



Kerrin Mitchell:

Welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy Podcast.

Tim Sarrantonio:

We're your hosts, Fluxx's Co-founder Kerrin Mitchell and Neon One's, Tim Sarrantonio. We've spent our career learning how to leverage technology and data in the social sector to better connect and serve our collective causes, constituents and communities.

Kerrin Mitchell:

In this podcast series, we profile leaders, public figures, philanthropists, and industry experts to explore the fascinating intersection of funding, technology, and policy. We're here to analyze the most formative topics and trends that shape the present and future of philanthropy.

In our previous episode, we spoke with Daro and we discussed a lot of the technical infrastructure of data as a social good, and today we wanted to shift focus and dive into the human side of the transformative power. How it can come together to build a community, how it can be facilitated to bring that all into a space that is both authentic and in line with the values of a community. So we wanted to bring on a very special guest who I just adore, and I met her at a conference, Good Tech Fest, just recently, Genevieve Smith. She runs the GV Advisory. It's a consultancy that actually is dedicated to helping organizations adopt a mission-driven approach to enhancing and leveraging their data systems. But it's really unique actually in how she goes about it, and I can't wait to have her explain it in terms of the structure of how she approaches it from all levels, from the board, all the way into the data. She is a visionary in her field. She's a personal favorite of mine. Genevieve, welcome to our little pod Untapped Philanthropy. Welcome. Welcome.

Genevieve Smith:

Thank you for having me.

Kerrin Mitchell:

Absolutely. We're so thrilled. Tim and I both are extremely excited about this episode because it's a little bit of a departure from some of the normal tech-focused ones we've been having. So I wanted to actually start by introducing you a little bit to the crew here, and obviously you have embraced this idea of world building in a quite different way than most, and so I wanted to sort of give you a moment to introduce yourself, but also talk about your journey, how you got here. It's a very unique story. Do you mind sharing a little bit about yourself with the listeners here?

Genevieve Smith:

Yeah. So yeah, thanks again for having me. Super excited. So yes, I've been running GV Advisory for six years now, but have been working in the social sector for about 10. And before that was in a lot of different interesting spaces related to the social sector, but definitely outside of the social sector. Things like I played in a lot of bands and spent a lot of time in anarchist collectives and these spaces where a lot of folks were thinking about the world doesn't have to feel the way that it does. The world doesn't have to be the way that it does, so what are we really buying into? And then I went to school, got my degree in economics, and ever since then have tried to kind of figure out, just like you said, that what does world building look like within the social sector?



And I definitely started my data in the social sector journey as like, we can measure change, that's easy. We have all these models and I'm going to just be sitting back in this corner writing a bunch of code. And really quickly it became, oh, how do you get 300 social workers who are underpaid and under-resourced to care about documentation that doesn't actually do much for learning or the mission or the clients? So really, really quickly it became less about actual measurement and more about what might a data culture look like, especially one that is mission aligned and what do we actually mean by mission aligned? Can we have a conversation about how values actually show up in data? And depending on where you are in the social sector, that can be a really hard conversation to have.

Tim Sarrantonio:

I mean, I have so many questions already.

Kerrin Mitchell:

I knew you would. That's why I wanted to intro you two. I was like, Ten is going to love her.

Tim Sarrantonio:

I mean, the anarchist spaces alone, we could probably have a whole conversation about including I had friends who founded an anarchist arts center in Huntington, Long Island. So very, very fascinating, but not the point of today's episode, I believe. So very, very intriguing. But I think what's really interesting to hear that perspective is that it definitely, like me, I had a very similar kind of, I didn't play in bands, but in terms of that understanding of space and its critique of the typical structures of power dynamics, it definitely has shaded my approach to things. But what do you think Genevieve was like? If you can point to a moment that kind of clicked for you when you said, okay, I think the social good sector is where my passion lies. What do you think that moment might've been, if you can identify that?

