

Nguhi Mwaura:

Hi, welcome to Solvers. I'm Nguhi Mwaura.

Courtney Martin:

And I'm Courtney Martin. On this podcast, you'll hear stories about how social innovators are tackling the world's biggest problems to build a better future.

Nguhi Mwaura:

The work of our solvers and the conversations that we have with them are almost always rooted in complexity, which is a thing that Courtney and I love to talk about.

Courtney Martin:

And ask about and uncover.

Nguhi Mwaura:

One of the most complex, high stakes, and frankly, fragile things that I personally love to think about is democracy.

Courtney Martin:

Oh, that old thing. I've got that Janet Jackson song in my head, (singing). It's like Samples Joni Mitchell. Tell me you know that song.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Courtney Martin:

Okay.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Yep. Yep.

Courtney Martin:

All right. Pull it together. Pull it together. Yes, our democracies turn out to be terrifically fragile. Some of us didn't really admit that until pretty recently, but you'd have to be very insulated at this point not to acknowledge it. And as it turns out, democracy protectors from the global south have a lot to teach those of us in the north who are just realizing what is at stake.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Great. Let's jump in. Today's episode is my conversation with Alessandra Orofino. Alessandra is the executive director of a nonprofit based in Brazil called Nossas. What Nossas does is that they run hyperlocal, city-based campaigns and organize people and give them the tools to actually organize themselves around whatever it is that they need to do, especially to engage really big institutions. So whether that's holding police accountable for brutality or making sure that cities have the green spaces

that they need, Nossas uses tech to organize people. And so without further ado here is my interview with Alessandra Orofino.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Hi, Alessandra. Thank you so much for joining us.

Alessandra Orofino:

Absolutely. It's my pleasure

Nguhi Mwaura:

To get us started, would you give us an introduction to Nossas and exactly what you do?

Alessandra Orofino:

Nossas is an activist organization based in Brazil, but present also in other Latin American countries. Essentially what we do is that we help people become activists and we do that by either launching campaigns that they can join and making it very easy for them to participate in the political life for the country, of their city, of their community. Or we can also do that by training them to become better activists, giving them tools that they can use that make it easier to organize their communities around causes that matter to them or giving them money so they can fund their activist activities. We also incubate awesome activist projects that need to be more structured in order to have the impact that they can have.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Once you have this critical mass of activists, what then? What would you say the ultimate goal of Nossas is, and this type of organizing?

Alessandra Orofino:

Nossas is not a neutral sort of campaigning organization. We have a point of view and we really do believe that in order for democracies to be healthy and thrive, we need citizens to be the backbone of it. So the end goal here is to make sure that democratic values are actually upheld by citizens themselves. So we're not just relying in institutions to do the work of keeping democracies alive, but this is actually something that is happening from the bottom up. Because citizens value democracy and these see their role in it, and they want to keep it going.

Nguhi Mwaura:

You're from Rio, and Nossas is doing a lot of work in Rio. So would love to hear a little bit about why Rio, what drew you back, and what the work of Nossas has been in Rio?

Alessandra Orofino:

Absolutely. So, yes, we actually started our work as a tiny, city-based organization and it was based in Rio. I had lived in different countries around the world, India, France, the United States. But in 2011, at the end of 2011, Rio was undergoing this massive transformation. We had just found oil offshore, so there was a lot of money coming into the city. The country at large, but particularly the State of Rio. And Brazil was getting ready to host both the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics, which took place in Rio in 2016. That just meant that there were these massive projects to transform the city. I was concerned

that a lot of these projects, they didn't really have citizens at the center of them. And citizens' voices weren't being heard in this endless process of completely revamping the city that they lived in, that I lived in most of my life.

Alessandra Orofino:

So I went back to Rio and co-founded an organization called Meu Rio, which means "My Rio" in English. And that then grew to become Nossas, which is short for [foreign language 00:05:02], "our cities." We started as a urban activist organization, organizing citizens in their cities so they could be a bigger part of the political life of their city. They could understand what was going on and how decisions were being made, and they could organize their communities to really advocate for the changes that they wanted to see on the ground. Out of that, of course, we then grew further and sort of tackling some national level issues as well as also, the state of democracy in Brazil started to deteriorate in recent years. So that's been the journey.

Nguhi Mwaura:

For our listeners who are thinking, "Okay, that sounds great from a broad kind of viewpoint." Could you give us some tangible, practical examples of how you go about achieving your goals and what types of projects you undertake in different cities across Brazil?

