

## **Episode 277—Lakshmi Iyer: Exploring Opportunities for Social Impact and Social Innovation through Public-Private Partnerships**

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.inSocialWork.org](http://www.inSocialWork.org). We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello from Buffalo and welcome to inSocialWork. My name is Louanne Bakk and I'll be your host for this episode. In this podcast Lakshmi Iyer discusses her work at FSG, a mission driven consulting firm that is dedicated to advising corporate foundation and nonprofit leaders. She comments on how philanthropy and corporations can be viewed skeptically and are often misunderstood by social work and explains how for-profit organizations can help solve social issues and create an impact through collaborative partnerships. Models of social innovation and entrepreneurship are described as examples of how social workers can serve as change agents are discussed. In addition, social change approaches utilized by FSG in their connection to social work education, research and practice, including how these strategies address current silos are explored. The episode concludes with a short description of the UB School of Social Work Social Impact Fellows program and how the program provides opportunities for social innovation and collaborative partnerships. Lakshmi Iyer, MPP MSW is an associate director at FSG, where she is a core member of the organization's corporate practice. She has led projects with a variety of companies, including Intuit, Toyota and Cisco to help them design and implement strategies for creating shared value, enhancing their corporate philanthropy and community development strategies. She was interviewed in July 2019 by Dr. Gokul Mandayam, a clinical faculty member at the Rhode Island College School of Social Work.

[00:02:26] Hello, this is Gokul Mandayam, and today I am in a conversation with Ms. Lakshmi Iyer, associate director at FSG, a social change strategy consulting firm. She is based out of the San Francisco office. So Miss Iyer, could you tell us about your background and what led you to have a career trajectory that is taking you now to working for this consulting firm?

[00:02:52] Yeah, happy to. First of all, I just want to thank you, Gokul, for inviting me to this podcast. I think having a social work degree myself in the past is a big part of who I am today, so I'm happy to share my experiences. I would say in a nutshell, my background has been and continues to be about understanding and contributing to solving social problems effectively at scale. I've worked in different parts of what I think are an essential infrastructure office space. So I've worked as an individual social worker on the ground. I've worked in administrative roles in nonprofits doing fundraising and then moved over to management roles in office social responsibility in multinational, and then have moved to this consulting role where I work with a variety of organizations today from different sectors to advise them on solving social problems. So that's sort of the short version of it. And right now, for the past seven years I've been working at FSG and the majority of my work has been in the private sector space. So helping companies think about how they can create social impact through their foundations or philanthropy is also often to their core business. That's what I do today and I think I'll stop there. I'm happy to kind of go through the long over vision, but I think I'll stop there for now.

[00:04:07] Thank you. So if I may ask you to go back in time, what inspired you to get your master's in social work degree? And again, fast forward, how do you think pursuing that degree has kind of impacted the work that you're doing now at FSG?

