

*Female voice:* *A Deeper Look. Exploring what works and what doesn't in development and the changes we can make together to turn ideas into action.*

*Patrick Fine:* Hello. And welcome to *A Deeper Look* podcast. I'm Patrick Fine, CEO at FHI 360 and today I'm joined by Alicia Phillips Mandaville, Vice President for global programs at IREX, one of the leading U.S.-based international development organizations. Alicia, welcome to the podcast.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Thank you, Patrick. It's great to be here.

*Patrick Fine:* As our returning listeners know, this year we're exploring the darker side of development. So, what we're talking about are paradoxes and unintended consequences, some of which may be adverse when we're trying to do good through development efforts.

There's no shortage of critiques of development efforts and the question I want to explore is whether those critiques in themselves sometimes lead us into the darker side of development or in other words, the way we try to respond to what are often very legitimate critiques of our work actually lead to unintended consequences and sometimes adverse consequences.

So, let me just say a little bit about Alicia, who is a development professional with two decades of experience, somebody who I have known for many years and greatly admire. She's worked in the public, private and nonprofit sectors. She's an original thinker who has pioneered novel program ideas and tools at the intersections of policy, governance and economic development and technology.

She's the former chief strategy officer at MCC. That's where we first met. She also worked for years with the National Democratic Institute. So, she brings terrific experience and insight into the questions we'll be discussing today. Alicia also is an expert at measuring development impact. And she has expertise in how to think about impact and brings a very balanced point of view to that. I've learned a lot from Alicia about how to measure social impact.

So, let's get started. First, my basic question is do we set unrealistic expectations within the development community for what can be achieved? And by setting these very ambitious goals, does that work against us?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* All right. So, we're going to start at the shallow end of this. *[Laughter]* Thank you and thanks actually for the chance to be here. I'm going to start more days with you introducing me because I feel like ready to go out and take on the world now, having heard these things that you perceive me to be able to do something about. I appreciate it.

And one thing you didn't say is I'm also an economist, which makes me a little bit nerdy. And I do always think that things come down to a question of incentives. Like what's the incentive structure behind what's driving us to take actions? And what you're talking about kind of as the question at hand is in some ways a question of perverse incentives.

If we get asked enough, are we doing this one thing right? Are we getting good enough results? Are we getting a strong enough impact? Then we have an incentive to always estimate that our impact might be a little bit bigger to meet that request that we deliver the maximum impact.

So, in a nut shell, if the question is do people set expectations around development that are over ambitious or that are extreme, yes, yes, we do. I mean, part of that is nobody goes into development because we're pessimists about the world. You know, we go into development because we think if we put our minds behind it and we put our arms behind it and we gear a team behind it and we work collaboratively, we can actually change the way things are somewhere. So, if you start with that mindset then you do, you want to set ambitious goals.

*Patrick Fine:* Particularly, there's two aspects of this I'd like to explore. Certainly, we as practitioners want to achieve as much as we can. I'm less focused on us being ambitious, because in my experience, development practitioners are an exuberant, ambitious lot.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* But the funders, the donors ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Ah, ok.

*Patrick Fine:* ... set expectations for us. And my experience is that often those expectations, it's not just that they're big, hairy, audacious goals.

They're completely unrealistic by any measure and yet the development practitioners embrace them, accept them and then try to do their best to achieve them and fall short. And when that happens, then it looks like development efforts are a failure. So, we snatch defeat ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* ... from the jaws of victory.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah, yeah. So, partly there's a question around if we held development organizations to the same standard as small businesses, for example. So, small businesses in the United States. Five years out, 75 percent of them have failed. Right? So, if we held development actors to that same standard, we'd be delighted if we achieve success 30 percent of the time.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Because that's five percent more than the small business community gets and everyone agrees that the small business community is the engine of growth in the United States. Right? So essentially, you're asking are those who fund development efforts setting goals so far out and holding development actors to such a high expectation that when we agree that yes, that's the goal, there's no way we're actually going to be able to hit it in the first place.  
[Laughs]

*Patrick Fine:* And so, you set both sides up for failure.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Mm-hmm. Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* But do you see that happening? That's, that's a perception that I have, but do you agree with that?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* I think there's two pieces so in part. I think there's two pieces to it. I do think it can be useful to set an extreme outcome goal because you never want to set too short of a goal. Like, if I only needed to lift five pounds I wouldn't train past lifting five pounds. I'd stop at five. So, setting an extreme outcome goal makes sense. But, I feel like there's a second piece to it, which is setting a path and the rate of progress toward that goal, that I don't think is ever aligned with reality.

