where our grantees can share best practices and ideas, and data, across our portfolio, and we've had fits and starts, and we have a new one up and running, and expect feedback on that.

But yes, I think we're all looking for that. It's just that common sense of apples to apples that gets a little challenging, but I've never seen anybody feel proprietary about that. I mean, we're all in it to make the human condition better. Why would you feel proprietary about that?

**Bigham:** Victoria Vrana at the Gates Foundation is doing research right now on the philanthropies themselves. She's a sort of small think tank, within the foundation. Gates wants to convert Americans into a giving culture, more of a donor culture, so she's trying to research how that behavior happens, and some of it has to do with uses of technology and how people collaborate with each other. But she also is involved in the philanthropies sharing with one another, and tackling this question of redundancy of investments in areas where people could collaborate more often. Do you participate in some of these philanthropy affinity groups? And do you see some solutions for less redundancy, maybe in areas where people are not communicating with each other effectively?

**Borgman:** Sure. Yes. You know, Jeff's a member of the Giving Pledge, so that is very relevant. I think the Gates Foundation has been a first mover in that area, and has taken some of the new money that has come in, or some of the bigger, deeper pockets, and helped to coordinate them in a way that makes

their giving more effective, potentially, but it just makes them all more knowledgeable, if that's not how they were brought up, you know, if that's not... if it's not their first mission.

So I think the Giving Pledge is one. There are many sort of ad hoc meet ups. At the Forum, a quarter of the delegates are very coordinated and aligned funders. The list that we've created over the years really demonstrates that these folks are funding in the same kinds of areas, and funding the same kinds of technologies or folks or innovations, so there's a ton of sharing there.

I still think it's on that human-to-human level though, not necessarily technological. Global Philanthropy Forum and some of those folks as well, create circles, and there are definitely ones that are local, ones that are global. It's more membership driven, I think, than technologically driven, at this point.

**Bigham:** You don't see a demand for some scorecard in the sky, where you can see everybody who's working on water in Nairobi, kind of thing?

**Borgman:** Sounds nice. I think that would be really interesting. I haven't seen that yet.

**Bigham:** I haven't seen it either. It's a notion that we've got the capability to capture this information and to share with one another, and I've heard people talk about this much the same way you have, and there are ad hoc and smaller groups working on it. We've got the capability to put a platform together, where people could actually share that information widely. The question remains whether they would be motivated to do it, not from a proprietary standpoint, but from a bandwidth standpoint and a benefit derived standpoint.

**Borgman:** Yes. You would think someone like a Global Philanthropy Forum would engage – that a membership organization with those kinds of members might be the next step there. I could see that, yes.

**Bigham:** Okay, those were the questions that I had. This has really been a huge help. I'm so excited about your project. I've known about it for years, and I know people who attend and I know Don [Tapscott] and Roger [Martin] and people who think of it as a major annual event. So congratulations on that.

**Borgman:** Thank you. Thank you. The fun thing about it – one last note on that – is as something becomes a center of gravity, there are groups and organizations that have pop-up meetings around it, which have been really fun to see. For example, there has been a network of development entrepreneurs. For the past half a dozen years now, they have a meeting in London that same week, prior to our meeting, and people go to London and have that meeting. Holcim just had a big corporate gathering on the Tuesday before in Oxford.

**Bigham:** That's great.

**Borgman:** Yes. And the Impact Investing Community has done that as well. So it feels like there's a center of gravity, where people are collecting, groups have come together to push boundaries in ways which have been awesome to see.

**Bigham:** So you've really been a catalyst for that.

**Borgman:** We hope so, yes. That's been the pattern, and, we can't necessarily take credit for the outcomes of that, but we can take credit for potentially bringing people together geographically, to make that happen.

**Bigham:** Thank you for your time. It's great to talk to you, Sarah.

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