[00:04:22] I love that question. So I think I'll rewind a little bit. So I grew up in a pretty middle class family in Mumbai in India. And I did my schooling there and my undergraduate degree actually in business. And like most people and most of my colleagues that actually decided to do a master's in business, an MBA, eventually. But during my undergrad, we were looking for internships and I had two very diverse experiences. So I had on one hand I went ahead and did like the traditional corporate internship where I conducted market research for a small business. I ended up selling washing machines with Siemens at a trade show. I did that whole thing, and the other summer, I actually decided to do something different things for my sister. I just sort of part about this nonprofit called Akanksha, which taught and supported children who live on the street. And I signed up to teach art during the summer. And the whole rationale theory was that these are kids who live on the street or live in slums, but they do attend school, but they are normally sent back to the village during the summer to support their parents. And so oftentimes that's when the biggest drop off would happen and they would not come back. So the idea of this camp was to keep them engaged and give them a support system. And for me, that was a pretty important pivot point where I could clearly see the impact of the work, and I knew that I wanted to have a career that gave me meaning versus selling washing machines and refrigerators. And that is important but it was just not for me. So I actually said, "okay, let me check this out a little bit more." And I went and worked for this national emergency help line called ChiLine. It's still there and it's India's first sort of toll free help line for street children. I was in charge of fundraising, and there was sort of a second wave for me because my job was to essentially explain how our nonprofit function to do corporations and raise funds, right, And explain to them the model and why it was effective. But I just sort of found this big distinction between what was happening on the ground and what companies part was happening on the ground. And so I really felt like that was all that I could play to be a translator between the two sectors, but to play that role effectively I also knew that I myself needed to know the grassroots level work well. And growing up in India, you see poverty around you, but that doesn't mean you're equipped to understand social issues and why they happen and how they're structured in a system. So that's from when I decided I want to go ahead and do my master's in social work. And yeah. That's what led me to the decision. I think it hugely impacts what I do today. I think it's hugely impacted who I am as a person. And I think about it that a lot of the underlying values and underlying sort of ways of being that I think about even today. So I think at a very sort of high level, I would say the degree, the two years of MSW that I did equipped me with sort of that theoretical knowledge about why social problems sort of exist, I think very grassroots level. And the course that I did at the time through the social sciences was, of course, where we had class three days of the week. But the other two days you were sort of working for a nonprofit as a social worker. And so that was sort of a real life experience, right, working for two years. And it allowed me to see sort of the systemic nature of these problems, how is it set up and problems at the systems level. But it is affecting the family and working with or the child I'm working with or the community that I'm working with. And so one that allowed me to see that connection between what happens on the ground and look at consistents or look in institutions or book and policy failures. And so I could see that all the time and I feel like I was able to even in FSG. Now, a lot of my work is global, both based in the US and in different parts of the world. And I feel like that pattern is repeated, you know, and unfortunately, it is repeated. So when I see something on the ground, I'm sort of connecting it immediately to the questions that I first asked to understand the problem are,

you know, what's happening at the systems level, what's happening at the institutional level, because I see that connection. So I definitely bring that in today. I think on a more tactical level that are just principles and ways of being of working with communities on the ground that I do bring, because at the end of the day, in the consulting firm you are so many steps removed. So we're trying to bring in more of the end beneficiary wife into our work. And I'm happy to talk about that later. But we try and do interviews with the end user and beneficiary that our work is targeting so that we actually get that wife in addition to just the expert wife, so just very tactically, that's also another way in which I feel like my experience comes to life.

[00:08:51] Thanks you. So given that you are a social worker by academic training to some extent and currently now working for FSG, could you talk a little bit about your experiences of being entrepreneurial, innovative or engaging in disruptive thinking in your job?

[00:09:06] So firstly, I'll say that because FSG is a pretty small organization, what about 150 of us across the world, there is a lot of opportunity to create something new within the organization as well as a lot of freedom to do that. So as an example, for the past few years I have been leading the work on racial equity in corporations. So the idea that companies can advance racial equity is a new concept. It's not a concept that the field has ever done before. If you look at the field, most companies, they talk about diversity and inclusion, but not about racial equity. And so we started doing some research on that and we found examples of where companies had done that. And that was a totally new area. We managed to get some grant funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and from the Ford Foundation and the Clark Foundation. And did that work. And now with these early release stages, I think of it like a startup type phase where we are trying to do out what it means to put this theory and this research in action. So we are now working with a few companies who have reached out to us after reading this report to ask us how do you actually do this work. Now FSG has done shared value work a lot. But the partner that we're working with in this work is policy, and they've been in this racial equity space for a lot. But those two words have never come together. And now I'm getting the support from the organizations that do that work because A: it aligns with our mission, two: it is a wonderful opportunity to move the needle on a problem. So that's an opportunity when I feel like I've had the opportunity to kind of be entrepreneurial within the firm.

[00:10:38] Thank you. FSG's tagline is "Re-imagining Social Change." And as you very well know, social workers call themselves as social change agents. So from your perspective, could you speak to how the two are similar and/or different?