*Patrick Fine:* Or factored in.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Or factored in. Right. Well, or so say you've got five years you're going to work on something. I like five today apparently. There's an expectation that you could prorate across those five years your level of outcomes. So, if you're going to deliver 100 by the end, you're going to get 20 a year.

*Patrick Fine:* Mm-hmm.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Well, reality is you might get five the first year and then figure out that actually that didn't work very well and move on from there. And, I actually think that that underlying assumption that those who fund development outcomes can most effectively predict the path you're going to use to get to the outcome is part of why the end results sound excessive.

So, if you realize that at the end of year one you're going to have to rejig and figure out what would get me twice as many as what I did last year or what would get me three times as many as what I did last year, or say you're working in the human side of development around systems or around people's decision making. If it's not working in the first year, you do have to try something different.

But, now you've lost a year in your process. And, if you're good at getting to outcomes you should recalibrate, you shouldn't just keep trying the way you're doing, but so, I

do think – this is a long-winded way of saying yes – I think that the expectations become unrealistic. But, I don't think that it's the number at the end that drives the unrealism. I actually think it's the assumption that we can predict with perfect clarity what it's going to take to get there.

*Patrick Fine:*

Yeah. That makes sense. And the variable of time as a factor in determining success and development efforts has come up repeatedly in conversations on *The Deeper Look* podcast. So, time is a factor I think many of us would agree that we don't have the right methodology, the right approach, for how to look at time as a factor in how we carry out programs ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:*

... and achieve objectives.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

Can I ask you a question? Do you think time is a proxy for what we know? Right? Because it's not, like if I knew all of the things I knew at the end of the year at the very beginning, I wouldn't need more time. I'd know that the first effort wasn't, didn't work or I'd know that actually people don't live where I thought they lived. They live in a different location or that they use their household income differently or they make decisions about sending their children to school different than I thought.

*Patrick Fine:*

I think that's much too rational. I think that the reality ... I think that what you were saying is true and you're talking about the importance of pivoting, ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah. Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:*

... when you find out that a certain path is not taking you to where you need to be or there are other considerations that need to be taken into account or there's new data that informs your program that you need to pivot and change. But, I think on the time issue that it's more driven by election cycles, by budget cycles, by idiosyncratic decisions ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* ... that may be tied up with an individual's personal ambition.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah, yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* And that we just don't have a good method within development programming, whether you're talking about bilateral programs or multilateral programs, for really managing those idiosyncratic and imposed parameters.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah, yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* Or constraints.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* And, and then on the flip side, there's not a systematic way to think and talk about political economy, I feel like, in the execution of development programs. So, if you're doing a program that's about democracy or rights or whatever then you can talk about politics constantly. If you're doing a program on health education, you don't necessarily talk about politics or think about the politics of it. But, the institutions that you wind up working with to deliver the program, there's a political economy attached to them.

*Patrick Fine:* They live within a political context.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Right. They didn't emerge in the form they're in for some random reason. It's not because people didn't think hard enough or they're just being dumb. They're institutionally situated in a set of incentives that people have around things. And I think you're right that donors have a set of things which drive their timelines that sometimes they control and sometimes they don't. It can be their own budget cycles. It can be political pressure within their own system. And then on the programmatic side, we don't have a system for, I think, articulating back up why it is that the timing of the program might not fit well with the timing of the donor's timeline.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* So, if you have an election in the country, then that changes what you can deliver. DFID years and years ago did an initiative called Drivers of Change and it was this, gosh, it

would have been like early thousands like 2003 or '04. And, it was an effort to look at the political economy underneath policy making to fight poverty. And they commissioned research and did their own research in lots of different countries. And, I worked in both Bolivia and Nigeria on research about the effect of the legislative system in Nigeria on anti-poverty work.

*Patrick Fine:*

Mm-hmm.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

And the effect of political parties in Bolivia on anti-poverty work. And part of what we found in that research was that when the election happens in Bolivia, if you've got a coalition government, you alternate the civil service. So, people listening can't see that I'm intertwining my fingers, but I'm intertwining my fingers to show that if you've got three parties in the coalition then the cabinet position goes to whoever got the most votes. The deputy minister goes to whoever got the second most and then the third goes to the next one. And, then they keep alternating like that the whole way down through the entire civil service ...

