



“Funders could drive a significant amount of change if they change the game at their level.”

A conversation with Rob Johnson of [Acceso](#).

Lissa Harris
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Lissa Harris: Tell me about your organization and your work.

Rob Johnson: I lead an organization called Acceso, and we work to make markets work for smallholder farmers. We have social enterprises, [meaning] we have companies in the countries where we work, so we can effectively trade, train, and [provide financing] for these farmers. We can do everything a farmer may need to make agriculture work for them.

We're different from typical programs in that we don't just come in with a soft touch or advice. We've realized farmers need partners. They need someone in the trenches with them. They don't need someone to be like, oh, didn't you know about this market you could sell to, or didn't you know this bank has this? These communities are so underserved that often there isn't anyone providing these key services.

We operate in Haiti, Colombia, and El Salvador, and, as farmer partners, we intend to be there for the long term. Our goal is to make farming, farming livelihoods, and rural communities thrive so people can stay and make a decent living, they can put their kids in school, and they can pay for medicine and healthcare. We believe fundamentally people want to stay where they are. Everybody should have those choices and be served in a way where they have opportunity.

[In 2024], we worked with about 48,000 farmers and had about 700 staff members. We sold over \$20 million of local production into local markets. We buy production from farmers, pay them, and get that production into Walmarts and Subways and other

buyers. We're very localized. We have a few staff members in the US [United States] but everybody else is based in the markets and communities where we work.

We've been operating for 11 years. I started Acceso in Haiti in 2014, and now we're in multiple countries.

Lissa Harris: There are a lot of organizations that work on rural farm market development. What do you think makes your approach distinctive?

Rob Johnson: We're a partner or coworker. We're in the trenches with the farmer. The other difference is that we are driven by the market, and always have an ear to what it wants. It allows us to leverage everything else that's happening rather than working in a silo, [which leads to] a lot of good programs and a lot of good approaches, and maybe increased productivity. If it's not connected to a market, the people we serve are living day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month, so there has to be an economic end game, which is another key differentiator. Unlike a lot of advisory-type services, we're local and in the chain. This is tough because often we're the ones stuck with a product if we can't sell it, so we see things differently.

Lissa Harris: Is it fair to say you're in a middle space between a farmer advocacy or support nonprofit and a co-op? You're not directly representing farmers, but you're there for their benefit.

Rob Johnson: Exactly. We've often described ourselves as a more sophisticated, structured cooperative that is only as good as what the farmers produce. If the farmers don't produce, we can't keep the contracts. We've also described ourselves as an integrated intermediary or a value-creating intermediary.

On the other side, [there are farmers that we do] everything for, and our endgame is to help them have a shot because most of the time they're on their own. You go to these rural communities and there are no resources, the agri [agricultural] inputs aren't right, and the training isn't relevant. The financing is expensive, and the markets are working against them. So we're their partner.

On the buyer side, we saw the intent was there and everyone said, wow, I'd love to buy locally. I'd love to help my community. But if 20 farmers show up and one of their products is not right, what happens if you buy the product? It's just not practical. Buyers don't have the mechanisms to buy from tens of farmers, nonetheless, hundreds of farmers. Then their systems are electronic, and there's no one advocating for the farmer, but also for the buyer to say, well, we're not going to deliver you stuff that's not good. We try to serve both sides, which is also unique.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example that you can share that illustrates the impact of the work that you do?

Rob Johnson: We always take it back to an individual farmer. We have farmers in El Salvador that we've been working with for 10-plus years. In the past, they were on their own, but they did have buyers. We came in and said, hey, great, produce lettuce. You haven't traditionally produced that, but you produce similar products. We're going to buy from you every week. We're going to provide you with inputs and financing.

Those farmers go from maybe one small greenhouse or one small plot to five plots, from a couple of workers or no workers to eight workers, and they invest and reinvest. We have one farmer, Alex Gomez, who has gone from a small greenhouse growing tomatoes to eight greenhouses. He had a temporary person who was helping him, now he has eight employees.

The other side is that the value chain is structured. The supermarket in El Salvador that we work with traditionally would import [goods] because they couldn't get the quality in El Salvador. Alex is one of hundreds of farmers, but now they can find that product locally. It's the right quality, it's the right price, and it's on time.

Then we look at the pure economics because that's what it always comes down to. We always look at how much is that farmer making today versus the past. What was their salary or their wages? Usually, we see jumps of hundreds of percentage points, like in Alex's case. He went from making a couple hundred a year to \$5,000 a year, so there were big jumps.