[00:10:57] Yeah, happy to. So I think social workers are change agents. I think they have this incredible asset of being on the ground and truly understanding what is happening on the ground. I think the reality is that anyone else who is or seems to be in the social sector is two or more steps removed. So if you think about a funder or foundation that funds the program, they are a couple of steps removed. Consultants like us who are consulting the foundation, even one more step removed, a corporation that's funding, that funding that organizations is also a couple of steps removed. And so I feel like at the end of the day, the social workers who are more on the ground have an incredible asset of really knowing what's happening on the ground. That said, social problems are complex. It cannot be solved by one entity. And there are other entities that need to work in synergy when it is that nonprofit, the funder or companies or policy makers and consultants like us. We need to work on synergy to to address that problem. And so FSG works oftentimes with entities that are a step removed. So with funders of foundations, large topic organizations or companies who want to influence a social problem or who want to address that problem.

So I would say if you think about the different levels at which a problem can be addressed, I would say a social worker at that micro level are really on the ground and FSG is also addressing the same problem by probably by working with institutions at the next level or the systems, we do a lot of systems change work and we bring that system strange thinking in our work at that macro level. We're trying to do the social change, so that's how I see them as working together in sync. Does that make sense?

[00:12:41] Sure. Thank you. So in a nutshell, I guess you are saying that the work done at FSG parallel social work practice kind of largely at the mezzo or more so at the macro level. Thank you for sharing that. A partnership between social work, philanthropy and corporate organizations is often viewed very skeptically and sometimes even is misunderstood. So I would like for you to explain your work at FSG to people who might not have much background on or exposure to topics like shared value, collective impact, influence of markets, and the connection between racial equity and corporate performance, as you just mentioned, and who might sometimes even find these terms controversial.

[00:13:30] I think you are totally right, Gokul, in that there are a lot of individuals who find that controversial. And I personally think that, you know, there are valid reasons why such partnerships are looked at with skepticism. For example, if you have a foundation, a corporate foundation, that doesn't mean that all is well. As a company, you could still be doing the business in an equitable way of creating societal harm for just having that CSR, Corporate Social Responsibility, arm is meaningless if the way you do business is not good. So I think the skepticism is valid. There's a lot of data out because of which the skepticism exists. That said, I do believe that at the end of the day, I'm also a realist while I'm also an optimist. And we are in a capitalist society today. And I believe that you have to be in the system to change the system. And that is actually something that one of my professors in my social work degree had actually told me. You have to be in the system to change the system. And I have been inside boardrooms of companies where there are a few individuals who want to change moving the entire company and the entire machinery is hard and it takes time. So let me give you an example of one such concept of what we do, and maybe that might shed some light. So one of the big areas of work that we do at FSG and I've been working on for the last many years is called shared value. The shared value is basically a management strategy in which companies find business opportunities in social problems. So philanthropy and corporate social responsibility typically focus on giving factors to society. They may be aligned to the business or they may think about minimizing harm the business has on society. But essentially the idea is to give back or do less harm. But a shared value is a little different in that it focuses on solving social problems but also getting some competitive advantage. So you do that in three ways. So you either have a company, you can create new products and use those products to reach new markets that are traditionally underserved by reducing costs or improving productivity to a company's core operations or by strengthening the business context and addressing any market failures that are caused because of social problems. So let me show an example of that third thing, the third level, which are strangling with business contexts. So, you know, an example that comes to mind is some work that Prudential has done you know, we didn't work with them on this project. But if an example that I like, we shared that in racial equity paper, they called my colleagues. So, you know, the problem is, if you look at it there are about two thirds of households of color in the US that actually did not have any access to retirement savings, right, 401Ks, and that rate is double the rate for whites. And, you know, this disparity is obviously one way in which racial inequities manifested, but it's obviously because of many factors, because of structural racism that has existed for so many years in this country. And basically, Prudential is obviously in the retirement