Genevieve Smith:

I mean, I love the first, I love the overlaps. The number of people I meet doing this work that came from similar spaces is I think really lovely. I mean, probably a collection of moments, but definitely hearing the band Crass for the first time was really big. And that didn't immediately get me thinking like, oh, it's about the social sector and working with nonprofits or foundations. But it was really about looking for where is this work happening? Or more realistically, where do people say this work is happening and how can we leverage that language to actually make the work happen? If that makes any sense. I think.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Well, and I think it also, it makes sense to also ask the question of who are the people that we're even asking these questions to. But we'll probably unpack that later in the episode, I suppose. So Kerrin, where do you want to kind of guide us? I absolutely would be unhinged if you just let me go here.

Kerrin Mitchell:

I know that's why you were so funny. So Tim and I typically, as you can imagine, I prepare the whole document and forward it over to Tim and Tim's like, I'm ready to go. And Tim is so good at just going with the flow. If I gave him complete creative control on this, it would be unhinged. So on this episode specifically, so I'm going to let you be a butterfly in this. Just come in and flip through and tell me where you want to kind of dive in. But I'm going to start the arcing here. So let's talk a little bit Genevieve about the work that you do. Obviously you have a ton of published articles and such, and in something that has popped up when we looked at and said, what is her ethos, her approach, your mindset has been likened



to a community garden, inviting everyone to contribute and benefit from collective wellbeing like bees and butterflies and nature. So I thought maybe what we could do is start by talking about how that sort of infuses into your practice of data. How do you sort of look at data in this collective lens on how they better serve the communities around them? Do you mind kind of tapping into that first and then Tim, I'm going to let you loose. You're going to do it.

Genevieve Smith:

So yes, this idea of a community garden, especially thinking about how organizations can leverage data to better understand their community. I think where I start with that, because this is a question, I mean, this is how a lot of my work begins, is reminding us that data are one of the tools we have. Systems are one, or depending on how many platforms your organization has, maybe many of the tools that we have in our toolbox, but always coming back to why even use data and what questions are we asking of the community. And one thing I think about a lot is data collection itself is an extractive activity. So whether we're thinking about demographics, spending habits, lots of surveillance data, understanding different stories, feelings that communities are having or members of the community are having, that is essentially us going in, especially in philanthropy a lot of times and extracting information for hopefully community benefit.

Often it's more complicated than that. And so instead of casting a really wide net and collecting a ton of data and then asking questions, one of the things I think about a lot is getting really clear on what the questions are. So what questions do we have about the work? What questions do we have about the community? But also thinking about this idea of mutualism, not only are we the only ones who are allowed to ask questions to understand what's happening in a community, or does the community have questions or even more often, the community usually knows what they need, and we might have some really specific questions about how to get there and how to collaborate. But that's really where I start when we think about how are we going to leverage data is do we understand the why of data and have we interrogated what biases and assumptions we're bringing to our questions? Because nothing is neutral and we all bring biases everywhere we go. And so it's really this idea of if we want to grow tomatoes in the community garden, what does the soil need? What season are we in? And is somebody else already growing tomatoes in a corner that we just can't see and we're just not communicating? And so all of a sudden we have a ton of tomatoes but no garlic, which might be fine, but is that actually what we want for our garden?

Tim Sarrantonio:

I think I just love the analogy of that. I think the struggle that I always have with these very same questions is that everybody wants to plant their own garden because that's just how the economics have been framed by default. It's always even the nonprofit sector, the social good sector, the phrase is that a nonprofit is a tax status, not a business model. And so when going into communities and things like that, what have you witnessed, for instance, on the fact that individual communities likely already are doing their own versions of data collection just in a way that might not match what more traditional funders define it as efficient. So I would say the question is how do we balance preconceived understanding of what good data is versus getting to that mutualism in a way?