*Patrick Fine:*

Wow.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

... of that office. So, the capacity to, like, retain what happened in the last – like first of all the team doesn't work together particularly well, because two thirds of them have a political incentive to make the minister look bad. [Laughter] Because they're another party. So, the team as a whole can't carry forward from last year very well.

*Patrick Fine:*

So, you're raising another recurring theme when we talk about the darker side of development, which is in the development community we too often think of ourselves as operating outside of or independently from the political context in the country where we're operating. Many development organizations and practitioners see themselves as neutral parties.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:*

Working on, like, your example, health education.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* So, that's not a political thing.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Right, right.

*Patrick Fine:* But the reality is that any program, especially programs that are bringing in resources that are making personnel decisions that are influencing policy are by their very nature highly political. And so, one of the early lessons I'm drawing from conversations this year is the importance to have increased awareness about the development communities' or development organizations' roles as political actors, not just as technical actors.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Well, and I think respecting that everyone we're working with is also sitting in a political space of their own. And like small "p" politics. It's not that they're elected officials.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. Exactly.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* But even inside one's own office, which if you've got a double booking on your calendar which meeting do you go to is technically a political decision. And it's not. It's small "p" and people know you're busy, etcetera. But if you do capacity building work inside an organization, if you want people in the system to use a new tool or to use a new process, they also have to want to use it. They have to think it's useful for them, and there's a political context that they have to operate in that that same system has to serve them. And neither the donor in the equation and sometimes not the programmatic side remember that the politics of the people, stakeholders with whom we're working, is actually going to be the determining factor in whether they continue to use the system or not.

*Patrick Fine:* Exactly.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* No matter how well designed it is.

*Patrick Fine:* That's exactly right and that's a great lesson to try to build into the way we think about programming funds or designing programs and applying resources. I want to go back for a minute to the idea of goal setting.



You made the point that setting a bold goal is a good thing and that's consistent with, I think, the current thinking which is: You set a bold goal and you challenge yourself to achieve that bold goal, and then you start small. And, you have these incremental steps where you see what is advancing your cause and what's not. And, you pivot where necessary to achieve that bold goal. So, I hear that talk a lot. I can understand how that works very well for a small operation that is focused on a discreet outcome.

But, if you're talking about programs at scale, national scale or maybe provincial scale, and you're talking about multifaceted programs, I still wonder: How do you reconcile setting the bold goal, which is going to be time limited? Because we're in a political context that's allocating resources for a certain period of time. And then, creating a situation where no matter how effective you are, it's unlikely you're going to achieve that bold goal. So, the outcome is a public perception or a political perception that development doesn't work.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. It's kind of like when you decide whether or not to put in your own performance plan for the year a stretch goal *[Laughter]* Right? Like am I actually going to get to that? I'm torn about this honestly because I do think that there are tradeoffs between types of bold goals. If you want the largest number of people vaccinated in a year, that's one goal. If you want the public health system to over time vaccinate the maximum number of people, that's a very different goal. And either one of them is pretty bold.

But knowing which one you're aiming for changes a little bit what you actually need to do over the course of a period of time. Right? Like if you just want to get as many needles in arms as possible because that's going to protect as many people right now and there's an immediate urgency to it, you might set up your programmatic work to actually just deliver. You're not looking at sustaining. But for development actors you always look at sustaining, of course. You don't want to walk away and then have no one get vaccinated after that.

So, I'm not willing to let go of the idea that setting a bold goal is helpful because I do think it helps people inside a program, on the ground, figure out those tradeoffs between do I need to make sure everyone in this clinic knows the cold chain that they need to keep? Or do I just need to be present and make sure that cold chain stays in place for the next certain number of months? Do I need to find some way to make sure it doesn't fail for the next six months?

*Patrick Fine:*

Yeah. I think that's a great insight in terms of how we define what a bold goal is. I suspect if we looked at development programming, we'd find more programs that are focused on your first example, which is maximize the number of people that get vaccinated in the next two-year period ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* ... as opposed to a bold goal that says build a system ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* ... that can vaccinate all of the people in this geography over the next ten years.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes. I think often when we see a request to do a program, the target is something around the number at the end. It's not about the capacity to sustain a number like that over time or any number. It's not that setting a bold goal is the problem. It's setting a bold goal that is short sighted is the problem.