business. And it asked itself again, what can we do about this? So first thing they did was it said, OK, let's actually research this topic and understand what's happening. So I actually partnered with Unite Us, which is the largest Latino nonprofit advocacy organization, who understand why Latino households, for example, are lacking access to retirement savings and ask that question and then give the research to a traditional market research agency. It partnered with this nonprofit and basically did that research and they understood what are the issues that that particular community is facing. So they found a couple things, right. So they said, "okay, 80 percent of small businesses in the US do not offer any retirement plans because they are concerned about costs. It's complex. The whole process is extremely cumbersome. But a majority of people of color actually work for these small businesses." So that's why a majority of people of color actually don't have access to those retirement services. And so Prudential, basically, it's public policy team, it realized that there's something called Multiple Employer Plans. And I'm not getting technical right now, but the devil's in the details. Basically as an Employee Benefit Plan in which many employers can participate. And they said, "hey, that's actually a solution that might narrow this retirement coverage gap." And so it partnered with many other nonprofits and organizations to advocate for that policy change. And in the process, it's not completely passed. The bill is not going to be passed, but it has a strong chance of passing now. And that's an example of where it's changing something in a business context. But by doing that, it's actually good for both the business, because now you're opening up a whole new market of Latino households that may have access to retirement services. And it's good for society because you are increasing access to retirement services. So I don't know if that example is helpful, hopefully it is. I can go on about those. That's an example of a company creating shared value and addressing a social problem.

[00:18:16] Thank you. The next question very much related to what you just mentioned would be, today we talk a lot about models of social innovation and entrepreneurship, both for profit and nonprofit, targeting different vulnerable population groups in order to address the wicked social problems. What are your views about choosing such approaches, such as cross-sector partnership, shared value, collective impact etcetera to address the grand challenges, social challenges of this century?

[00:18:45] I don't think that there's any one approach, obviously, that can solve all the problems. I think my view about choosing those different approaches is that it needs to be chosen based on the situation and based on the context. So, for example, I think that there are certain issues where it is imperative that different cross-sector players come together to solve the problem. Whereas I think if a company is asking, "hey, what role can I play in this?" There may be a specific, unique role that the company can play. So even shared value, it's not a model to solve all social problems in this world. I think shared value is one approach that the corporate sector can take to play its role in a more positive and productive way to solve a social problem. But I think that the approach needs to be chosen based on the context.

[00:19:33] Moving along, in terms of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, 17 SDGs, as they exist today, how does FSG's approach act as a solution for addressing complex problems through the lens of these SDGs among vulnerable population groups? And if you could share with some examples, that would be great.

[00:19:53] You know, I think that the SDGs, obviously there's a ton of opportunity. I mean we work with idea of social issues, everything from education to poverty to inequity to sanitation. So some or the other SDG is covered in terms of the work that we do, I will say that both companies and foundations are extremely interested to align our focus areas with

their SDGs, particularly multinational corporations, and international NGOs right? An example is we worked a few years ago with the Gates Foundation to explore this topic of menstrual hygiene and mental health for women and girls. And that I would say, let's say that fits within SDG five, I think that's for gender equality. Another SDG of another number, maybe seven, which is the one about clean water and sanitation, so it fits within all of those. So that leaves a lot of opportunity to do that. A lot of companies who are exploring their purpose are trying to align their purpose to SDGs or their shared value goals to SDGs, so there's a lot of opportunity to kind of touch on those issues there. They really give us a framework for prioritizing some problems that need to be solved in the world, right? And I think working with these different entities help us think about what are the unique role that entities can have in contributing to that SDG.

[00:21:09] So if I may, in working with your clients at FSGs really sort of examining the work through the SDG lens is also sometimes a core element of the projects that you undertake. Am I right?

