



## S3:E10: INVESTING IN INDIVIDUALS...

### Marcus Desando in conversation with Adrian Ellis

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[THEME MUSIC]

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**Adrian Ellis:** Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on the intersections of cultural and urban life. The series and supporting materials can be found at [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net). And if you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

I'm Adrian Ellis, chair of GCDN, and the director of AEA Consulting. And my guest today is Marcus Desando, and Marcus is the director of the Prince Claus Fund. And the Prince Claus Fund is a relatively new member of GCDN. So I'm thrilled to have Marcus here. Marcus, thank you for joining this podcast.

[00:00:54]

**Marcus Desando:** No, thank you so much for having me, Adrian. I hope we have a wonderful, stimulating conversation.

[00:01:00]

**Adrian Ellis:** Me too. And my temptation is to start with you because from what I know from having spoken to you in the past and having since then read about your biography, you have a fascinating trajectory to your current position. But I'd like to start at least with the Prince Claus Fund itself, because I suspect that people may be unfamiliar with it and unfamiliar with both the interesting mission that it has, and the interesting way in which it fulfils that mission.

So would you like to just start with a two minute account of the Prince Claus Fund, and in particular, what it exists to do, and broadly how it does it.

[00:01:41]

**Marcus Desando:** Yeah. Um, I mean that's, that's also quite a difficult one to kind of bring down to a few minutes, right?

**Adrian Ellis:** (laughs)



[00:01:50]

**Marcus Desando:** I mean, I joined an organisation that has such a lot of history that is rich around uh, celebrating great cultural contributions globally. You know, as an organisation, it started in 1996.

It was registered in 1996 and it started with its activities around 1997. And in 1998 we started with our – what we called then, awards, where we seek to amplify work that is done by change makers in the cultural space in particular people that are really very much in touch with what their societal challenges could be and are, and how those can be either highlighted or even solved through culture. And for us as an organisation, which is really quite an important aspect of what drives us as an organisation is that, we believe that culture is important.

We actually have a motto that says culture is a basic need. And it is important for developing societies, as infrastructure, as education, or even economical contributions. And do we believe that is where people derive their identity and dignity. So we try to serve the cultural sector by looking at individual actors within the space. And this is very much a new strategy for us as an organisation. It's one that we started implementing three years ago.

And we want to amplify, create space, find ways to improve their practices or even moments of connections with different individuals within the cultural space and even beyond, because we do believe that culture solves. So, can be in a position to solve so many of our global challenges. And so for us, you know, culture is a force of change. You know, it has the power to transform our world, and we really want to be contributor to a peaceful or rather a more peaceful, equitable, sustainable, and even an inclusive place for us as people.

[00:04:13]

**Adrian Ellis:** So, at least the current strategy, which as I understand is what one or two cycles old, the emphasis is on individuals?

**Marcus Desando:** Yes.

**Adrian Ellis:** And artists, who are in some way committed to social justice in their work.

**Marcus Desando:** Exactly.

**Adrian Ellis:** And in societies, where artistic and other freedoms are under some sort of threat. Whether it's economic threat, or whether it's political threat, some broader form of social oppression.

[00:04:44]

**Marcus Desando:** Even social pressure. Exactly. Even social oppression. And it's really important to note that cultural practitioners are always in the forefront of the pulse of their society's needs and their society's realities. And so that is why we have made a decision to focus on individuals, and not organisations because we feel that the impact that an individual can have in their own community, sometimes it's greater than just an organisation.



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**Marcus Desando:** We do not discount organisations however, but we do really recognise the value of individuals and also that individuals are not always afforded the type of support that a lot of organisations sometimes have access to.

[00:05:27]

**Adrian Ellis:** So this is unfortunately, I would've thought an expanding rather than contracting market. In other words, we appear to be living in a period when social and economic and related freedoms are in a defensive stance rather than a proactive stance. Is that broadly your perspective?