*Patrick Fine:* Well, it's because those goals that are aimed at long-term capacity building don't sound bold to most policy makers. They sound like an unending process sort of activity ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* ... as opposed to we're going to get everybody vaccinated in the next six months.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah, yeah. In some ways that's where I think the incentives get misaligned is that for me to get people to listen to me about how great a program is going to be, I

need to tell them an end number that like resonates, right? But in reality, what I want is for the system to keep producing its outcome over time when I'm not there. In theory that's the goal for all of us in development is we walk away at the end and then there's a level shift. So, there's an outcome that the population sees over time that we don't touch anymore. But, like, that sounds all mushy and how do you measure it? And you have to measure it over time. You can't measure it right at the end of the program.

*Patrick Fine:* Mm-hmm.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* So, there's some accountability pieces built into that problem too. So, there's partly a politician's and/or appointed and/or people who need to staff them and work with them need to articulate really large momentous outcomes that often have big numbers attached to them.

*Patrick Fine:* In order to get resources allocated for the activity.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes. Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* So, you have to oversell.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* So, in my mind this is one of conflicts that we have within development, which is the people who are the advocates, who are the persuaders, to explain why it's important to do something, are usually the same people who are doing that thing. And, as a result, in order to convince a policy maker, whether it's a multilateral development bank or a congress or parliament or your local city council, to allocate resources to the activity, we tend to overpromise. And now with this new emphasis on setting bold goals, I question ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* I see where you're going.

*Patrick Fine:* ... whether that's just going to exacerbate our willingness to overpromise.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* I want to bring in the concept of benchmarking here, because within the commercial sector, they do a lot of benchmarking. So, when GE is looking at selling a product, they're looking at a market and they're benchmarking their performance against competitors. And they may have bold goals. But they have realistic benchmarks to inform whether the progress they're making is cost-effective or is justifiable.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* And, I don't see that same kind of benchmarking within the development community.

Let me give an example. In Afghanistan, we had a target of building 580 schools and clinics in a one-year period. In the end we had to extend that to two years and we delivered about 460 schools and clinics in a country that was at war, where there was no infrastructure to move materials ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Right, right.

*Patrick Fine:* ... and supplies. Where there was not very well-developed community structures to work with, in terms of sighting schools, allocating land.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Mm-hmm.

*Patrick Fine:* And there were few construction companies to actually do the building. So, you've got a bunch of constraints and in this two-year period, we still, this was USAID, still manages to deliver something like 460 schools and clinics built to high standards. The program was perceived and was described as a complete failure because we both had to extend the timeline and it didn't reach its target.

I went back to try to benchmark. And I looked at large-scale public programs to build schools and clinics in developing countries over the previous 20 years. What I discovered was that this program in Afghanistan beat any other program in the last 20 years by tenfold in terms of number of facilities delivered at the pace they were delivered. So, in terms of effectiveness, it was light years more effective than any other program in much less

difficult circumstances. Yet, it was still regarded as a failure and used as an example of development failure.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah. Well, I think there's two pieces of this and one is the request for what are you going to do. Like, so like, here's the expectation about what we think someone should be able to do at the end of the block of time based on whatever information is at hand. And that information might have come directly from things on the ground and be very rooted in realism. And it may have come from like the most recent assessment which may have had some time behind it, right? And it may or may be based on the experience in some third country or something else.

*Patrick Fine:* Or driven by political imperatives ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* ... that aren't connected to reality.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah. In order to get the funding to do it you have to commit it's going to be this number. So, there's a lot of things that drive the initial expectation setting. Then, there are a set of – so I had to learn game theory like 80 million times. I couldn't stop going to school for a while. I kept going back and getting different degrees and I swear I learned game theory like each time I went back and got a different degree. *[Laughter]* So I'm kind of over it, but it's useful sometimes in terms of there's a little bit of a prisoner's dilemma side of it for those people who wish to actually implement this work.

*Patrick Fine:* So, what's the prisoner's dilemma?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* So, prisoner's dilemma is this story around how two people get arrested because they're caught committing a crime together. The cops put them in two different rooms and say to each of them, "All right. If you tell, like if you tell me all the information about what happened, you'll only get a year in jail and your buddy will get ten. But if neither of you say anything you'll both get five." The cops also know though that if they both confess they'll both get ten. Like that's reality right. *[Laughs]* So, the dilemma is if no one says anything, then they're both better off. But the situation that

the cops have set up are such that they're probably both going to tell on the other one and then they'll both go to jail for ten years, right? Make the assumption they weren't actually committing a crime. Ok. So, that's the notion behind prisoner's dilemma.