In Haiti, we see similar percentage jumps, but it's just a different scale given the poverty and their type of farming. We'll see a farmer that goes from typically making \$300 or \$400 a year, to \$1,000 a year. That comes from a variety of these kinds of components, whether it's cost savings or market access. It's [a combination of factors]. It's yield, it's savings here, and more sales there.

Lissa Harris: You've talked about the evidence you use to track whether things are working. Is there anything you didn't mention or anything more you want to say about what evidence you look at?

Rob Johnson: Does that farmer have more money to spend on whatever he or she wants? If you're a buyer of a product or a customer, that is the single most important piece of evidence for us.

Behind that is also a big challenge because, traditionally, there's not a lot of investment in tech or data collection. The sector as a whole is old school. When we look at riding in an Uber, everything you do and the driver does, that data is harvested.

When we work in rural Haiti, we're [turning] a corner so we can start absorbing that same kind of efficiency and that information. It's exciting because it allows us to change how we work with those farmers so it's like, if we didn't get that impact here, why didn't we get it? That farmer came to four training [sessions], we visited the farmer six times, we bought this much product.

We're on the edge of that, but it's also a challenge because it's hard to find the funding to make those investments. We easily find funding for a technician or a technician's travel costs. But a lot of folks don't want to fund or make future investments like a company would in systems, tech, and tools, which can hold back that growth that the private sector often sees a little easier.

Lissa Harris: You take on risk from being a market player yourself. How do you balance losses that you may take? How do you manage your level of risk?

Rob Johnson: We do a lot of planning. We have learned and grown fairly organically, but [what has taken us the most time is] how do we grow without having windfall losses, because when we commit to a farmer's product and buying from that farmer and we tell them to grow peanuts, beans, or maize, we have to be sure that if we sign a contract, we can buy that product.

The same goes with buyers. We have to show up rain or shine. If they order from us, we get one shot. If we miss a delivery, they just move on to the next [seller]. We spend a lot of time developing those relationships. We have had losses where we had to buy at a more expensive price and had to sell. We've had cases where buyers rejected the delivery because the quality wasn't right. We can't go back to the farmer and say, this wasn't right. We get better at matching the two. That's really what the sweet sauce is. I'd say it's a never-ending battle.

In El Salvador, we look at our monthly financials. We're either paying the farmer too much or the buyer is buying too cheap and not covering our costs.

There's a downside, and that's what we often talk about as an organization. It's much different than overspending on salaries or the travel budget. We could do everything right and the buyer [still] comes back and pays us less. To your question, it comes back to experience. It comes back to negotiating the right contracts and having the right intelligence internally, and a constant internal data review to make sure we're not getting squeezed in the middle.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example of something you tried that didn't work the way you thought it did, but learned something from it?

Rob Johnson: In the early days, we looked at the model as saying it's hard to have thousands of farmers on one side and then have hundreds of buyers on the other side. We said, let's just find ourselves the biggest buyers. Ideally, we have one big buyer who takes everything. We went to some big companies that we were convinced with their mission, [and with what] they wanted to do, but they were publicly traded companies. We went down the road, we developed these supply chains, we worked on things with farmers, we got the production up, and those big buyers, because of corporate interests and investors, didn't always keep their promises.

[That was a big] learning [experience] because it [shook] things up. It's better to have one or two buyers rather than five. Then, even thinking across markets, it's ideal to have the same buyer in El Salvador as Columbia just in terms of learning what they need. That was a big one in saying, gosh, we need to find smaller buyers and be more open to that fragmentation. We struggle with the funding cycle because we're not project-based. We don't operate in just a few areas. It's like one enterprise in the market. Sometimes with funding, we end up having to segment and structure how we operate.

To get more funding to do more, it has to be *this* project and *this* community when that's not our vision. We don't enter a community saying it's going to be one year or two years. We enter thinking we're going to stay and partner with them. That can also have an impact on [the] team's approach and how they view what we do.

Another one is localization. We've been committed to [moving from] having our organization led from our C-suite to our local leadership teams by people from the communities that work where they're from, and have that connection. Sometimes that takes longer to upskill certain areas that we could hire a consultant and bring in.

Sometimes it's just a longer process and the systems have to be more robust to get there. I think it's still the right decision. We've been able to withstand COVID. We had increased sales. We found in Haiti in these past years, it's been such a mess with the political instability, but we've just grown and grown. That's entirely because we're local. It doesn't mean that there's not the challenge on the other side of, wow, the accounts aren't as clean, or the M&E [Monitoring & Evaluation] isn't as tight, or other things.