[00:05:47]

**Marcus Desando:** Indeed, if we look at the funding models that exist now. Currently globally, there is a shift that is now moving towards supporting organisations that serves civil education, civil security. And the issue of cultural practitioners gets pushed aside because we still believe that, you know, art is really for art's sake and not really a powerful tool to use for transformation of any kind.

So the contraction that we are seeing is also believed to be a way of control, I think, in a lot of different scenarios in governments because the, you know, the kind of political climate that we are entering into, or we've been in for a number of years now, has become quite polarised.

And so, you know, we feel that it's really important to really start, uh what did the Americans say – hunker down, on the issues that individuals can really explore.

[00:06:48]

**Adrian Ellis:** And the Prince Claus Fund is based in Amsterdam. Prince Claus was a member of the um, Netherlands Royal family. What is the governance structure?

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**Marcus Desando:** The governance structure of the organisation is really quite simple, so we are regarded within the Netherlands as a non-governmental organisation that receives quite generously support from our foreign ministry, and mainly their foreign ministry, because the work that we do is of international importance, and so the foreign ministry really sees the value of the work that we do. But we have a board you know, quite a very normal kind of board constitutes the governance of the organisation. And I am the executive that is tasked with keeping the organisation going and making sure that we implement what we intended to do as an organisation.

I have a team of about 16 individuals that work in different aspects of the organisation. And currently, we do this work through programmatic support and also grant making.

We have about three main grant making programmes; which is the Seed Awards that focuses on individuals that are in the beginning stages of their career, emerging artists between the practice of zero to five years. And I have to also add that it is multidisciplinary. So there is no discipline that we discount in our consideration. We give them a grant to the value of 5,000 euros which is trust-based.



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**Marcus Desando:** And it's quite important for us – and I know I will touch on that a little bit later, trust-based funding, and all we ask of them is to indicate where and how they want to use the grant, but we as an organisation do not dictate further than just approving the grant for them.

We then have the second tier, which is geared towards intermediate individuals, and this is our Mentorship Awards programmes. And these are really kind of partly curated by us, but we also have some of the programmes that are curated by partners. And this looks at individuals that are just beyond five years of their practice, and it is theme-based. We have right now, we have four themes that we are focusing on. We have a theme on climate crisis. We have a theme on urban design and urban existence. We have a programme which is now centred around the MENA region, which is uh, Arab Documentary and Photography programme.

And then we've just introduced this year the fourth theme, which deals with alternative narrative. And this is really looking at creatives that are going to be uh, focusing on how to retell histories from a point of view of not just victors, but people that have been affected by colonialism. And so this is a very exciting programme. We, and all these four programmes, we partner with different organisations to fund it and also to jointly run the programmes together.

And the last one is the Impact Awards, which is possibly the most glamorous of all of them. And this one purely just celebrates change makers within the cultural space. We choose six individuals that we grant 50,000 euros each, also trust-based. And then we celebrate them at our infamous and really kind of celebrated ceremony that we get an opportunity to, to be invited by the royal family as guests to celebrate these people every two years in the Royal Palace in Amsterdam.

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**Adrian Ellis:** There is something extremely refreshing about the structure and philosophy of the programme and it will come as no surprise to you that I identify that as trust-based. One of the phenomena that I have noticed, certainly in American philanthropy in the 25 years or so that I followed American philanthropy, is that organised philanthropy moved over that period from not saying, how can we help you, but saying, how can you help us?

**Marcus Desando:** Yes.

**Adrian Ellis:** In other words, we have a strategy. And we want to know how your organisation or, when they are brave enough to fund individuals, you the individual, can contribute towards meeting our strategic aims.

**Marcus Desando:** Yes.

**Adrian Ellis:** And satisfy us on our KPIs and our outcomes and outputs, et cetera. And what that has done is sort of change very subtly, but quite fundamentally the discourse between philanthropy, organised philanthropy at least, and the cultural sector.