Alessandra Orofino:

Absolutely. I can give you a few examples. I think one that has been a recent success and then one that wasn't really a success and then became something different as it evolved.

Alessandra Orofino:

The recent success was a campaign that we led last year with a broad coalition of partners, over 200 nonprofits in Brazil. We launched that campaign at the end of March, so right at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic here in Brazil. It was a campaign to implement a massive cash transfer program in the country to help families cope with the crisis, an emergency basic income for Brazilians. At the time, the Brazilian government was under pressure to give some sort of response to the crisis and they had suggested that they would make an existing cash transfer program a little bit more ambitious, but it would be still very limited in terms of number of beneficiaries. And the maximum amounts that families would be able to receive will be around \$40, 40 U.S. Dollars for a month for a family. That's a family of five. That's the family that will qualify for the maximum amount.

Alessandra Orofino:

That just didn't seem enough, so we started advocating for more. And at the end, we got a bill approved through Congress. And Bolsonaro, the Brazilian president didn't veto it mostly because the political costs of doing so will be very, very high. That was achieved through a gigantic mobilization of resilience with hundreds of thousands of people involved, hundreds of organizations all over the country, a historic coalition of YouTubers actually, who came together to support the campaign, including some of the biggest YouTubers in the world, because Brazil has a very big YouTube scene. And we worked with partners in Congress to get a bill drafted in record time and approved it just a matter of weeks.

Alessandra Orofino:

That policy was implemented. It benefited over a hundred million people. That's half of the Brazilian population. The maximum amount was up to 200 [inaudible 00:08:11] a month per adult. That's about \$50 a month per adult in the household, which was significantly more than what the government initially proposed. So a big victory for organizers across the country, which also happened quite quickly.

Alessandra Orofino:

But then another example of something that wasn't as easy to achieve, and then we took a bit of a detour and it's become a project. A few years back, we were looking at how it could support survivors of gender based violence in Brazil. Brazil was one of the worst countries in the world when it comes to gender based violence, in particular domestic violence. One of the things that we realized that was missing was mental health services for survivors through the public system. So we started advocating for that and for change at the legislative level, so that mental health services will be available for free for those who needed it. And we lost. It was just too big of an ask to make that wasn't enough money to do it. Government agencies just didn't respond in the way that we wanted them to respond. We realize that this was going to be a much bigger battle, but we needed to organize the community around the issue so that we could rely on that community to advocate for that change long-term and really play the long game.

Alessandra Orofino:

What we did is that we created a peer network of therapists and lawyers who provide their services pro bono. So effectively giving access to mental health services and legal support for survivors in the absence of state action. Through that community, we're now advocating for the legislative change that we want to see. We're now serving about one woman every hour, who comes to us for help and receives help from this community of volunteers.

Nguhi Mwaura:

That is incredible. Part of what I've heard is, as you're giving these two examples is just such a range of topics and approaches to different issues. Where do your ideas originate from and how do you decide what you're going to organize behind?

Alessandra Orofino:

Yeah. That's a million dollar question, isn't it? There's so many things to do. It's a mix. A lot of the ideas come from the community that already works with us, our members, the people who have participated in campaigns in the past, the people that we've trained, the people that have access to our technology and use it regularly. They are our eyes and ears. They are on the ground all over the country, even very remote areas of the country. They know what's going on and they constantly tell our team about what's going on for them and what their biggest priorities are. And that helps inform our strategy.

Alessandra Orofino:

But then it also comes from having a team of people who are following very closely every single decision that is being made in the countries. So we pay close attention to the bills that are going through Congress and the bills that are going through the legislative houses in the capitals of the 27 states. We have people on the ground of those capitals. So they're just seeing close contacts with decision-makers and allies across the board. And they tell us when something is going to come and become an urgent matter before it becomes an urgent matter. So in the same way that journalists have their sources, we

have ours. The difference that our sources are a little bit more distributed I think because we have this sort of presence of hundreds of thousands of people who are in close contact with us now.

Nguhi Mwaura:

It sounds like it's really quite a balancing act between making sure that the issues aren't too far gone, or it's not too urgent to act, but at the same time, kind of mobilizing people behind an idea or a movement or even against a particular bill. How do you make those decisions? How do you play that balancing act?