In this instance, the issue is someone has said to a bunch of development actors, we want 500 schools in Afghanistan at the end of the year. If you want to build any schools in Afghanistan this is the vehicle you're going to do that through. And so, you say oh ok, maybe I could build 500 schools in a year in Afghanistan. Sure. Let's give that a go.  
*[Laughter]*

And then you do your earnest best to figure out ok, how do I get the best people? How do I put the best systems in place? How do I in that first few months actually figure out what the work plan is going to be such that I surface early if a year is going to do it or not, figure out where the roads are going, all of these different things. But, everyone's first push is into that box where they both tell on their buddy.

*Patrick Fine:*

Uh huh.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

Because everybody actually wants to do the work. And we've learned it's not plausible to go back and say hey, this entire timeline is probably not realistic because it's probably been put there for something that actually our interlocutor can't control either. It's a political time table or it's a pressure to deliver a certain outcome, a commitment that's been made diplomatically, something like that.

*Patrick Fine:*

And that creates adverse outcomes, in terms of negative public perception. It could actually interfere with your ability to achieve the objective. So, you've described the dilemma and the factors clearly. What's the lesson that we should take away in terms of how do we pursue these development objectives in a way that is going to be more effective?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

I do think it is building checks early in terms of if you build a point at which you have to say here is realistically looking at how much time there is ahead of us and what the stated outcome was, here is the likelihood of now that we

have all of the facts, here is what are the adjustments that get us to that outcome. Because then you're in a conversation about is it better to address the outcome? Would 200 schools be better inside of a year? Or, is it better to take two years and still get to 460?

*Patrick Fine:*

So, you're talking about building in feedback loops and then having an understanding with the stakeholders that you're going to use that information to shape the progress of the program.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

Yeah. So, in some programs, it's kind of the iterated cycle of adding new locations, for example. So, we're doing some work on governance in a particular place and in the first year there's, it's working in 20 locations and it iterates that number every year so you don't start with everyone under the sun. You start in one place. You learn from that and you grow to the rest. Because I think setting a check-in point only works if you all agree that that's the point at which you can make adjustments. If only one of you thinks you're going to make adjustments at that point, then you're just going to have a fight when you get to it.

*Patrick Fine:*

But I think that just in terms of development practice that if there could be a greater understanding on the part of all the stakeholders. So, the major stakeholders are typically the local authorities, whether it's a national or local government, an external funder whether it's a bilateral or multilateral funder. And then the organizations that are carrying out the work, whether they're international or local or some combination of the two.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

Both. Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:*

So, if you could get those parties to embrace the notion that there is a shared goal but the path to that goal is not laid out in advance. And that as information comes in, as you gain experience that you're going to have to revise work plans and that that is a desirable outcome, not an indication of failure.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:*

Yeah. So, I spent a year at a tech startup and the company builds custom data applications, large scale, reconciliation of large-scale data sets and we were working on a tool that

would help customs officials in ports identify fraudulent trade transactions. So, it included a whole bunch of trade data and dollar point price points and things like that. In the process of going from a data base you can interact with it spits out what's the price supposed to be of something, bananas for example. What should a container of bananas price-wise be?

Going from that to an actual tool a human being can use at the moment of transaction in a port, there's a lot of steps in between that. And you do have to iterate on them. You would never get to a good tool at the end if you tried to say in the beginning exactly how you were going to get there and then just build that thing.

*Patrick Fine:* That's a great example.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* And so, the process of doing this, and this was new to me. I had not been a software development project manager ever before. You plan to readjust yourself constantly and you plan check-ins constantly because you sit with your client and you show them what you've done so far, and you say this is what it looks like. This is how the operators would use it. Here's the assumptions that we made. Click, click, click you walk them through it. And they say ok, great. Except that they actually need to interface with this other thing and it needs to only take up half the screen. And ok. So now, you actually go back, and you fix all of those things. But the outcome is in the end the operators can use the tool. Whereas, if you just built the thing to the specifications that you had in mind when you started, it would be totally unusable. But in software ...

*Patrick Fine:* But, we don't use that method ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* We don't.

*Patrick Fine:* ... in development programming.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* This is what I mean by it was really eye opening to work in that space because project management is not at all like that in that if you have been a good manager your whole career, you're rewarded for the fact that you've predicted everything. *[Laughs]*



*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Like you see the problem coming?