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**Adrian Ellis:** But I also suspect the environmental sector, the health sector, et cetera. So instead of saying we understand your mission, we want to support you in the realisation of your mission, again, personal or professional – it says, I hope you understand our mission, and I hope you understand how you are going to contribute to ours.

You seem, as it were, old school in this respect, in that what you are saying is we will look at what you intend to do, or indeed we will look at the body of your work or we'll look at- and we'll come back to what, and we are putting our trust in you to realise more fully your goals, not our goals. Is that right?

[00:12:24]

**Marcus Desando:** That is correct, but also, I mean there has always been an overemphasis on results within the funding space, which is very much understandable because we do have, as you mentioned, everyone has a mandate that they want to respond to, and they want to be able to make sure that the work that they do is able to be reported on in a way that is quantifiable, in a way that is a lot more tangible than the usual.

But from our point of view, we believe that the power of investing individuals, is really moving away from the end product, but rather investing in the process, rather investing in experimentation, investing in individuals that are looking to either better their practice or find different ways of working with their practice without the pressure of having a report at the end of the granting cycle that we can then use as a tool to then also do our reporting system, but rather we try and find a different framework of how to do that report without putting the burden on the grantee themselves.

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**Adrian Ellis:** And so, how do you judge your own success in your funding strategies?

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**Marcus Desando:** It's always a very difficult one to kind of, completely say there is a system of finality, right? Because we invest in continuous work of individuals, that doesn't mean that it ends. So we have developed a monitoring and evaluation and learning framework that focuses mostly on storytelling as a means of measuring the impact that we have in the field that we work in.

So, we use those stories from the grantees and because all they are required to do is to possibly give us an hour of their time where we will do a number of questions that we pose to them and they respond, and that some of them can be quite quantitative in terms of, you know, asking them how they used the funds that they received from us.

But what's more important is, what value did the funds create in the work that they do and in the community that they work within. And we use those stories and the success stories and sometimes failures of the beneficiaries themselves as the yardstick of our own success.



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**Marcus Desando:** An example is that we had a young man who in 2021 was given the Seed Award grant and he was just purely seeing himself as a graphic designer who had aspirations of contributing to his society. And within a year he had developed into what he called himself a dreamer, and he then looked at how he can contribute towards his society's wellbeing through design, through social entrepreneurship, through kind of interactions with the young people and finding out what their needs are and how he could translate it into his practice, that he very soon applied for one of our training programme – one of our mentorship programmes, which is the Building Beyond. And he was accepted purely based on the strength of his work.

So that's also another way to measure out your own success and seeing how you can provide resources for a young creative who then uses those resources to really develop themselves to even a much more impactful practitioner at a later stage.

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**Adrian Ellis:** So you are building an extraordinary network of people. A network of people at the beginning of their careers, middle of careers, and established in the maturity of their careers, all of whom are interested in art that involves some form of social engagement, all of whom are working in circumstances where that profoundly matters. Are you fostering that network explicitly?

[00:16:26]

**Marcus Desando:** Yes! Well I think part of our sustainable dream – so we've just completed our 10 year plan, which is still very much in development stage but the statement that we want to live with is that we, as an organisation, we want to create a sustainable dream where we foster, create, co-create a community of change makers from different levels of activities and experiences within the work that they do, who would be able to work with each other, with us, outside of us as an organisation, but then that we still remain embedded in that community.

So we remove ourselves from just being a grant maker to being also an active participant within the community itself. And we foster that by different things.

We have programmes that we call Mobile Lab, where we uh, celebrate the six Impact Awards awardees that we have given awards to in the previous year, to, we request them to co-curate with us a week's long lab in their own context where they will be talking about their own practice, the communities that they live in. They will be able to show us around the work that they do, in, and also in at the same time, we invite a maximum of 10 Seed Awards recipients who would then also join in that lab week. And this is an opportunity for them to be able to interact with the Impact awardee, but also within the community that they work in, so they could expand their own network and their own possibilities of developing their practices.