Alessandra Orofino:

Yeah, we talk a lot about real and emotional urgency when deciding on whether or not we should create a campaign around an issue. And real urgency is ... Well, real urgency. Is this actually urgent? Is the decision being made soon? If we don't act now, can we just lose this forever? Like, is this something that we can really revert in the future? And there are a number of sort of considerations that we take into account when deciding on whether or not an issue has real urgency. But then there's something that we call the emotional origin urgency, which oftentimes doesn't really have anything to do with real urgency. But something becomes urgent because it's symbolic, because it represents the kind of change that a lot of people want to see in the world.

Alessandra Orofino:

And even though there is no decision to be made and it feels like there is no deadline, it may be urgent for other reasons. It may be something that has been a long time coming, but it's just not been enacted in a bill or proposed by anyone. So it's not something that where you can say, "Oh, in a week, there will be a decision so we need to organize." These are the issues in which we have to force a decision to be made in which you have to create the alternative, but they sometimes are the most pressing issues.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Alessandra, as I'm hearing you speak about that, it's really bringing up images of the past summer of protests around the world Regarding Black Lives Matter, and that description of emotional urgency really captured that for me. As you're thinking about what motivates people to act, would you say that in Brazil, it's a deep distrust of government, both local and national that's a motivating factor? Why would you say people are willing to be engaged and take whatever action they think is necessary?

Alessandra Orofino:

The science behind why people act is something that fascinates me. So I read a lot about it and we have a lot of data from our own experience in Brazil. And we know a few things. We know that people act when there's something wrong, of course, when they want to change something. But they also act when they believe that the change is possible. So one of the worst things that a government can do or a corporation or a system can do to squash activism is just deprive people of hope. Because without that idea that it's actually possible to win, it's really hard to act, it's really hard to fight the losing battles. That's also why it's so hard to revive a movement when it is successful to some extent, but then fails at the end, or it doesn't achieve its proposed goals because there is a sense of going through something that feels very meaningful, but then losing. So I think one of the hardest things around getting people to act is keeping them going for long enough for the change to be seen. And sometimes it takes years. Sometimes it takes decades.

Alessandra Orofino:

And that's really hard to do because whenever there is injustice in the world, there will be someone to tell you that that's the only way, that you can't change that. And they will test your patience, so we have to remain patient even when urgency is so much of our currency.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Wow! I think the idea of the deprivation of hope and how that kills movements is incredibly powerful. It sparks so many different thoughts going in so many different directions for me. But I guess for you, as someone who is standing for change and shifting the status quo, what is the cost of that? Because you're taking on some pretty powerful and entrenched interests, in my opinion. So as an individual, what is the cost of that?

Alessandra Orofino:

Well, thank you for asking that. Well, first I think this journey has given me a lot more joy than anything else. So it does come with a cost, but I don't consider it to be too high. Otherwise, I wouldn't be doing this. But there are moments in which the cost becomes unbearable. I got to say that Nossas has been through a lot. Like we've been threatened, there have been attempts to silence us, but because I am personally quite privileged in Brazil, I do feel that I can still keep going under relative safety. And of course I am always aware of the risks involved and I do take them seriously. So sometimes I do have to act around that and protect my family and protect myself or protect my team. But I never felt in these 10 years that I couldn't do the work that I do because the costs were either emotionally or physically too high.

Alessandra Orofino:

However, for other activists, for my peers, that's not always the case because not everyone is as privileged as I am. And when you're already in a situation where you are deprived of so many basic rights really, or your community is deprived of those rights, it's a lot easier to target you when you revolt against that deprivation.

Alessandra Orofino:

I think the episode that comes to mind to me most often when people talk about the cost of activism is the assassination of Marielle Franco who was a Congresswoman for the City of Rio, a councilwoman for the city of Rio and also a close personal friend of mine. And she was a activist for a really, really long time. She was on her first term as an elected official when she was murdered.

Speaker 4:

And now, the assassination of a city councilor in Rio de Janeiro, a woman who embodied a new kind of politics on behalf of the country's poor.

Speaker 5:

Brazilians continue to mourn the loss of 38-year-old Rio de Janeiro city council member and human rights activist, Marielle Franco. Franco was assassinated along with her driver last Wednesday night after a pair of gunmen riddled her car with bullets as she returned from event on the topic of empowering black women.

Alessandra Orofino:

And Marielle came from a favela, a slum in Rio, and she was a member of the LGBTQ community and a black woman. She had so many things going against her in many ways. Like she was living in a country that just didn't approve of anything about her. That didn't approve of her sexuality, that didn't approve of the color of her skin, who treated her badly in every single way. And of course, when she became a leader, that put a target in her back in a way that I don't feel I have in the same way, because I just don't face all the other challenges, additional challenges that she did. But being in this line of work and losing a friend is really tough.

