

Grace:

Welcome back to Future of Business, where we take you on a journey to explore the diverse range of sectors and stories embedded in the Oxford MBA cohort and beyond, and how they will shape the future of business. I'm Grace, one of the co-hosts, and today I'll be chatting with my classmate, Su Zun Mon. Welcome Su Zun.

Su Zun Mon:

Thank you for having me here Grace, and really excited to talk about humans and their designs and the social impact sector.

Grace:

It's a pleasure to have you here. And I'm also excited to explore more about the role of social enterprises and intergovernmental organizations in generating growth in developing countries, particularly in Myanmar because that's where you're from. And just to give a little bit more of a context for our listeners, Su Zun has worked across a variety of organizations. From engineering roles in the private sector, to project implementation and impact oriented roles in the public sector. But I think it'll be best if I leave it to you Su Zun, to expand a bit more on that, and tell us more about yourself, and the organizations and projects you've worked on.

Su Zun Mon:

Thank you. Yeah, so I will say my life has been a journey so far. I left Myanmar when I was 16 years old to study undergrads in electrical engineering in Singapore. And from there I have been working there, and I lived there for about 10 years in this commercial center, mainly focused on technical aspect of it. And in 2016, I decided to move back to Myanmar to spend more time with my families and my parents. And when I was looking back to job opportunities in Myanmar I was wondering, because I was so focused on technical aspect of what I have been studying. I didn't know what kind of career should I take. So I was like, "Okay, how about impact generating sector? This looks interesting." So I took a career switch, and decided to join the social enterprise called Proximity Design, which is a Skoll social enterprise awarded in 2014.

And as a product designer, I'm kind of involved in developing products and services that would generate positive impacts in Myanmar's rural families. And then three years ago, I decided to move to the World Bank for the Nation Electrification Project with the mission of providing accessible electricity in Myanmar. And at that time, if I'm not wrong, when the project started, we had 35 percentage of accessible electricity in Myanmar. And when I leave, it was about 70% of accessible electricity in Myanmar. In terms of my career, it has been up and down in the sense that I came from commercial sector, and the hybrid which is social enterprise, and then in the governmental organizations. And then I decided to pursue MBA, mainly because I want to kind of see how to equip my technical aspect, and the business aspect, as well as come like the knowledge of dealing with the different organizations, different backgrounds and stakeholders.

Grace:

Well, I think it's interesting because a lot of people come to do an MBA because they want to make a career change right. And of course you've outlined your motivations for coming here. But you already made, I would say, a pretty significant career change previously. I want to go back to what you said earlier about when you went back to Myanmar and you came to the idea of social impact as your next

step in your career. Could you walk us through a little bit more like how you decided on, that and how you were able to make that change happen?

Su Zun Mon:

So I'm going to share you a funny story here. When I went through the interview process for the project designers role in Myanmar that's social enterprise. I remember that the... My supervisor was asking me, "Have you ever been in the farm?" And I'm not proud of my answer, but it was quite... When I look at it, it was quite funny how far I have come. My answer was quite frank, I passed by a few. So he was like, "Okay, that's not what we are doing. We don't just pass by. You have to be in the farm."

Grace:

Right.

Su Zun Mon:

So I was like, but the thing is I'm pass by too, because I was living in Singapore. You don't normally see a lot of farms. So he can't get the account. He can't take it from the human perspective, which I'm really grateful for.

I got a job, but one of my main challenge is understanding and talking the same language as the farmers. I feel like I did have the technical perspective in terms of what are the designs approach the Skoll has kind of prepared us to. How do I think in an engineering way, in terms of how you solve the problems, right on the targets, solve the problem. And I feel that engineering designers and business people think really differently from the different perspective. So I only come seeing everything from engineering technical perspective to solve the problem. And my main challenge is around trying to understand the behaviors, how the farmers are behaving, what they are seeing, how do they concise, and how would you find the right solutions for them? One of the good examples of understanding the whole system would be critical for this kind of job. And it was a struggle for me for the first three months.

Understanding the competitor, understanding your stakeholders, including from the CEO to the consumer, which is our Myanmar farmers. And when I was studying GOTO here, I kind of look back when I was struggling it will help me a lot if I have system experience. Because that's what I was trying to solve, making the system change in Myanmar's agriculture industry. So that makes sense, system mapping makes sense in that sense. And GOTO has been really helpful to developing that skill set of mine. GOTO as in Global Opportunity and Threats.

Grace:

Yes. Right. For context for our listeners, believe we talked about it in one of our previous episodes, it's one of our main projects during our MBA program, where the groups get to pick a system issue related to whatever overall theme that our program has given us. And this year there wasn't actually a specific theme. It was just overall, system reset. So we got to have a lot of leeway with what we got to work on. But coming back to what we were talking about just now, and your role at Proximity Designs, which previously you noted had been awarded the Skoll award for social entrepreneurship, which there is a bit of a connection to Oxford since we have the Skoll Center and that's connected, we're funded by the Skoll foundation. And so I'm curious, you mentioned about... want to talk about the human center design aspect, and in your role as product designer, their product management, product design, this is something that as a function is I would say quite popular for MBAs looking to make a career transition.

