



## Take on Board

# Transcript – Elenie Poulos

Helga Svendsen 0:00

Today on the Take on Board podcast, this episode is about her accidental journey to the boardroom. First, let me tell you about a Elenie. Or in fact, I should say the Reverend Dr. Elenie Poulos. Elenie is on the boards of Uniting NSW/ACT and ANDI (Australian National Development Index). She was previously on the boards of ACOSS, the Australian Council of Social Services, Act for Peace and the Churches Refugee Taskforce. She's got more than 20 years experience working in public policy, advocacy and government relations in the not for profit sector. She's an ordained minister in the United Church, and now has her PhD in politics. Welcome to the Take On Board Podcast, Delaney.

Elenie Poulos 0:38

Thanks Hegla, it's great to be here.

Helga Svendsen 0:39

So exciting to have you on. So we first met when I was at the time the CEO of Hotham Mission Asylum Seeker Project, and you were Uniting Justice. And we've managed to kind of interact in various different ways. Like we're both now on the Greenpeace General Assembly. And here we are sitting in the Institute of Company Directors meeting room in Sydney whilst off for the conference having this fabulous conversation. So thanks for being open to it.

Elenie Poulos 1:05

It's just great. I'm very excited to get the call.

Helga Svendsen 1:09

So as always, before we dig into your accidental journey, let's dig a little bit deeper about you. Tell me what was your earliest experience of governance?

Elenie Poulos 1:20

I found myself on the board of the Australian National Committee for refugee women. It was 1996. And I had offered a couple of years before that got very interested in refugee issues and refugee

policy in Australia. And I was a bit upset about what was happening. And I met some people and ended up on this committee, which was a very grassroots committee at the time, I was made up of people like me who were wanting to make life better for refugees, particularly refugee women in Australia and asylum seeker women, and made up also of refugee women themselves. That was my earliest experience working with an incredible group of women, to draw from their own experiences and to make a difference in the lives of others. very grassroots very, very meaningful, fascinating place to be.

Helga Svendsen 2:25

I look, we may well delve into this as part of your, you know, accidental journey. But you said, I got involved, I met some people, and then I'm on the board. So what happened in there? How did that actually happen?

Elenie Poulos 2:38

I'm pretty much as I said, right. Now, I had, through my church related advocacy, I had met some people who were doing policy work. And they had a number of different things that they did. And so I'm thinking particularly of Eileen Puthaway, who was at the time, the director of the Center for Refugee Research at UNSW or about to become that, I think, when I first joined, and Kerry Goldsmith, who met me through church related stuff, and Velvie Holden, who's in South Australia now, who was the, it was a funded organisation at the time. And she was the CEO, and her husband was the Uniting Church minister. So, you know, we crossed paths and cross paths with a couple of others. And then they'll be said to me one day, we've got got a spot on the board. Are you interested? We'd like to have you on board? And I was I was, no, but you know, I'm a white woman. And I've only just started engaging in this area, and I'm not sure what I have to contribute. She said, No, it's really important that you come on. So I did. And but you're not only about the lives of refugee women in Australia, but I learned a lot about policy advocacy. And of course, it was the start of my learning about governance.

Helga Svendsen 4:10

Which brings us to our topic, the I feel like you're the accidental director or the accidental journey to the boardroom. So how did the accident happen?

Elenie Poulos 4:20

It's so happens that when you become a minister in the United Church, and especially when you are offered leadership opportunities, as I have been, those opportunities come with responsibilities to get involved in church based committees and commissions and groups like that. So I became the national director of uniting justice in 2002. And as part of my role, I was required to sit on various

committees and commissions, one in particular which had significant governance responses, delegated from the National Council of Churches and this was what is now known as act for peace, which is an international aid and Development Agency. Also, as part of my role, I was engaging with the World Council of Churches and was appointed to some of their Commission's and, and they had some delegated governance responsibilities, as well. So, so it was not a plan to start engaging in board work or in in governance work, but as a result of the kind of professional role that I held in the church. So that's why I say it was a it was a bit of an accident, because it wasn't anything that I had really expected or thought too much about.

Helga Svendsen 5:44

I mean, I think it's reasonably common for people to end up on board roles through their work. My very first board was through my role, not through my professional work rather than separate to that. But it really starts to build that confidence muscle, and gives that bit of experience. Can you remember your first board meeting there? And what can you remember about your very early days there? And even maybe what you learned?

Elenie Poulos 6:10

That's a good question, ah, acronyms. And that hasn't changed. You know, every time I've joined a board, the first meeting, and prior to the meeting, reading, reading the board packs, this just being confronted with all of these acronyms that you've got no idea about. So that was act for peace. The other thing that was interesting about it is that at the time, it was a representative body. So on the board were, were people who'd been nominated by their churches, you know, so you had the Greek Orthodox representative, you had Anglican representative, the Catholic representative. And I think one of my first experiences was realizing that on such a representative committee, not everyone has the same kinds of experiences. Now, I know that's true for all boards. But in the case of churches, particularly smaller ones, and they're asking their people to step up. And like me, it was my first time experiencing anything really about international aid and development work. I was clearly not alone in that. I remember noticing things like that the fundraising thing was totally new to me. And the responsibility for the stewardship of money that was donated. So that was always a key part of the conversation. And from the very first meeting, it was a constant issue, you know, are we doing right by the people who've donated money to see this work done?

Helga Svendsen 7:57

Now, I know you experienced a bit of a dilemma around fundraising and fundraising strategy. I'm not sure if it was that organisation or another one. But what can you tell us about that dilemma? What happened? And how is it handled?