Alessandra Orofino:

There are so many others in Brazil right now that are under threats, and it does worry me. So I think that the highest cost is that when you become an activist and you start this journey, you will invariably meet people who will become your friends along the journey. And some of them will be more vulnerable than you are, and you may try your very best to protect them and fail. And when you fail, then that's emotionally of course, very taxing and hard to digest. But it also gives you another reason to keep trying, because it will be a betrayal to that person's memory not to do that.

Nguhi Mwaura:

I'm really sorry to hear about your loss. I'm hearing you talk about what it means to harness all your different privileges and extending those to the people around you who aren't as safe. You've touched on this a little bit, but I'd love to talk about what drives you. Why do you continue to do this work, especially in the face of immensely high stakes? What keeps you going?

Alessandra Orofino:

Well, I was born in '89, and Brazil had its first election, direct election for president after a very long military dictatorship in '88. So I was born really at the onset of our new democracy. And I think that differently from friends that I have in other countries where democracies are a lot older, I just don't take democracy for granted. I never did. Because I grew up hearing the stories of how people have fought really hard to achieve this, to get to where we were, to write our constitution, which again was written in '88. It was enacted in '89. That was the product of people working for decades on building democracy. And it doesn't feel like that work can ever be called finished. It's never done. And if we lose heart or if we lose sight of democracy, then it can be gone in a minute. It deteriorates so quickly like we wouldn't believe. And things that we didn't even imagine possible, suddenly are possible.

Alessandra Orofino:

Things that authorities would never say, then they start saying. And violence that we never thought we would see including institutional violence, then we start to see it. Of course, that for so many Brazilians, Brazil was never really a democracy. Like for so many people, people who are living in slums in Rio, for instance, are under military rule right now. They are. The justice system in Brazil gives police forces permission to enter any home in a given area. That never happens in rich areas, of course, but that happens. So I wouldn't call that a democracy. But there are a few wins that we had in the '80s that we still have to fight for. And then there are all the other things that we need to improve upon. That's what keeps me going. It's knowing that this is all too fragile and that if we don't do the work, then it can be gone very quickly.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Alessandra, as I'm sitting on a completely different continent in a completely different context, so much of what you're saying is really resonating, especially about democracy sometimes just being for the most privileged. What do you think it would actually take to expand those democratic freedoms to all people, regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnic group or race or tribe?

Alessandra Orofino:

I don't think we can have equal representation if we don't have more equality in all the other areas of our lives. I don't believe in perfect equality. I don't think that's possible, but I do think that the level of inequality that we have today across different lines, both economic inequality and racial inequality and gender, that level is just not sustainable. You can't have a democracy with that level of inequality. Because if you have more resources, you will find a way to harness more political power. That just skews representation right there.

Alessandra Orofino:

If we're serious about that, then we need to be serious about equality. I just don't think that it is sustainable to keep modern democracies going while we deepen inequalities year after year after year. And things are bound to get harder as the planet starts reacting to the way that it's been treated for so many years. Because the climate crisis and other crisis that we're seeing, including this health crisis, they tend to yeah, make inequalities wider. So unless we work very diligently against that, we are going to lose democracy. That means that everyone will lose, including the current winners of the system who are vulnerable. They need individual rights and freedoms more than anyone. Because if you're a winner of a system, then you better make sure that minorities are protected because you're a minority yourself, whether or not we realize it. I think that the only way to secure it long-term is to be more serious about equality

Nguhi Mwaura:

Alessandra, I don't think I've ever heard the political elite described as a minority, but I do love the idea that their interests are aligned to the most marginalized in their own communities. I'm going to switch topics and ask you about how you harness technology. You've really baked technology into your model. Your communities are just as active online as they are in real life. And you've harnessed the power of the data you collected in a really powerful way. Tell me about a specific technology that you've used that maybe has given you surprising results or even one that didn't quite work the way that it was supposed to, but helps you learn an important lesson about how you use technology to successfully organize.

Alessandra Orofino:

Sure. A few years back, we were working on a new system for collaborative reporting of police violence. That was before the world cup. And we knew that when mega events happen, police violence usually gets worse because there is this sense of set of exception. So you need to use force to keep things peaceful. So we were worried about that and we decided that we needed a way for people to report on the violence that they were seeing collaboratively. Because so many cases of police violence never go anywhere because of insufficient proof. But oftentimes people who have witnessed these cases, they file separately and neither of them has sufficient proof. So if we can get people to file collectively, then it would be easier to win.