Genevieve Smith:

Yeah, I mean, yeah, it's way easier I think, to talk about, and then when we get to evaluations frameworks and results frameworks, it gets really tricky. So I think one thing I like to really keep in mind is that slowing down can feel really counterintuitive, especially when so many of us are working in really



urgent contexts and not working with a lot of resources, but there really is something to slowing down and saying, well, what do we think "good data" are? And so really balancing, sure, we need quantitative data and we need different indicators for X, Y, and Z, but as much as we can, what can we stop asking for? Do we actually need some of the data that we're asking for? Because I think that's going back to that casting a really wide net. There's a difference between, oh, wouldn't it be interesting to see if X is impacting Y?

And we absolutely need this information to make this decision. So I think there's some prioritization there. And ultimately slowing down and stopping things is really, really hard, especially for those of us who are used to having a pretty good amount of power. And so I think it also takes kind of an interrogation of why are we owed data? Why are we owed information? And I think that it ultimately becomes a conversation about trust because some things aren't going to work. And I think there's a real fear around managing well, what about accountability and how do we make sure resources are getting used the way they were intended to be used? And sure there are going to be missteps with all of that, but I think there's something about building the trust around not only what data we're using, but whose stories matter to us and how much prove it energy do we really need to bring to this work?

Tim Sarrantonio:

Well, and Kerrin, we can get back into the flow here, but kind of an interesting insight that this is bringing up is also I think a lot of, especially smaller organizations, when they're working with a funder or something like that and they're being posed, all these questions they get based off of my personal experience, based off of talking with different organizations, there's almost like a performative hustle that comes into, oh, I'm going to get you the data that will get me the money versus what's actually helping what's actually needed here. So I think that's a fascinating insight, but Kerrin, maybe you could kind of keep us moving forward to help.

Kerrin Mitchell:

No, I mean, I think it's an interesting one to dive in on because so much of what Genevieve, as I've understood obviously your work to do, you're actually balancing that of someone like the board who will have priorities of obviously continuity, pushing forward growth, fundraising. They have one idea, the community itself as to what's actually, to your point, making the difference might have a different idea. And the reconciliation of those is oftentimes where I think you in your work get kind of put in the middle to say, how do we restructure this? And going kind of off on a limb here, would you mind actually discussing a little bit about some of the best practice of bringing that cultural alignment and the data alignment together? Because I think that's something that folks really struggle with. And I can tell you on the boards that I'm on, and I'm only on a handful, I've seen that there's just a misunderstanding of oftentimes what needs to happen. How do you even approach that?

Genevieve Smith:

So yeah, early in this conversation, Kerrin, instead of saying GV Advisory, you said, GV adversary, this is where...

Kerrin Mitchell:

We're going to edit that part out because that was where my coffee hadn't kicked in and I was reading it like a moron.

Genevieve Smith:



But it's perfect because sometimes I can feel that way. I think especially with this reconciliation work. So one thing I think about a lot is in data and tech projects, we often have technical roadmaps, but we rarely have emotional roadmaps because inevitably, especially in the social sector, so many of us care about this work so much, and so many of us have our identities as good people tied up in the fact that we do this work and that we do this work well. So it's really hard and can feel really threatening to rethink how we're doing the work. And so all of that said, I think one thing I really, really, really care about is building up conflict practices with organizations. I think there tends to be a hope that we can just avoid conflict, but when we're talking about our values, when we're talking about whether or not we're causing or perpetuating harm, when we're talking about the power differential between communities and especially boards, there's going to be conflict.

And so one of the things that I work with organizations on is building up a generative conflict practice. And a lot of this is informed by adrienne maree brown's work around emergent strategy and a lot of change practice and mediation practices, but essentially to get really clear with each other about, hey, we all care about this a lot. We all have a lot wrapped up in this work, whether it's on the board side, our identities, our careers, our value. And on the community side, our livelihoods a lot of the time or our housing or self-determination, all of these different things. And so before we even begin to talk about, hey, there's a mismatch here, or hey, what you think is right is actually causing harm. We've got to agree on how we're going to navigate that conversation together, first. So whether that is generative conflict practices or something as it can feel simple, but is actually really transformative, having community agreements about how we're going to share the space together, it's crucial for being able to have these conversations and then also to be able to be really upfront to say, hey, I know you're investing in a data project.