And this then gets populated with masterclasses, with workshops, with brief presentation from industry experts in the other different theme based on the impact of awardee themselves. And ultimately we don't just celebrate them by giving them the money, but we also give them an opportunity to really share the work that they are celebrated for with a much broader audience outside of just their own community.



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**Marcus Desando:** And at the same time, we expose these young creatives into what is possible, if they apply themselves uh, further in the work that they do. So yes, we definitely want to constantly be explicitly involved, but at the same time when we leave – we have seen already with a few iterations of the lab that the Seed awardees, even themselves, start forming their own relationships, but they also form relationships with the Impact awardee and with whomever expert that we invite to either give workshops or masterclasses. And that for us is really important because it broadens not just our reach, but also the reach of our beneficiaries.

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**Adrian Ellis:** Perhaps I could, change the focus very slightly because I have a funny instinct or feeling that, that extremely sophisticated model that you are describing is something that has been uh, at least an intellectual concern of yours that preceded your arrival at the Prince Claus Fund. Is that intuition right?

[00:19:45]

**Marcus Desando:** Partly right, yes. I do think that I was very fortunate that I joined the fund – I have to make a disclaimer, I joined the fund where most of the decisions on the new strategy had already been made. I just had the fortune of really filling in the gaps and working at focusing a lot more than where it was.

But you are right in a sense that I have an interest in leadership development in the cultural and creative sector. And I did my masters in leadership regeneration in the performing arts of South Africa looking at how leaders could really redefine their space in how they, they lead organisations in light of the political shifts and also funding models that were changing within South Africa that made it very difficult for organisational leaders to really define a new way of working for themselves.

My PhD is focusing on sustainability and self-reliance within the cultural and creative sector. And I am looking at developing a framework that would, rather, introduce the cultural and creative sector into the socioeconomic landscape of South Africa. In really kind of simple terms, in how do we define a space for creatives in a world that is uh, really focused on entrepreneurship, but also for them looking at how they sit within this space.

And also they can realise themselves as real contributors, not just to the social issues or global challenges, but also to the economic wellbeing of the societies that they live in. So when I looked at the strategy of the Prince Claus Fund, it excited me because I do believe that the power of individual contribution to this is what has always been overlooked in a lot of ways. And, mainly because, you know, individuals have less overheads, they have less resource demands, but also they could really contribute in a much more meaningful way to the societies that they work in. I do, however believe that culture has the power to change a human being's life. As I believe it has changed mine.

And I think that in the strategy of the organisation and also in my own PhD studies is, it'll be my contribution in how I could in a way give back to this great sector that actually saved a young person from Pretoria Mamelodi in South Africa, who didn't see a future beyond the repression of the government at the time, to now leading a global organisation.





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**Adrian Ellis:** I cannot but ask a little more about that story, because I know enough to be deeply, more than intrigued, fascinated, but you are uh, perfect embodiment of theory and practice together.

Tell us something about how the arts in general, and opera in particular, had that transformational impact on your life.

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**Marcus Desando:** Oh, wow. Um, you know, I don't always talk a lot about my own trajectory in the cultural space. So I'm never very great at articulating it. But I'll try it. I grew up in a very poor society in South Africa as you know, during apartheid where we had no, not even a conception of what the world could look like outside of oppression, and being limited to only a few manual labour possibilities for yourself as an individual.

And I discovered singing, and I was fortunate enough to as a young man of 13, find myself singing opera on an amateur base in Pretoria. And what I didn't realise at the time was, even though it was a love to sing for me, but I didn't realise that I could really make a living out of it.