*Patrick Fine:* You stay on the critical path.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* And then you fix it before, right, before it causes you to deviate. And so, we get incentivized to be better and better and better at doing that. And then we also get the expectation that that's always going to be possible.

Whereas, in software development you don't ever think you're going to get it right the first time. I mean maybe some people do. I would not hire those people. *[Laughter]* But if anyone has been through kind of creating a data base or commissioning someone to build their website or there's iterating attached to it because what you can articulate changes as you see what they're producing and you get to the outcome you actually need by interacting with the people who are doing the building. That same principle applies here but it is, we're not normed for it I think in our society.

*Patrick Fine:* Yeah. That's a, that's a great insight and a great example of some of the unintended consequences that affect our work.

Now there are a couple of things I'd like to ask you. One, before we wrap up, is what you're talking about and what we've referenced here often in this conversation is using evidence in our work, and evidence is another big buzzword in the development community. Everybody loves evidence. FHI 360 is one of the leading proponents of evidence-based approaches, so I embrace that.

But, I also worry that sometimes our commitment to evidence works against us. And, I see that when just want to know what works and what doesn't work and we're going to do what works and we're not going to do what doesn't work. And we're going to make that evidence-based. What's your view of that narrative around what works and what doesn't work?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* This is a weighted question. *[Laughter]* I am a big proponent of fact-based and evidence-based decision making, however, not in the absence of judgment. So, this is actually a conversation we had internally fairly recently. Do you need to tell people that when they're making a decision they should use their judgment? In my mind if you're making a decision, by definition you're using your judgment in some way. Whether you have good judgment or bad judgment, you're still using it to make the decision. That's the definition of decision-making.

*Patrick Fine:* And isn't judgment a major quality in leadership?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes. So, we were talking about if we want to say we support evidence- or fact-based decision-making, do we need to add on using your judgment. And, I was arguing you don't need to add using your judgment because, of course, you use your judgment. Like, that's the piece that goes without saying. It doesn't always go without saying that you should get facts on the table first. So, I still don't think that a drive towards using evidence actually is a problem for us. I do think a drive toward using only numbers can be a problem.

*Patrick Fine:* That's a great distinction.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Actually, there's a sector in development that I feel like is more normed for this kind iterative, fact-based but not necessarily I-have-to-have-a-number-for-everything approach. And that is the democracy institutional support people in that if you are working with a parliamentary caucus somewhere you know you have to go along with the way things are going politically inside that legislative body and inside the country. You cannot just design a program and then if they call a snap election halfway through the year keep doing exactly what you planned to do. Like no one is confused. It's clear you have to work that way because you're definitionally working on a thing that changes frequently based on people's actions and behavior. And so, because you're centering people in the whole system and the whole system is built on nothing but people's interaction with each other, you know up front you're going to have to have this iterative conversation about, ok, we were working on how you get your, how to

whip your caucus around voting on particular issues but now there's been a snap election.

Now we're going to work with you on how you integrate new members of your caucus into the political system because they haven't worked with you before. And that need to pivot feels really natural. In that community nobody thinks it's odd. And that's where I started professionally, and so, I think that kind of carries with you through things later. Wherever you started filters in.

*Patrick Fine:* I started in the education sector and the example I like to use is for a period of time we used a cascade model of training ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes.

*Patrick Fine:* ... to build capacity. And it became clear through observation, not through elaborate, expensive impact evaluations ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Right.

*Patrick Fine:* ... but through observation, it became clear pretty quickly that that model of training was not effective for many of the uses that we were using it for.

And so, we stopped using it. We were able to say based on observation this isn't effective. People are not gaining the competencies that we are expecting. They're not changing their behavior in the way that needs to happen for more effective teaching in the classroom, so let's not do that ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Right. Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* ... anymore.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Exactly.

*Patrick Fine:* Let's find a new approach. So, for me, that's an evidence-based approach that is natural and uncomplicated. I do worry about the notion that we can, through elaborate methodologies, that we can determine this works.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* And then do that everywhere.

*Patrick Fine:* And then apply it everywhere.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yes. No. Yes. So, I agree with you about that. I think human beings and where they live vary from person to person and place to place. And if you are talking about systems change and human beings interacting with the system, I do not think you can just replicate and scale everywhere on the planet from something that worked in one place. That said, like so understanding ...