You're going to have feelings about it. And three months in, you might be really mad at each other or really mad at me. And it's been really helpful to set that expectation because inevitably three months into a project, somebody will say, oh man, Genevieve, yeah, I've been having a lot of fun with this project, but now you're trying to take my toys away and I hate it. But then we're able to name it instead of, oh, I have this really itchy feeling and I'm having resentment. But instead being able to open up that space to say, yeah, I thought I was right about that thing. And it hurts to be wrong, especially in spaces where we're rewarded for being the smartest people in the room.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Do you see any generational differences in how people approach these projects? Or is it a different type of factor that may influence it? There's a reason I'm asking that question, but I wanted to get your thoughts on that. Are certain generations less attuned to having these types of conversations?

Genevieve Smith:

I think when I first started this work, I thought that the answer to that question would be yes, absolutely.

Tim Sarrantonio:

"Okay, boomer" answer, basically.

Genevieve Smith:

Yeah. But it's actually been way more about whether or not folks have the capacity for change and uncertainty. And I think there's something there too about security of I know I'm not going to lose my position, or I know I'm not going to lose respect by saying, I don't know. And I think really the divide that



I've seen is far less generational and more racial. It's more White folks who tend to be fellow White folks. I'm a White femme, but who tend to be a lot more resistant to these conversations.

Tim Sarrantonio:

The reason I ask is interestingly enough, and on track with what you're talking about was having a conversation with a Black leader yesterday, younger leader in the New York City area actually. And he was talking about his frustrations about a data sharing project where some of the older organizations who were also Black leaders were hesitant about participating in types of things. And I think that in many ways what you're getting at is there's always power dynamics here, and that shows up in so many different ways depending on the kind of fluidity of the community that you're interacting with. But I think that's a really fascinating thing to start with though, is no matter what in all of these, if we're setting the right expectations, that it's like first of all, addressing almost the scarcity mindset that comes with sharing in a way. It's almost like I have little kids and I have to teach them all the time. It's okay to share. You don't always have to share. Set the expectations on that. And what are you finding when it comes to this is also the biggest hang-ups that people have regardless of power dynamics or racial dynamics, socioeconomics. Does it just come down to that fear? What is the underlying thing that you think is driving a lot of the blockers here?

Genevieve Smith:

Yeah. Well, I mean that example sounds really familiar, and I think that makes me think of one of the really core things that I try to remember and tell my clients is resistance is coming from somewhere. Where, if folks don't want to share, it's not only about zero sum thinking or wanting to hoard information or data, but especially just thinking about historical context. People have been hurt when they've shared their data. And so I think that's another thing that I really like to keep in mind. But I mean, I think it's urgency is one of the biggest blockers where we're in such a hurry that slowing down to have these conversations and they do take time, which means they're more expensive. Especially if, you might hear my dog dreaming in the background.

Kerrin Mitchell:

I do! Oh, hi. Mine is snoring in the background.

Tim Sarrantonio:

It better be part of the podcast.

Genevieve Smith:

He's happy to be here. But I think I do, I think urgency and I mean, it's manufactured urgency, I think. And that's an important distinction between something where it is if you're in an emergency context and you've got to get resources deployed, then yes, that is urgent, and there's this deadline, deadline, deadline. And that I think also goes with perfectionism, right?

Kerrin Mitchell:

It's very reactive.

Genevieve Smith:



Yeah, it's very reactive. And I think that it kills collaboration because we don't want to work out loud because we might be wrong or somebody may edit our work and it's going to take way longer because all of a sudden, a bunch more people have to look at the thing and maybe somebody doesn't get it as fast as I do, especially involving line level staff in a lot of this work. This tends to live at leadership levels and it takes a lot longer to ask staff what they need.