[00:21:22] Yeah, it depends on the client. If it is, then I think with international clients it more comes up. So I think especially when you're working with companies and if you are in the process, let's say, of helping a company figure out what is its shared value strategy, what should be the social issue that the company is most uniquely positioned to address, we'll obviously look at the internal assets that the company brings, the strength that the company has, the social problems that the company is ready to address. But we also look at the SDGs as one idea to think about how a company can prioritize.

[00:21:54] Thank you. So you've talked a lot about terms like collective impact, shared value, inclusive markets and the non conventional approaches to addressing complex social problems. And as a person trained academically in social work, I would like to ask you what's social work about all this? How would you see these as social work interventions?

[00:22:17] I think this goes back to a comment you made earlier about the micro mezzo macro. When I think about social work interventions, at least in my mind, the most common practice is at the micro level with a lot of what we were taught in the client industry through social sciences about working directly with individuals or clients. I think when you think about collective impact, collective impact can happen at a city level, at a community level, at a national level or international level. So that in my mind is more the mezzo level or the macro level practice. And then a lot of the work that we do is also in the systems change space. So that I would say again is at that macro level. I think that's the level at which you are intervening is different in my mind. As for a lot of the work that FSG does, for example, will be at the second or third level, right, the mezzo and macro level and not at the individual level.

[00:23:04] Thank you. The consulting practice at FSG also, as I understood, works in the area of inclusive markets and I would be very curious to know if you could possibly share any examples in that space that would have social work relevance of sorts.

[00:23:21] It's actually not an area that I have worked directly in, but I'm happy to share in a high level what it is. So it's a really interesting approach. It's very different approach than the work that we do. Our Mumbai office actually leads our inclusive markets work and it's very different than the consulting work that we do and the whole idea is that basically in our inclusive markets work, FSG plays the role of almost a facilitator. We are bringing companies and investors, funders, governments to both develop strategies that can scale

something to the business model, so we do research to understand what are those inclusive business models, and then takes it to investors and funders and governments to actually implement those models. And there's a lot of sort of principles to that approach, so it starts with a really great understanding of low income consumers, or customers or producers and there's a lot of research of thousands and thousands of consumers who maybe might be using low income housing or decentralized water plants and things like that. And then we go through a phase where we actually do research and develop the business models to solve the problem. Let's say we are thinking about the problem of low income housing. The team worked and figured out different models that will actually work for those segments and then identified what the values are at the ecosystem level and eventually function as a facilitator at the industrial level to get different stakeholders in the industry to try out the business model that was recommended. So there are different topics that FSG has worked on that are different issue areas that FSG has worked on, including market space that has led to the low income housing industry, it's a really interesting story where because of the work that was done in that space, more than 80 thousand units of housing have been sold across the country and they've incubated a new housing finance company that has provided 28 million in micro-mortgages. So there's a lot that's been done in that space. That's a very different model and the one on one consulting model that we do here based out of the U.S. team.

[00:25:16] Thank you. And just to clarify, when you said a lot of housing has been created, is my understanding right, that this is to sort of really help with housing for the lower income markets so that they are able to have a roof over their head. Am I right?

[00:25:31] Yes.

[00:25:31] Thank you. Moving along. Would you share your thoughts on how social workers as change agents could really claim their space or be present at the table, particularly in areas like collective impact, shared value and inclusive markets. And let me give you a little prelude to this. As I was looking at the FSG webpage and reading people's profiles, I really wanted to count how many social workers are there. And I hope I'm seeing this right. Yours was the only name that had an MSW against it. So piqued my curiosity.