And the thing is we typically think of tech companies, right? When we hear PM, or at the very least in the private sector, we don't really think about PM in the context of social enterprise and context of

development. And I'd love for you to expand more on how elements of design, thinking of human centered design and other aspects of PM, can be incorporated to social enterprises, and how that actually can help in achieving their wider mission.

Su Zun Mon:

I think we also talk a little bit on human center design role, and then seeing from consumers and beneficiary perspective, I think this came into the picture significantly. So when we talk about like social impact, we often use the word beneficiary.

Grace:

Yeah.

Su Zun Mon:

Which I feel that is [inaudible 00:09:30] of how important the end consumers are. In my case, which was the farmers, because we are trying to create the impact. We are trying to create the problems that they have, not trying to come... whatever we do we are going to benefit them. That's the assumptions that come with the terms that we use.

Grace:

Yeah.

Su Zun Mon:

In the tech company also again, same thing, I think the drawback lines would be when we talk about PM is more of analyzing the data, create the stakeholder management is mostly around internal, rather than including the end consumer. When we talk about human center design, the main factors that we have to look into is, are we given the voice of the end consumer in the designs already?

Eventually that's the goal that we are trying to achieve as a product or as a service. And most them, they are the people who often got forgotten in the process.

Grace:

Right.

Su Zun Mon:

And who lost their voice. I think the most important rule for PM, no matter be in the technical... technology sector or social impact sector. We still have to involve the end consumer who is going to benefit from it, who is going to use the product or service, how they are going to react or behave around that. And that I think is the crucial role. And often people just look at it from commercial sectors and that's the only area as well, and users are important.

Grace:

Yeah.

Su Zun Mon:

Which is not true, so I think PM roles would be useful no matter which sectors you will be working in.

Grace:

I mean, I think the fact that just within the MBA, and what we've been exposed to through the MBA, there's greater and greater overlap, between public-private sector. And I think that ties into the fact that, when it comes to specific functions it also isn't just restricted to a specific type of company, or sector. I want to take this conversation to a bit of a broader context. Aside from the importance of incorporating these PM elements to social enterprises, what do you think are other aspects that are key to enabling the success of social enterprises? As well as the challenges that they need to overcome.

Su Zun Mon:

I think in that sense, even in the impact generating sector there is two players. I would say two sub categories, which is NGO, nonprofit, which mainly depends on the donors' money and social enterprise. They try to regenerate revenue generations, and then use the generated revenues into the cost or particular missions. Because of MBA, I kind of change my mind in a sense, because I would say each one have the different strength in a sense. So when you're talking about NGO, most of them, they have more... better relationship with the government. And they have better, in terms of relationship with the network within like deployment partners and establish reputations in that sense. But most often what happened is people trying to invest so much time on pleasing, or trying to meet with what the donor requires rather than focusing on who is your end consumer, what kind of impacts you are making.

So it's a bit of trade off in that sense. But for the social enterprise is also, again, same thing because social enterprise normally start from a small local community. Most of the time they have to struggle a lot in terms of, at the beginning stage, trying to make the reputations and the trust even amongst the local community. And often the funding most of the time is the problem for the social enterprise. But the good thing for them is they can see this as a business, and focus more on the end consumer.

Grace:

You worked at the World Bank as well. I'd love for you also to just talk us through the role that they played. Just based from your experiences within Myanmar, and how that compared to the role that a social enterprise like Proximity Designs played.

Su Zun Mon:

First of all, I would say the first thing was the relationship with the government. Social enterprise, like Proximity, we were doing the whole Myanmar, but we have to... Because Myanmar is politically unstable, not only at the moment, but also before some parts of Myanmar they have some conflicts around. Not everywhere is accessible in terms of social enterprise to go and do their work. In that sense, like with the World Bank, that's the main reasons that I joined World Bank as well. I want to see and expose to more vulnerable community, which I could not assess with the Proximity Designs outreach. So that's one, it's also given me exposure to looking from the government's points of view, the process. Which I didn't have an internal perspective from the government's side when I was working in Proximity Designs, because the public perceptions on the government is a bit controversial.

So we're trying to stay away from that, and not being seen as anything to do with government. So we're just trying to, we as in Proximity Designs, trying to beat the image of, `we don't do any political related work.

Grace:

Right.

Su Zun Mon:

But with the world bank, we are directly communicating with the governments, because they are creditors. We are giving out the project money, and we are trying to see from the overviews of how they are managing the project. It's a little bit farther from what Proximity Designs was doing. It's also exposed me to gaining the experience of how do you even train other project managers? How do you even deal with these controversial conflicts that are happening in different part of Myanmar. And yeah, safeguard. And also even when the World Bank came in, we asked the government to follow this framework of... You have to go through this tender process.