Another thing we've learned is that we've spent a lot of time focusing on always being the market. We have seen that we can work in crops [if] the market is there. Even if we're not the buyer, we can still have an impact and work with those farmers on other

aspects that increase their productivity. It's that dance of organizational alignment of [who we are, who we aren't].

Lissa Harris: This seems like a good segue into asking about the kind of support you've received and whether it's funding support or other kinds of support. Is there something that turned out to be helpful in a surprising way or that helped you to scale? What's been useful to you from the funding and support end?

Rob Johnson: Less restricted funding is powerful, but the organization has to be at an age and maturity that it can use that funding effectively. We've been lucky throughout our history because, to your question on how we manage the risk of buying and selling, we've had to do intense business planning with intense projections.

When we've had the opportunity to have unrestricted funding, [we've been] ready to absorb it. RippleWorks is a good example of that, they kick the tires to make sure that the maturity and the sophistication are there, but then they say, great. Now, you guys do what you need to do with this because you know your business better than we do.

We've also had some partners we work with. We're a recipient of the GLG [Gerson Lehrman Group] Social Impact Fellowship. That gives us access to experts in any sector. Rippleworks has a similar program that they started which allows us to put in a request, and, within a day or two, connect to a person who knows about processing, quality control, tax situations, inputs, or tariffs. That's hugely helpful because then we can just go faster and we waste less time.

Lissa Harris: Are there other metrics or evidence that you look to for that kind of support to know that it's working?

Rob Johnson: The ideal case would be us seeing our projections get tighter and tighter. We always look back at the year and say, we were going to deliver this. How close were we? What were the factors that took us off our plan? Sometimes it's [an] earthquake in Haiti, strikes in Columbia and a hurricane that it's like, we had no idea that was coming, but then there are times where we were just off.

Lissa Harris: What role do you think trust plays in your relationship with funders and how can a funder cultivate trust in that relationship?

Rob Johnson: It's huge. There is an inherent power dynamic with funders. I often say funders could drive a significant amount of change if they change the game at their level because so many of these local organizations are so starved for resources. You're trying to do your best in difficult conditions, so you compromise, and work and respond to what the big players say or don't say.

I often find most of those funders are just not coordinated. Rippleworks is part of a group called the Big Bang Philanthropy group, which is a group of like-minded philanthropists and funding partners. They piggyback off each other and benefit from this due diligence. It's huge because when one partner gets in, they do heavy due diligence, which indicates trust.

It saves everyone time because, in the early years, you'd spend so much time with a donor, [or a] potential funder, and nothing comes of it. This thoughtful approach to investing in building and leveraging trust is huge. [If] Rippleworks trusts Acceso, others may want to consider that same thing.

The other side of the coin is helpful. Often as an implementer, you don't tell the reality to your funder because you're looking for them to fund you. But when the trust becomes mutual, it opens up a door that you can say, this happened, this sucks. This is not our fault, or, it is our fault. This is what we're doing, and you can respond productively instead of this game of one versus the other.

We're going through a big challenge with USAID [United States Agency for International Development], as you're mentioning, with the federal government in the US shutting down funding. It's an unprecedented shutdown. We have spent years to make sure we developed it in a such way that we keep our identity because oftentimes with those contracts, you become the implementing partner of their idea.

In December, [or whenever] we received the stop work order, with no understanding of when it would be lifted. Our relationship with our other funders, whether they can help or not to have that trust to say, this is a situation, this is what we're doing. It's huge. To feel like with our farmers, that our funders are in it with us rather than sitting up here as puppet masters is meaningful even outside of funding way, in a mental way.

Lissa Harris: Do you see bold shifts that could happen in the funding landscape that would center the voices of those that are closest to the problems that you're working on?

Rob Johnson: The funding landscape in the past was that the most money had the loudest voice, and it was very fragmented. Despite all of the terrible things that come from a shutdown like this, it may shift to more thoughtful, less cyclical, less political funding structures. When politics enters the cycle and it's the biggest funding source, it can be very dangerous to a lot of organizations. One thing that could potentially be positive is to center the voice around the more thoughtful, long-term, less politically oriented types of funders.

The other thing is thinking about how we make the work we do more self-sustaining. One of the things we pride ourselves in, and think is core to our ability to weather these types of storms is that we are not entirely donation-funded. We're about 70% - 30%, 60% - 40%. About 30% or 40% each year of our total budget comes from grants, and then 60% to 70% is from our activities.