[00:26:02] So FSG is a firm, I would say it's a small firm, and we try and get people with diverse sort of backgrounds. So we have people who've done their MBAs. We have people who have done their public policy. I agree probably not so much social work backgrounds, but a lot of people who have, even without degrees have done a lot of, let's say grassroots mobilization community work in their lives, either in the US or abroad, maybe they don't have a degree, but they have either started organizations on their own or have actually done that work. We do try and ensure that people who are coming into the organization have some experience in the social sector. So it may not be the traditional social work experience, but definitely experience working in the social sector. So they may have a different groups, right? But you're right in that people perhaps with a traditional social degree is probably not as high, but they think about the role. I think there's a lot of space. I think the idea is how do you take one experience and translate it to another experience, or translate it to another sector. So, for example, I think in a collective impact effort a lot of the work that the collective impact team does is with communities on the ground. So it is with nonprofits on the ground who are doing the work with community leaders in different communities. And of course, there will be a funder on the table and a local business on the table if need be. But it's very much a partnership with all these different entities. So if you are a social worker, you're working in the nonprofit and you are realizing that the work you're doing is siloed and you're only able to solve one part of the

puzzle and not the others. And if a collective impact model is the right model in your community, you could be part of a collective impact effort. If you look it up there's a lot of case studies about how collective impact works. And I think anybody that can take that leadership role is to be a backbone or to be the backbone that looks at the shared goals of that collective impact initiative. So I think that there's definitely a role there. I think even in shared value, there are increasing partnerships between a company and nonprofits to make that shared value effort for success. So an example is we recently featured this example in our paper of Promatic Health to a healthcare company, where healthcare companies are realizing increasingly that there's a lot of factors outside clinical factors that influence health outcomes. So Promatic has actually added a new step in its service delivery where they actually screen patients for different indicators related to social determinants of health, such as food insecurity, housing safety, financial strain, child care, transportation challenges. And so if I'm a patient, I go to Promatic medical center, I'm screened for that. And if I am screened for that and I'm positive, let's say I do have food security, then I am referred to either a food clinic or some other entity. And some of them are in-house and some of them are external nonprofits, Right? So in case a promoter of the operator food clinic where they supply food, whose contributions are doing positively for that food insecurity. So that is sort of different, or their sometimes refer patients to a shelter if they are experiencing homelessness. And they do that not only because it's the right thing to do, because they have realized that it actually reduces their health costs. So again, that's the shared value angle where partnering with the nonprofit ends up putting its patients there, It's actually helping reduce health care costs and readmissions for an organization. So I think that I like different goals that we can play and sort of break down the files between the different sectors. I think it requires a mindset change from both sides of a social worker and at the nonprofit end, as well as the private sector and I think it requires just a mindset shift. But I definitely see a lot of connection points.

[00:29:29] Thank you. And just for the benefit of the audience, how you define shared value, could you sort of briefly define the term collective impact, please?

[00:29:37] Yeah. Yeah I'm happy to. So the whole idea of collective impact is it's a very structured a way to achieve social change. You know, there are a lot of organizations that work in isolation from another's, so the idea of collective impact is that organizations work together to achieve a common goal. But there are certain features that make a collective impact different or distinct from a regular partnership. So there are five characteristics of a collective impact effort. So it should have a common agenda. If you have many organizations working together and have a common agenda you have shared measurement systems. So the idea is that let's say there are 10 to 15 organizations, you are all working towards the same goals and the same indicators of success that are mutually reinforcing activities. So the activities that I'm doing or you are doing in the same type of impact should be complementary to each other. Continuous communication is another important characteristic. And the first one is the idea of having a strong backbone, because one entity or one organization is actually tracking if all the other organizations are meeting their goals, is contributing towards goal shared outcomes. So an example is, and you can look this up online, too, there's a really interesting initiative, a citywide initiative in some of them, Massachusetts closely links all of them, which is the collective impact campaign to reduce obesity. So it had 40 restaurants on the city offered like healthy options on their menus. But then it also had schools who participated who basically increased healthy foods and vegetables in their options. It had clinicians and school nurses who were trained on how to identify children of obesity or who are overweight. The city participated in and renovated parks and increased space where children could do



activity. So that was a collective impact that met multiple parties who played those mutually enforcing roles to achieve a common objective.

[00:31:24] Could you just repeat the example again, please?