Kerrin Mitchell:

I mean, I think organizations run into that constantly. I mean, we have that at Fluxx where in terms of alignment of what the key driving metrics or success criteria is, kind of sits at the executive level and then it gets down to the director. But the actual translation point to where you can start to make it something that resonates for folks that may not have access to the same data that the executives had, that informed why it mattered. That translation point oftentimes can be harder as it gets done to line management and things of that nature. And I think that's the part that I think a lot of, I will speak for ourselves, we struggle with a lot too. So I'm not shocked at all that that's there. It's very interesting when you said that it was a lack of, or maybe it wasn't a lack of, but it was a resource question. My mind immediately went to cost, but in fact, it was actually people just doing it proactively instead of reactively. And I love that that took a different direction than what I thought you were going to say. But do you find that there are other, what are the biggest challenges beyond just being proactive versus reactive that you would say get in the way of people building a good practice around data? Is there a cost factor that people see? Are there other factors that you would say you come across?

Genevieve Smith:

I think it's mismatched expectations around what data can actually do for us. One thing I run into a lot is, and I think cost has something to do with this, but there's an assumption that, oh, once we get the database, we'll be fine. Once we get the CRM that we need, it'll fix our problem. Instead of like, no, y'all talking to each other. And that takes way longer. And so I think the most successful projects I've seen and the most successful pieces of work around this that have been able to be a part of, folks were willing to say, oh, okay, yep, no, we wait a couple years before we make any big decisions on systems or data and spend some real time with strategy. And also just understanding what do our values actually mean in the context of how we're using data on a Tuesday morning. Which of course brings up a bunch of other conversations across the organization. So I think it's the willingness to wait and also just embracing multiple truths in that we're never going to get to an absolute answer on a lot of these questions, especially how do we understand what our impact is? We can have a lot of really, really great proxies for that, but in some cases we may not always have a, here are your three metrics that are always going to tell you exactly what time it is.

Tim Sarrantonio:

The interesting thing about the context of what we're talking about is also the vast majority of the sector does not have formal data training. Meaning if, my wife is an engineer and she went to school to be an engineer, and there is a set career path for jobs like that, and there's going to be rules and things like that nature. In the nonprofit sector, in the social good sector, a lot of people fall into it. I always frame it as, how did you get on the island of misfit toys basically? And what's interesting that we found in our own work is that a lot of those folks understand the importance of data. It's like they've addressed in some ways the data culture in that we know we need this, but they get very self-conscious about either the state of the data, if they want to share it, if they want to talk about it. It's so dirty, we're so embarrassed.



Kerrin Mitchell:

Well, it has an academic lens. There's an opportunity. Yeah, you're right, absolutely. It's almost like it's so comprehensive and complete that the concise conciseness is not important anymore. It's like it has to be comprehensive before you make any decision.

Tim Sarrantonio:

So that's the perfectionism that was definitely touched on. And then also probably, again, going back to that perfectionism and that kind of inherent emotional element that underlies all of this, because data is just electronic points of representation of human life when you get down to it. So the other piece that we hear all the time is people feel shame over it, especially community driven organizations. We released a recurring giving report, and we found that the typical nonprofit had 11 recurring donors, and a bunch of people sighed relief. They were like, oh, that's like me, because everybody hears about Charity Water, and they go, well, I don't have 10,000 recurring donors. Guess what? Most people don't. There's a shame that we have explicitly tried to address with our work, but it's so empowering to hear that these are larger conversations. So in that context, how do you also in your process, address the shame, the guilt, the fear as part of this?

Genevieve Smith:

Oh. Yeah. I'm so glad that you named that because it's huge. And so going back to that idea of the emotional roadmap for this work, not only being able to say, Hey, you might be really annoyed at me for a while, but also, and this is where building up a conflict practice, building up community agreements and how we're going to share space together, is being able to say, hey, this is going to feel weird. And one thing that's really helped me is framing from adrienne maree brown's, also borrowed from Octavia Butler, is this idea that, well, we've never seen a world that actually works for every single person. We've never seen it. So sure, there's this idea of, well, what are other organizations doing that I should emulate? Especially with data? That's a question I get constantly is what are other organizations doing where they're doing this well?