*Patrick Fine:* Yes.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* ... what actually works. This is where there's tension in answering this question is that if you want to understand what actually worked in a program you do have to ask a bunch of different kinds of questions. It's not just did this work but also, ok, well ...

*Patrick Fine:* Why did it work.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Exactly.

*Patrick Fine:* Yeah. What worked and why did it work?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* And so, you know, some of the more robust impact assessment measures where you have, you know, control groups where you don't do anything and then some groups where you do half of the intervention and some where you do the other half give you that comparison that you can say this is the piece that worked here. Then asking the question before you take it to a next place. Is this new place similar enough? What is different about this new place? Is that difference going to affect the thing that worked?

We were talking recently about community centers in Nepal and the space that they occupy because the municipal governments in Nepal didn't have a lot of strength after the conflict was ended there. There are only so many other countries that have that same reason that their local municipal government isn't as functional. And so, when you think about the role of community centers in

Nepal, if you went and then talked about them in Ghana they would have very different purposes and roles.

*Patrick Fine:* Right. Different context.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* The Ghanaian municipal government system has more structure to it and doesn't have a war behind it.

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* That it needs to contend with and so what is it that worked? Not just did this work becomes the important question. But I do think that you have to ask that question and you probably have to measure some pieces of it. However, I want to just say this fast because I realize we're getting to the end. *[Laughs]* I do think we have a tendency to say what can you count? And that must be what counts. And for some types of work it's not what you can count that is actually the measure of your best work and that's where this drive toward evidence and drive toward measurement and drive toward metrics is more problematic. We do a lot of leadership development work at IREX. It's very hard to quantify someone's leadership two years out, right?

*Patrick Fine:* Right.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* There are proxies for it. There are surveys. There are ways that you can assess their leadership development, but it is still very subjective because it is about someone and their behavior and other people's interpretation of their behavior and their own interpretation of their behavior. So, there's some fields where having a metric is much more complicated. And if we get into a world where we believe that if you can't measure it, it's not important, then I fear for humanity because most of my personal life is not measurable, but I find it really deeply valuable. *[Laughs]*

*[Music plays]*

*Patrick Fine:* On that note I'd like to wrap up our conversation with a couple of questions for you personally. The first one is what is something almost no one agrees with you on?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Maybe something that's controversial but somewhere I hope people agree with me about this. You know this actually already from having worked with me. I do think that respect for human rights and dignity is the fundamental basis of all development work.

*Patrick Fine:* Doesn't everybody agree on that?

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* I do think that I have had arguments with people about if you are, pursuing economic outcomes, you just pursue the outcomes and you don't need to think about the rights piece because it's about the aggregate economy. So, if you're building a road, that's not a human rights issue. Or if you are doing a health services program where there is a mechanical thing you are delivering ...

*Patrick Fine:* Like a vaccination.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah. You focus on the vaccination. But I don't think you can design a sustainable system to do either of those things if you have not accounted for the respect, for the rights of people involved in it.

*Patrick Fine:* And the underlying trust.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Yeah.

*Patrick Fine:* So, I agree with you on that. So, you didn't answer that question ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Oh, I'm sorry.

*Patrick Fine:* ... correctly. Second, *[Laughter]* what ...

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* How about what is something no one but Patrick Fine agrees with you on? Sorry.

*Patrick Fine:* What's one lesson you've learned from the work you've done that you'd like to share with our listeners. So, if you were going to share one thing besides the importance of rights.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* Right. Ok. Fair, fair, fair. There's two pieces to it. It is one lesson though. There is a difference between doing things

that are important and being someone who is important. And particularly listeners around Washington, DC, this may resonate more if you're based in a capital city, a political capital city somewhere. But there is often a point in your career where you have to decide if what you most want is to get important things done or you want to be seen as an important person. Sometimes they go together and there's lots of people whose careers do put them together.

But, sometimes early on you do have to pick one or the other in specific decision-making. And here's the example which is the second part of the lesson. When other people start to take credit for something that you made go right, that's when you know it has worked well and that's where you split between being important versus doing something important.

*Patrick Fine:* Alicia, thank you so much for joining us.

*Alicia Phillips Mandaville:* It has been great to be here. I have really enjoyed it. Thank you, Patrick.

*Patrick Fine:* And listeners, thank you for tuning in. I invite you once again to share your comments on this episode and on previous episodes and stay tuned throughout the 2019 season.

*[End of audio]*