[00:31:26] It's called Shape Up, Somerville. Somerville is a place in Massachusetts.

[00:31:30] Thank you. Moving along, in your opinion, what implications does your work with FSG's Social Change Approaches have for social work education and research and practice?

[00:31:42] When you say social work education, research and practice, are you thinking about what should change in the way those education happens?

[00:31:49] I would say how does your work with FSG, how do you think that would sort of filter into the curriculum with education and how do you think it could also really play into advancing social work research and practice at the micro, mezzo and macro levels?

[00:32:06] I think a couple thoughts. I think the big thing, and I don't think this is an implication, just for social work. I actually think this is an implication for all vectors of education and practice. I think there are too siloed in our society and hence we are siloed in our thinking. We try not to be, but we are. So an engineer only launched in, let's say a computer engineer, only practically learns to code. But when that engineer gets into a start up in Silicon Valley and is creating the next Uber or creating the next startup, that person is not thinking about how that startup is going to affect the urban city, the way people communicate, the way people who live, congestion, all of those things. So the implications for city and city planning, that's not taught to an engineer. Similarly, I feel like sometimes in social work we are not taught as much to think about how does, what is an assets that the private sector have. Oh, you know, this company working in the sector has a very, very strong logistics system. What does that mean for the work that we do in the most interior parts of some countries? So I think there a lot of silos and that sort of limits are thinking in our world view. And I think it's breaking in many parts of the world, of course it is, I'm not saying that no one has done it. I would say in terms of the curriculum, I don't know the curriculum has taken that on. I think the practical world has written the silos, but I don't know if the curriculum has. So I would say that in my mind is number one, about, you know, breaking silos. And then I think in terms of research, I'm not a researcher. I don't know the entire piece of research. But I feel like in my work I've found that there are so many areas where sometimes we just don't have evidence on what interventions are successful to others. So the mental health example that I was telling you, there's a lot of consensus that improving access to menstrual products is going to lead to improved education or health outcomes. And some evidence is strong and some context and some evidence is not as strong. And I think there's a lot of data gaps in that evidence space that I think there's just more opportunity to improve evidence base in terms of what types of interventions work on the ground so that the funders and people who are sort of resources are going to flow based on what interventions work best. So those are sort of a couple thoughts that come to mind.

[00:34:14] Thank you for sharing that. Now moving specifically to social work education, let's look at the MSW program, particularly. What suggestions, recommendations you might have coming from the FSG world that could bring some value addition to classroom course content in terms of creation of courses or creation of content within existing social work courses, whether it's like community courses or administration and management

courses or interventions courses and also the field practicum experience. If you could share your thoughts, that would be really useful.

[00:34:49] Yeah I do feel, I also took my social work courses many years ago and I'm going to age myself that I think I did them in like 2005 and 2007 in India and I think I'm going to share that context. Obviously the social work education here might be different. I think one of the things that I think is worth adding is a discussion exactly like you're having today about different practices in the social innovation, social impact space that people are undertaking. So there is a lot out of there, but I think certain practices, innovative and impactful, are more aligned with the social work degree. So I think collective impact was an example. I mean, even more than shared value, I would say collective impact would align really well with individuals who want to be in the social work space because it is such a community based approach that I think it would really be important and interesting for someone who is doing social work but not doing a lot to understand about what works and what doesn't work, because that'll be an opportunity for them when they are in the real world to sometimes take a step back if they're interested too, and if they have the space to think about, say, how can I connect what I'm doing to something else that's happening in the field and not be disconnected? So I think number one would be some of these practices like I think bringing guest speakers or sharing case studies in the space. For example, I know that a lot of business schools now have courses on shared values, so business sectors are trying to learn about social impact. But I worry, to be honest, and this is a personal reflection that is instead of a distinction of who is starting social enterprises. And I don't think it should only be people having their MBA degree who may have spent like a year doing some volunteer work. I think if someone who is grounded in social work, who has done work on the ground, is able to then think about innovations, business models, how to actually start a organization, run it, who are they should be partnering with? I think there's an asset there. And I think people are doing it. I don't want to say that it's a new idea, but I don't know how much of it is in the curriculum. I think I've seen examples of people starting things on their own and running with it. I know my colleagues are my classmates are doing that, but I don't know how much of it is because it was in the curriculum versus they just opened eyes, saw the world and they picked up on something.