And when that world opened, it, it made it possible for me to really see what could be achieved if one has no limits in what they can do. And so culture for me was not just uh, you know, kind of a saviour from poverty, but it was a way to free me as an individual to, to see the world beyond the confines of what has been created by a system that was working to retain me in a particular space. I think that opera in South Africa, in particular, has been a great transformative exercise because so many people had an incredible talent and amazing voices, but we also didn't know that we could also be not just mere singers, but we could end up being administrators of organisations.

So that is my trajectory. I started off as a singer and I went on to actually becoming the first black opera director in South Africa. You know, very grateful of the mentors that I had at the time, and that propelled me then to becoming an administrator of several opera companies in my career before I moved on to running development organisations.

So I do believe that I'm a poster child of what culture can truly do to a young person living in a really repressed society, to realising not even dreams that they knew they had.

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**Adrian Ellis:** What role did mentorship play? I'm interested in this because now you are also in a position where mentorship is clearly part of the programme and the philosophy. How important is it for us, in the privileged positions we now are, to look out for those mentor-mentee relationships and nudge people?

[00:25:47]

**Marcus Desando:** Oh my god, it's so important. I mean, Adrian, I've had a lot of angels within my journey, as I call them, but the one thing that is really important in terms of how one seeks out um, a mentee or even a mentor or even a relationship between the two, is a recognition of potential.





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**Marcus Desando:** It is very important that people not constantly look at what's already evident, but what they think could be the possibility of an individual. It is important for me to really note that sometimes we believe that talent has to be apparent, but sometimes it's really kind of spending time in, in investing in what is possible. And I think in that sense, the work that we do in the Prince Claus Fund with our mentorship award, it ties in very much into my relationship with my mentors who realised the potential before even I did it. And then spent a lot of time in making it possible for me, taking me along the journey, exposing me to different situations that would enhance my practice and also very bravely would leave me alone to handle projects sometimes as testing grounds, but in others, just as a way to start spreading my own wings.

[00:27:08]

**Adrian Ellis:** You are in, um, South Africa currently, I think?

**Marcus Desando:** I am. Yes. I'm home.

**Adrian Ellis:** Holiday, or work, or both?

[00:27:16]

**Marcus Desando:** Both. I was here for holiday. It was my first trip home since I moved to the Netherlands. So I had, you would say holiday, but I think it was also quite an activity filled few weeks of reconnecting with everyone. (laughs) And also, interesting enough, also reconnecting with my mentees, because I still have mentees in South Africa that I work with quite closely who have ambitions of really becoming important leaders in the cultural sector. And currently I, the last two weeks I've been working remotely in South Africa yeah.

[00:27:49]

**Adrian Ellis:** And after a period away in Amsterdam, what is your take on South Africa's cultural and more general vibrancy, currently?

[00:28:00]

**Marcus Desando:** When you want to think about in particular the vibrancy, I think, oh my word, South Africa in terms of its cultural output is possibly one of the most exciting in the world. We have so many theatres – professional theatres that are constantly putting on productions, in particular dance and theatre and music. I mean, opera is right now the kind of like the poor cousin. And it's a very difficult one to bring back up again because it costs so much more than a lot of other art forms, but I have already seen so many amazing productions that are happening and also spoken to a number of young people who are excited about the future, excited about the contribution that they're putting towards the cultural sector.

There is a lot of conversations around how do we expand the market that we have, how do we start creating art for the general public outside of individuals that are normal consumers of the art? So the conversations that are being had now are really looking at how to broaden the cultural spectrum and its impact on society, which is really exciting because I think pre-covid, most creatives were really comfortable with just creating art for the few discerning individuals and not really looking at how it could be a community-wide experience.



[00:29:22]

**Marcus Desando:** So there's a lot of wonderful things happening and I'm very happy that they're doing that. And, and we're still struggling in South Africa a lot around funding and what funding means.