Most of the subcontractors in Myanmar, they don't even know how to submit tender. So we will also in a sense, we are introducing behavior change among different sectors. And forcing the government to follow a particular framework, and also introducing the transparency in that sense as well. I would say being somebody who came with the money, normally World Bank has more influence on the government.

Even once the building the relationship with, when I was in Proximity Designs, when I was in the World Bank, it came across as it's different. When you're given the money, people are willing to give to your terms and conditions rather than when you are going from someone who needs their help.

Yeah, so these kind of relationship buildings and being understanding around how the whole government process approval process works. How to induce the behavior change around different sectors would be different.

Grace:

It's definitely a very fine line to balance, to navigate. And the title of this podcast is the Future of Business, right. Why does the success of the projects that Proximity Designs at the World Bank are carrying out key to enabling SMEs on the ground to flourish?

Su Zun Mon:

When we talk about creating impact, we often just look at how do we provide a better life for the vulnerable communities? Let's say, our beneficiary, how do we benefit the beneficiary, just using the term. And the first things that we will look at is the opportunity area as well. What are the main constraints that these people are not being able to do, what they are supposed to do? And most of the time it's a financial problem. It always go back to economics and financials, and enabling the livelihoods of this community. I think it's the chicken and egg problems.

You have to improve the economy first, so that they will have a better life. But again, you can go from top to bottom, or bottom to the top, right? So creating the opportunities for people to add more money, or creating the opportunities for them to have more income so that they can create a better lifestyle. They can provide more for the families or their wellbeing. And it is really important for the country like Myanmar, because they are the GDPs of Myanmar, 35% come from the agriculture sector. One of the misconceptions around inducing the behavior change among farmers is we tell them, "Hey you are using this traditional method, which is hundreds years old, you shouldn't be using." It's easier for us to go and say that.

And then you will get more yield. But when I really actually put myself in their shoe, I only have two income in the whole year. Two seasons. And all of my children's wellbeing, my wife wellbeing will be depending on that. I will not be making that assumption, and saying, "Hey, we are giving you all these amazing techniques. You're not using it, Why?"

Grace:

Yeah.

Su Zun Mon:

So much risk. I cannot do that with even my monthly salary. I cannot do that. Imagine that they're just reliant only two points of income for the whole year. It's such a big risk for that life, and for them to take this kind of major change without having any guarantee. That's one of the lessons that I learned from being in the agriculture centers of Myanmar as well.

Grace:

And feels a bit full circle in terms of what you mentioned, of course putting yourself in their shoes, and thinking of they have two incomes year and so much of it is on the line. That of course, it's hard to when you're in their shoes.

Su Zun Mon:

Yeah.

Grace:

Okay. Changing the practice and that's comes down to also human centered design, what you were talking about earlier. Now I want to sort of take the lens back to you in terms of what advice you have for those who are interested in working at a social enterprise or a larger IGO, like the World Bank, just based on your personal experiences.

Su Zun Mon:

I would say one of my frustrations is being the person who have to provide the local insight, because most of the time, normally with the international organizations, some of the... we are losing the voice, the end consumers are losing lots of voice.

So if you are trying to like impact the local community, trying to understand them and bring their biases to the table when you're making the decisions. And don't be so reserved about it in a sense that okay, being diplomatic, people are talking in the room and people have different views. But most of the time do they have that local insight, do they really understand what is going on at the ground level, and represent them be a voice for them? And I think that's really crucial. And I think that is really missing in most of the organizations, in the sense that some of the skills that did not come from the minority groups like myself. When I decided to join for the design expertise, most of the people did not come with... Most of the people from Myanmar did not have the training, these academic trainings of like critical thinking or engineering.

These are the common tricks that I'm seeing amongst all the organizations that are working in this developing country. Even myself, I have to spend lots of time on understanding the vulnerable communities, and understanding the biases, and trying to represent that as genuine as I could. And I think that's the one trick that most of the programs and projects has been missing so far.

Grace:

Well, I want to end on a more lighthearted note. What do you enjoy doing when you're unwinding in Oxford?

Su Zun Mon:

I just love meeting people here. We have 355 people coming from really diverse group with really... Every time I have a conversation with some people, like one person, I'm learning everything. I'm learning new things every day in the sense that, "Oh, you come from cryptocurrency. Tell me more about cryptocurrency!" Which I have no idea what was that about, before I came here. But there are so many opportunities that you could do, which block change or cryptocurrencies for the impact. And people often think that, "Oh, like you can be an expert in one thing." But coming to MBA has opened my mind in a sense that I'm learning so much from everyone. I was like, "I'm just going to be a generalist in a specialized world." And trying to be able to understand and learn from others, and see what the opportunity areas for the impact. If I have to pick one, that's one big, huge experience that I'm enjoying in Oxford MBA so far.

Grace:

Likewise, I am learning so much from you just from this conversation. And so glad to be able to share your stories and your insights on the Future of Business podcast. So thank you for joining us today.

Su Zun Mon:

Thanks for having me. It's really a pleasure.