Alessandra Orofino:

We developed an app for that. We thought it was going to be huge because it was so beautifully done. And then no one used it. It was a total failure. And then we learned a very important lesson, which we carry to this day, we would never develop apps. We hate apps, no apps, because if you want to serve people, particularly underserved communities, people that don't have expensive data plans or expensive phones for that matter, you need to use a technology that they already use. They're not going to download your new app. They don't have room in their phones for your new app. And their data plans really only work with WhatsApp and Facebook because that's what's free in most data plans in Brazil.

Alessandra Orofino:

We tossed the app away and it was a loss of money and energy, but good thing that we only really developed a sort of minimum viable products and we didn't put too much money or too much energy into it before we tested it. But we completely changed course and developed an entirely WhatsApp based system for collaborative reporting police violence. So people would send their video or their testimony or their report through WhatsApp to a number. And then we had a system that would take that information and turn that into an official case and automatically send it to the authorities. And then we would take the case that have most proof attached to them and actually sue the police department ourselves while protecting the anonymity of the person who had sent the report. Again, to the user, their only interface was WhatsApp. Of course, we had a whole platform that we had to develop that was secure, that used that information to do a number of things, but our users only use WhatsApp.

Alessandra Orofino:

That changed completely. It became a huge hit and people started using it in huge numbers, but that's mostly because they already have WhatsApp on their phones. And instead of trying to sell them on the latest fanciest thing, we just went where they were.

Nguhi Mwaura:

It is amazing what happens when people come together to demand more and to think about what is possible, when you don't accept what is as what always has to be. So if you're looking into the future, 10 or 15 years out, what does Brazilian democracy look like at that point?

Alessandra Orofino:

Wow! There is what I would like to see and then what I think we'll see.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Okay. Yeah, give us both scenarios.

Alessandra Orofino:

What I think we'll see in the next 10 to 15 years is that the movement that has elected Bolsonaro, which I considered to be a hate movement in many ways, I don't think that's going away anytime soon, unfortunately. I think that there is a good chance that Bolsonaro will be reelected in a year from now. And even if he isn't, millions of people voted for him and thousands of people advocated for him and helped him get there. They are not going to go anywhere. They are clearly unhappy with how our democracies is run to the point where many of them demand a return of the military dictatorship.

Alessandra Orofino:

We will have to work very hard in the next 10 years to make sure that that is the losing side. When I say that, I mean that there will always be people who want to live under an authoritarian regime, mostly the authoritarians themselves, but they can't capture the public's imagination. They can be the ones who are articulating the clearest, most beautiful vision for what the country can be. If they become that, then we have a problem. So I think that in that next 10 years, we'll see this movement continue to work and continue convince people. But I also think that there is a new generation of resilience emerging, and they were born under democracy and they want to keep it. And they were also born under a country that was finally starting to address some of its most historic inequities. And I don't think there's any way to go back from that. This generation won't let it.

Alessandra Orofino:

It won't let us forget that we were the last country in the world to abolish slavery. It won't let us forget that we're still one of the worst countries in the world to be a woman. This is the generation that I think will work to keep democracy alive. So in the next 10 years, hopefully, we'll see some of them get into more positions of power, organize their communities more effectively. We will see more wins, including policy wins and Brazilian democracy will be alive and well, but we will have to face the fact that there was a good chunk of the country that doesn't want it. And that's not something that it can just wish away or even physically eliminate because that wouldn't be democratic itself. That is something that you need to acknowledge and work with and in many ways, beat peacefully and politically, but you have to win when that's what you're fighting against.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Alessandra, I know you've been talking about your context in Brazil, but I'm sure a lot of listeners are going to hear parallels to their own contexts. This has been such a great conversation. Just before we wrap up, I have one last question for you. Is there a particular song or a poem that you return to often, something foundational or inspirational that is close to your heart?

Alessandra Orofino:

That is hard, right? There is a song from the dictatorship period, in the '70s actually, that I love, that I listened to often. And it's very simple.

Speaker 6:

(singing).

Alessandra Orofino:

But it's about how there will be another day. It's by a songwriter and singer called Chico Buarque and it's called Apesar de Vocêin. In spite of-

Speaker 6:

(singing).

Alessandra Orofino:

He was singing it to the dictators and saying, "In spite of you, tomorrow will be another day and the birds will sing and there will party on the streets." It's beautiful because it's light. It's a very happy song. It describes a very dark moment, but it's a very happy, happy song.

Speaker 6:
(singing).