I have a different relationship to funding than most South African people because I believe that funding should not be so heavily reliant on government bodies and also that creatives should really work at steering away from grant, you know, applications, but also more on how they can themselves start looking at investors and individuals that will invest in their actual artwork with clear output aspirations beyond just completing a mandate of a subsidy grant agreement. But it's really exciting. It's really exciting.

[00:30:10]

**Adrian Ellis:** Marcus, that was a fascinating conversation. I'm deeply grateful to you for taking the time, and taking the time on a busy day in South Africa with the technological challenges that we all have when traveling. Thank you very much indeed.

[00:30:26]

**Marcus Desando:** No, thank you so much for having me, Adrian. I really do appreciate this, and I do hope that we will meet in person soon and also that we can all contribute to really a better cultural industry, but in particular really kind of expanding the reach to the communities that need the kind of work that we do.

[00:30:47]

MUSIC BREAK

[00:30:54]

**Adrian Ellis:** That conversation with Marcus made me think about mentoring.

I've always been slightly ambivalent about my own mentoring efforts. It's an onerous responsibility that I don't always feel competent to meet. Perhaps because I've sometimes misinterpreted what people want from it. I'm probably not alone. I don't feel like I am personally a role model for professional advice.

Luck has played a big part in my life. I have plenty of professional regrets as well as sources of pride. And above all, the environment that I grew up in is fundamentally different from the environment in which I think more recent generations have played out their professional lives.

I entered the workforce in 1981, over 40 years ago. And career paths seemed more obvious then.

I joined the British Civil Service. My friends from college became lawyers, they went into finance, media, a few went into industry. Mostly, though, through quite well articulated graduate entry schemes from college. They, and I, may have grown wilder and wilier in time, but the first decade or so of our professional lives was usually quite well defined, and jobs were plentiful and, importantly, remunerated. Maybe not fabulously, but the bank of parents wasn't something I remember anyone having had significant recourse to. Perhaps I was naive and didn't notice, but I certainly didn't.



[00:32:15]

**Adrian Ellis:** It was also the height of social mobility in the U.K. and in the U.S., and I was, of course, and remain, white and male. The need for mentors, impartial, reasonably informed, well intended advice, seems to me to be far, far greater today for all sorts of reasons. Among which are:

First, the collapse of those avenues my generation enjoyed, or their absence in the creative and cultural industries.

Second, the incontrovertible need to widen access to the avenues that do exist.

Third, for the sort of people who listen to this podcast, the wide range of skills and forms of knowledge required that never formed part of our educational professional training. Museum directors, for example, who may have trained as curators but have become players in urban placemaking.

And finally, the relative isolation that remote working has brought to us all, and that bites harder on those earlier in their careers, and without the social and professional networks that come with time.

My aha moment in my fumbling adventures in mentoring was to realise that I was not being asked for career advice in terms of how do I get ahead, or where I was that I was not a good match and could explain clearly why. I was being asked for something more diffuse but more interesting, which was to help my mentees figure out what sort of experiences made them happier, more fulfilled, and self-actualised. To really examine where they might find those sorts of experiences and how to navigate towards them. And drawing the answer out of the mentee was and is obviously much more important than trying to give them the answer. I also realised that the techniques of interviewing people about their organisations, and what is and is not working, which I'd been doing for 30 years, and getting them in a relatively short period of time to tell you what they really think, and to reflect on why they really think it, served me and hopefully my various mentees well.

Anyway, this is all to say that I suggest mentoring is a critically important professional responsibility. And the GCDN may be a great forum in which to identify a pool of willing mentors and mentees in need, but also to provide those mentors who need it, with the access to the tools to feel confident and appropriately equipped to take on that responsibility. So watch this space.

[00:34:40]

THEME MUSIC

The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. Our theme music was created by Artwave Studio, who also sound mix our episodes. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at [www.thethreebells.net](http://www.thethreebells.net). And if you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

For The Three Bells, I'm Adrian Ellis. My guest was Marcus Desando of the Prince Claus Fund, and thank you for listening. Until next time.