And that can be useful, just especially understanding like, oh, they're "a mess" too, though. I hesitate in using that kind of language with folks. But I think so much of it is really grounding in there are no right answers. And the work of building a just world is that of science fiction. And this is where the work of adrienne maree brown and Octavia Butler comes in, we're like, it's going to sound really wacky when you say it out loud, and it's going to take a lot of different ideas. We've never built something that actually keeps everybody safe, and is that even the goal? And so building up a practice of getting people more comfortable with saying half-baked sentences out loud and being able to say, listen, my closet is a mess, and nothing is folded in there. And to get to the point where to say, but I know that you'll still love me even if my closet is a mess. So I think that comes back to something I said earlier about how in the social sector, so many of us marry our identities as "good people" to how good we're at the work. And the more we can separate those things and separate how good the work is from our identities, I think the safer it becomes to think about change, to think about what we're not doing well, to talk about failure, to talk about where we've made mistakes without making it personal.

Kerrin Mitchell:

And then you look at this idea of people's uniqueness being a part of their translation to their metrics, their culture, who they are. It's so unique. How do you sort of reconcile the need for custom metrics that reflect each organization versus standard metrics that give the ability to bring that collective of the bees and all of that together to say, here's where we as butterflies and bees and all can hook in. I mean,



it is such an interesting concept. I love what you just discussed, and I'm wondering, well, how do we tie it back to a collective? How do we bring it to something that's bigger than us so that we can honor the uniqueness, but then bring in something that translates as a common language?

Genevieve Smith:

Yeah. Right. Which I feel like I have a friend who talks about how are we honoring the lineage of this work? And I think being able to hold that uniqueness and hold community context, cultural context, all of those things, while also saying, who else has done this work and what other narratives can we start to build on top of? And so I think there's something to like, right, we're not reinventing the wheel, but maybe the vehicle's a little bit different. And I think that's where with this community garden idea too, which for the metaphor of the community garden, just shout out to Gabi Fitz. She's another really wonderful practitioner and consultant, but we've been working on this metaphor together. Is that not every bee is going to look the same, but how can we make sure that the core assumptions underneath our metrics are based on some shared set of values, shared research, understanding. Are we using the SDGs? Are we thinking about social determinants of health? And so being able to go back and forth between that really high level, what are the things we're looking at globally back to, and what does that mean in our context, which requires a certain level of comfort in the toggling between those levels.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Genevieve, obviously, I think that we could talk forever in all honesty, but for our listeners, they want it a little bit tightened up. So one of the things that you've already started hinting at is that there's other influences, of course, on your own work and almost a bit of intellectual lineage there. I'd love to hear a bit more about what influenced you and other things that can inspire others like you're inspiring us today.

Genevieve Smith:

Yeah, I mean, I've already mentioned adrienne maree brown, but her work around emergent strategy and a lot of the other authors, most of whom are Black feminists that she's brought in, like Prentis Hemphill, all of those folks are incredible. And then I know I mentioned Gabi Fitz. She runs Think Twice based out of Chicago. Donita Volkwijn is also an incredible knowledge management practitioner who thinks a lot about knowledge management as a vehicle for racial equity. And she's at Philanthropy New York right now, and I spend a lot of time in my garden and watching the bees and watching squirrels, and there's been a couple cardinals that have been visiting us recently. So I think there's something to be said about watching what nature does too. And then y'all too, I've also learned just how I think and more about how you think and different ways to think about the world from y'all as well. So also just a shout out that we can always be learning from each other all the time.

Tim Sarrantonio:

Well, and I think this has been an informative episode. Kerrin, do you have any final words before we go into our final segment?

Kerrin Mitchell:

No. I just love Genevieve. I'm so excited that you're in my little orbit now, dear. So thank you so much for sharing today.

Tim Sarrantonio:



I'm grateful too. I'm so jazzed about this discussion today.