It provides us with something to fall back on if philanthropy changes. Humanitarian relief needs humanitarian relief, but the more efficient, market-driven, diversified implementers can also help. Funders can be a part of the equation pushing that, pushing the connections, and pushing the different types of financing sources.

Lissa Harris: I'm curious if you think there is an alternate universe in which you can just spin off entirely and just become a business, like something farmer-focused, or a benefit corporation, something like that. If much of your revenue is tied to the market, it might be another survival path for you.

Rob Johnson: Absolutely. Until about 2018, 2019, we looked at the world saying we're going to run these things until [they have] positive cash flow and we hit that level in each market. One of our challenges was it reduced our ability to keep adding more farmers into the system. As you'd imagine, it's easier and more profitable to trade with a big farm than a lot of small farms, and it's easier to trade with a lot of small farms versus a lot of tiny farms.

It was an argument internally, and we took it to our board on several occasions to say, what are we going for here? Are we going for impact first or are we going for profitability first? To your point, the impact can be there with profitability right behind.

One of the challenges is we're trying to do the hard stuff in value chains that have super low margins with rough logistics and inefficient electricity costs. Even in the early days when I was doing the initial business models, I was like, ah, this is going to be profitable in year three, it's going to spit off this much cash, and we're going to use that to grow. But because of the realities of the places we work and the conditions, it's not always realistic. Yes, planning for tougher value chains and tougher economics are important versus having that overly optimistic view.

Lissa Harris: Talking about Rippleworks' support specifically, what kinds of support have you gotten from them? Do you have low-interest loans, do you have unrestricted grants, or do you have project support that's not monetary that's tailored to your operation from them?

Rob Johnson: We started probably four years ago, first with a project, and the project was great. It brought in a dashboarding expert from the private sector and worked with

our team's dashboards. it was a resource we couldn't afford on our own. Then there was day-to-day project management. Often, groups like pairing an expert to an organization, but then they say, great, you guys go do your thing.

We started there, and then we received unrestricted or lightly restricted scaling funding, which matched some of the USAID funding we provided as a part of our USAID grant. Then Rippleworks has a follow on talent and HR [Human Resources] grant, which is also another thing people don't think about. It's like, how do you retain the best talent to take on the biggest problems? [Too often], you don't pay them well and you overwork them.

You burn them out. People already know they're getting paid through their impact and the mission, but that doesn't make it easier on a family. Rippleworks, again, came back and said, we want to support your talent team, which was huge. Then we did another project with them that was linked to our HR as well, which is great, [meaning] how do we improve our HR [team by bringing in additional resources? Then we've had access to the mentorship, [expert office hours]. We have that with GLG [Gerson Lehrman Group], so we've continued to use that more than the one with Rippleworks at this point.

Lissa Harris: For the unrestricted grant specifically, are there any requirements or touch points that ended up being helpful to you?

Rob Johnson: The process we went through with the Rippleworks capital team was great. It was like, we think the need is here, we think the need is there. It wasn't like [we had] no plan, we had to sketch it out. Since then, we've gone back and reported as it relates to how we've used the funding, that's been helpful.

Personally, what's been good for us is having the projects and the capital work together, like the HR stuff. The HR stuff was powerful together, but that wasn't by design, that just happened. Flexible capital is worth two to one because we fight so hard for capital that often it's so focused, so inflexible. To have that flex, is huge even if it has restrictions on how flexible [it can be]. Rippleworks is one of our few highly flexible funding sources.

Lissa Harris: It's fascinating hearing these practical tales of what's working.

Rob Johnson: It makes sense that you have to come at it with a combination. It has to be trust-based, you have to believe in the organization rather than the activity.

Lissa Harris: In terms of the capacity-building assistance, is there anything unique about that versus other funders? What has been the impact of that process on your work?

Rob Johnson: What's unique is the active project management. Pairing experts with need, like with universities, is done in a lot of cases. Where Rippleworks is special is they have active project management to make sure deadlines are met and it keeps moving. The two project managers we worked with were thoughtful and skilled in understanding how to navigate not typical businesses in the US, but folks in other countries with internet problems and other things like that.

There's an effort to think through what can be accomplished in this period because, usually, it's a three- or six-month engagement. They're very thoughtful upfront to say that's too much to [handle]. I have been a part of other things where it's like, we're going to conquer the world, and we don't conquer anything because we took too much on.

Lissa Harris: Is there anything you think funders should understand more about capacity building that would be useful?