[00:36:58] Thank you for sharing that. And to that point, I would just say here at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work, we do have a Social Impact Fellows program in the summer. In fact, that's currently happening now as we speak, where we partner MSWs with MBAs and finance and doctoral students from other disciplines through an eight week program and let them experience the whole world of social innovation and social impact. At least I can speak for the MSW students from a very interestingly interdisciplinary lens. And we also have an interdisciplinary elective called Social Sector Innovation that a social work faculty member co-teaches with a business faculty member. And we have the course open to both MSWs and MBAs. And my last question to you would be if you were to sell FSG to MSW students, how would you do that?

[00:37:43] So I've been here for seven years and I really enjoy what I do. I think I would say a couple things. One, I think if you like problem solving, this is a great place to be because they're constantly doing that. I think the second thing is it's given me a wonderful opportunity to work across issues. I've always been issue agnostic in the social sector world. And so it allows me to kind of work across different issues, break silos and work across different factors. That's the second one. The problem solving, working across different issues, if you like that, this is the place to be. Third thing I will say is I have wonderful colleagues and just an attitude of learning. I think we as an organization don't think we have all the answers and are experts in the social sector. If that was the case, all

the problems that have been solved. I think we are very much in a learning journey. And I really appreciate that. We wrote the first article about collected impact I think about 10 years ago and over time, a lot of things that we've done, and as we learn things, we write about it. As we unlearn things, we write it. So I love that I add to as an organization as well as in my field and my colleagues, and we're not perfect, but we are in our journey. And we acknowledge that, and because it's small I think we all have an opportunity to build that as we grow as an organization. So, yeah, I don't know if that's helpful, but I really enjoy it and I've grown as a person here. So yeah, I'll stop at that.

[00:38:59] Well, thank you so much. And before I let you go, I was just curious to know about your work in the area of human rights. And do you still sort of weave that into the human rights perspective into your consulting work at FSG? And if you can share an example, that'll be great. If not, that's fine, too.

[00:39:15] I think it depends on the client and as things come. I know that one of the pieces of work. I'm not sure if I can share the name of the client or not in public. I need to look it up. But one of the pieces of work that we do is in the space of human trafficking. It's a large funder that's based here in the US that does a lot of work on the ground in Asia and Southeast Asia to address the issue of human trafficking. So that's an example that comes to mind where we were involved in two areas. One was to do an evaluation. So we do a lot of evaluation as well to evaluate the effectiveness of a program and to see what was learned, what followed, what what are areas for improvement and to figure out what's a cohesive strategy for addressing that issue. So, you know, that's an example that comes to mind. I wouldn't say that we are here who are experts in human rights, but I think that a lot of human rights issues that we do work are to our clients as they come up.

[00:40:11] And just out of curiosity, did I hear you seeing this client was sort of a corporate client or a nonprofit client?

[00:40:17] It's a philanthropic. It's a private philanthropy.

[00:40:19] Thank you so much, Ms. Iyer, for your time. I really, really appreciate you giving us the time to share your work with FSG as somebody who was trained in the discipline of social work and public policy. So I'm grateful for your time and thank you once again.

[00:40:34] Thank you so much for inviting me. This is a fun conversation and I'm really excited about both the work that you're doing and the interdisciplinary sort of nature of training that you are almost creating. And I think that's fascinating, and I was glad to share more background about my work that I do here.

[00:40:51] You've been listening to Lakshmi Iyer's discussion on creating social impact through public private partnerships. I'm Louanne Bakk. Please join us again at [inSocialWork](#).

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