Alessandra Orofino:

I think it teaches us a good lesson in terms of hope. He was writing this and singing this under incredibly hard times. The better times did come and we did win last time and we're going to win again.

Nguhi Mwaura:

I love that it speaks to the resilience of people and the resilience of the human spirit to persevere despite really difficult circumstances. Alessandra, thank you so much for joining me. I really appreciate your time.

Alessandra Orofino:

Thank you, and thank you for doing this. It's a pleasure and I hope we'll meet more soon. Thank you.

Speaker 6:
(singing).

Courtney Martin:

Nguhi, I loved that conversation so much. You know one thing I liked most about it?

Nguhi Mwaura:

Tell me.

Courtney Martin:

I loved how Alessandra talked about her failures in such a useful way. I always love, there is this philosopher, Cornell West, who says, "Of course, it's a failure, but how good a failure is it?" And I've always been a little obsessed with good failures. Like the notion that we can make meaning out of failing. We can make change, we can stop wasting resources, we can stop harming people. There is such a discourse about failure in the social entrepreneurship sector, but often it feels irresponsible and sort of like, "let's celebrate all the ways we failed." Even though people have been profoundly harmed as a result.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Yeah.

Courtney Martin:

And the way she talked about it felt so different to me. Did you get that sense?

Nguhi Mwaura:

Yeah, I think that just like this idea of using the entire cow almost. So when you're slaughtering an animal for meat or to eat, and a lot of indigenous communities will use every single piece of that animal. That's kind of how I thought about Alessandra with Nossas, is that everything that they're doing, they're learning from. And so whether it worked or not, like nothing goes to waste and they're constantly

improving themselves. So yeah, really enjoyed listening to her. I actually was super challenged walking away from that conversation because I haven't been the biggest fan of democracy, especially when it isn't home grown [crosstalk 00:34:44].

Courtney Martin:

I love how you said that as if it were a band. Like, "I haven't been the best fan of democracy." That was really good.

Nguhi Mwaura:

The U.S. does take their tour around the world and tell us how great it is. So yeah, have not been a huge fan. But as she talks about it, I think what I was then challenged to think about was, what are the things that I would lose if this ... Even if it's not what I would consider a fair democracy or a considerate democracy, especially when you mix that with capitalism and how it's really skew systems, but then I was really challenged about like, what is their worth holding onto and what is the cost of not then fighting for it?

Nguhi Mwaura:

So, yeah, I've really been thinking about this a lot. And Alessandra's just amazing, amazing. I don't know if you know that corner of the internet, the grind culture corner, where it's like, "You all have the same 24 hours as Beyonce." And it's like, "No, we don't. Like Beyonce has people to do things for us." But like Alessandra feels like someone that, yeah, she has 24 hours like me, but she's just doing so many different things and has such a love for her country and for her community. So, yeah.

Courtney Martin:

That was one thing I ... As I was listening to her, I was thinking like, "Who raised Alessandra?" Like, what was she like as a little girl? And like, how did she ... Because she seems to have this ferocity about her that feels really important. You know, I'm raising daughters so I'm kind of like ... I don't know, it just made me curious who she was raised by and how she was raised to have that kind of ferocity, but also a real realism and a tenderness. She's just got like a very unique combination of qualities within a very broken system. She seems to have a lot of grit and a lot of endurance for all of it.

Nguhi Mwaura:

Yeah. And an ability to just look at the hard thing with a clear idleness and a clarity.

Courtney Martin:

And having such real-world impact. I mean, when she talks about the domestic violence and sexual assault work that they've done, where they failed at first to get the policy passed that they wanted to get passed, and they just created the thing that would put pressure on the government. That actually in some ways reminded me of the Black Panther Movement in the U.S. Because some of what the black Panthers did was, you know, they just start the Free Breakfast Program, which basically shamed the U.S. government because it was like, "Hey, we're this like group of revolutionaries who figured out how to feed kids. You aren't even feeding kids." And then U.S. government started the Title I free breakfast program in schools. So I loved that aspect of her shape-shifting with strategy and having a very real world impact.

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Nguhi Mwaura:

Absolutely. And so even though the model's not the easiest to understand, I think that it speaks to the complexity of the issue.

Courtney Martin:

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Nguhi Mwaura:

Our theme music is by wonder Wonderly. And we'd love to hear what you thought about the episode, so email us at solvers@skoll.org.

Courtney Martin:

To tweet us, @SkollFoundation #SolversPod, or me, Courtney, @courtwrites. We would just love to hear what you think. See you next week.