Rob Johnson: Yes, it's similar to how we approach farmers. We think farmers need a partner. They need someone in the data with them, they need someone delivering their seed and buying their product. Oftentimes, we assume social enterprises just need the expertise, but sometimes they need someone running the spreadsheet. My biggest point is to approach capacity building as a partner rather than an advisor in the project, because oftentimes the management capacity bandwidth isn't there to build the spreadsheet.

I find that [to be] the same with our team. We have a service center that serves our markets, and realized we need to do the accounting for our teams. It's not that they don't know how to do the accounting, it's that they don't have time to do the accounting, so we do it for them, and it resonates with how we approach farmers.

The talent grant is [unique]. A lot of us as leaders in social enterprises, you and your leadership team always eat last, as if you don't take care of that group and you're always feeling guilty for investing. To have somebody come and say, no, you guys are the ones that are driving everyone else to perform and you need to get together and be together, that's huge. Then, even leveling. A lot of funders say you have to pay at the same levels, and then you as an organization are like, yes, I'd love that, but my budget doesn't permit getting people up. That was wildly impactful to us even in systems building.

Similarly, with talent, managers often have to do [HR] as a part of their [job]. There's not often an investment in a special HR person. We were at 400 or 500 people and we had one HR person, so [the grant] allowed us to invest in that area.

Lissa Harris: Do you have any thoughts on the timing or the combination, the sequence of the kinds of support that you got and if it was ideal, could it be improved on, just how did that work together?

Rob Johnson: Rippleworks getting to know and trust us was helpful. I don't think it was by design.

When it came to the second project and the talent support, they happened to be aligned. We didn't expect the talent support, and we were running an HR project with their project team, and it just dovetailed into the talent support. That was beautiful because it was like, what do we get the biggest bang for our buck in this area? What do we need to do? We already did the work, and so it was like, here's money to invest in your plan.

Lissa Harris: In terms of funding or other support, what's been the biggest challenges from the support end? What have been the biggest obstacles in that world for you?

Rob Johnson: It's a nonstop game. There's a Haitian proverb that says, "Beyond every mountain, there's another mountain" in Paul Farmer's book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. I think the funding landscape is that way. We don't always realize how critical and how much time and energy goes into that aspect. We all got into this work because we love the work on the ground, and working with our teams. We don't always love pitching. It's just the nonstop nature of it, but that's like investing, like a business growing.

The fragmentation at the funder level and the disconnect between all the different funding types is sometimes a bit surprising to navigate and to figure out who's talking, who's not, and how they work together. Similarly knowing what you can count on. We have one fundraiser, we're going to add another one this year, thankfully, and myself. There's limited time to study the market, and shifting massive trends is tough to respond to. I can imagine if you're fully grant-dependent it's even tougher, right?

Similarly, everybody has a different set of metrics of how success is judged and then M&E, but people are doing their best to observe if the projects are working or not, but that doesn't mean it isn't inefficient. That's another challenge where we have varying degrees of M&E that add costs that aren't aligned. If we want to keep scaling and adding, we'll probably always need a certain amount of funding to support it.

Lissa Harris: What advice would you give to funders who want to help social ventures be successful?

Rob Johnson: Think of yourself as a partner, not an external funder. Get into the game with your grantees, like an investor would, which is a change in mindset. Hold yourself to efficiency, and [have] accountability on that efficiency. When you ask something of your grantees you should think, are you adding work? Are you taking work away?

Are you talking to other funders so you're both leveraging and learning from them? I know of cases where somebody has received funding after funding, and they weren't a good organization, but it was because the donors weren't talking to each other, or the funders weren't talking.

The more an organization can move toward trust-based philanthropy, it [becomes] powerful, and more sustainable in the long term because if you're not moving towards that, there's a question of well, why not? If you don't feel you can trust a partner more in five years than you did early on, somebody's doing something wrong.

Lissa Harris: What do you think are the top three things you need to unlock your ability to scale your operation and sustain what you have?

Rob Johnson: For us, it starts with great people who have great people on their teams and are supporting those teams. It's investing in true systems for scaling so that we're super efficient, and we're transparent. With systems, it's also the tech and the efficiency as it relates [to it]. Behind that, it's funding at the right time.

Lastly, we need a lot of partners. We need buyer partners, we need research institutions. Acceso effectively is the unlocking agent, but we're taking demand from buyers, taking best practices from universities and research centers, and leveraging assets and skills that farmers have and the latent potential of the communities.

Lissa Harris: This has been so great, and I want to thank you for your time.

Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter, science writer (MIT '08), and former local news entrepreneur based in upstate New York. She is currently working as a consultant on capacity-building and local solutions-oriented community projects in the rural Catskills.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*