Elenie Poulos 8:09

So it was that organisation, and I think it was deputy chair at the time, I did end up being chair for two terms. So it was a very, it was a long, an amazing Association. So you know, and I think this story is not unusual, but it was particularly live issue for a church based agencies. So it was at the time we were needing to ramp up our fundraising capacity. And one of the most effective fundraising methods at that time, it's not so now but at that time, was the professional organisations that, that hire people to stand in the streets and sign people on for regular donations. And you don't see that so much now in COVID times, but it was a widely used strategy by a lot of organizations across the board. So the proposal was that we engage a firm to do this on behalf of the organisation. The issue for us was that were there on behalf of organizations, really, and, but more importantly, church members. So the fundraising, part of that organization had been around for decades. So church members across different denominations who had engaged with this work and had contributed. The question for us is, so how would our stakeholders feel if they were confronted in the streets but someone raising money in this way? And what does it mean for a church organization to raise money for church based work, although it it was also much broader than that, but what's the perception of that in the community And also how the church people perceive that kind of approach made on their behalf, on the streets in community. So the decision that we made was not to go that way. And it was about the perception from the community towards the organization and potential impacts of that on the perception of how church members would relate to that kind of fundraising activity.

Helga Svendsen 10:31

I'm interested in how the board had that conversation. Because I imagine as with a lot of organizations who chose to do fundraising in that way it worked. That's why they did it, because it brought in the money for your organization, presumably, those sorts of figures were in front of you. But you also, in whatever way heard the voice of your members, some interested in the way they either the voice of the members was heard in the boardroom, and the way that conversation played out in the boardroom.

Elenie Poulos 11:01

It was around the the values and the ethos, the conversation is was, what does this say about who we are, what we do and how we do it? And is that appropriate for us knowing that it's appropriate for a whole lot of other organizations? And there's nothing inherently wrong with it or unethical about or anything like that. But does that activity reflect the values that we hold? And does it reflect the ethos that our stakeholders expect us to be carrying into the public space? And I think the concern was about the perception that we might be promoting the organization rather than promoting the work.

Helga Svendsen 11:44

Okay, was the board, I'm sure, by the end of the conversation, the board was of one mind. But often, there are some quite robust conversations about these things and different views. If that was the case, in this one, what was it that then managed to bring that alignment?

Elenie Poulos 12:00

There wasn't actually there, there was a there was alignment on that. So the people that we had to convince with the executive team,

Helga Svendsen 12:07

Okay, I was just gonna say, well, hang on, if there was alignment, how did it get to the boardroom, it got to the boardroom, through the executive desk,

Elenie Poulos 12:13

Right, because, you know, they were doing what we'd asked them to do and to bring some proposals for how we could beef up our fundraising. So yes, so it was the executive team that we had to call have those conversations we then worked through, and, as always, was the case around that table, honesty and openness and a direct approach. But never disrespectful.

Helga Svendsen 12:39

Yes, or rude.

Elenie Poulos 12:40

So just knowing that we could have those conversations clearly will really important.

Helga Svendsen 12:46

So tell me in your experiences chair, what are some some lessons you learned in the role as chair, what's different to being the chair of the board versus being on the board,

Elenie Poulos 12:56

I was much quicker to voice my opinion, when I wasn't the chair. So my approach to being in the chair was to ensure that all the opinions around the table got heard and that I was open to them. So I

tried to work really hard to leave my, you know, my first response to the answer to his decision that needed to be made. Yeah, worked really hard to put that aside. And so that I would come with an open disposition to the conversation, then everyone around the table would be able to contribute to that, that as a chair, I would help steer the conversation. So whenever it got blocked, or we started going over ground that we'd been over many times before, you know, finding good ways and constructive ways of moving conversations on as well was so it's that direction to the meeting that helps support people to be able to make their contribution and to listen to others, and to come to a consensus decision about things.

Helga Svendsen 14:01

Absolutely. Was there a conscious choice around consensus decision making? Yes,

Elenie Poulos 14:05

Yes, there is. And one of the things that I learned in being a minister in the United Church, but also if you're an engaged member of the Uniting Church, the decision making process is consensus decision making. And, you know, we have a manual for meetings then, that people know how to use but it is decisions might get forced to a vote, but the aim is always to reach a consensus. I mean, that's just part of who I am now. And it's certainly part of a lot of church decision making processes around the world. And in fact, the Uniting Church has been a leader in that and has taken that process to both big ecumenical groups like the World Council of Churches and other global faith based institutions.

Helga Svendsen 14:52

Interesting. Okay. One of the things I noticed when I was working for a united care organization as well about what at least about uniting care governance? And I think, in other organizations similarly that there is always the opening of the meeting is a reflection as well. Can you talk us through what sometimes happens there and what you saw as the value there?

Elenie Poulos 15:15

Yep. I really like this practice. And in church only meetings, it usually centers around a reading from the Bible. So you might read one of the parables or, you know, one of the stories, and whoever's leading the reflection, would then just talk about that in relation to what was going to be happening in in the meeting. The uniting New South Wales ICT board does the same. But it's not necessarily a Christian reflection. Often it's based on some other material, what that board member has read and has been thinking about, particularly in, as I said, in relation to what business, we're going to be addressing that day, or some sort of bigger, ongoing issues. And I think the value of it is that it, it brings everyone together around questions of values, and mission and purpose and ethos, and sets a reflective frame for the meeting. And I think that's a very powerful way to begin, rather than kind of

straight into the business ticking off stuff. So, you know, my experience is that when you start a meeting like that, even if it's not a church based meeting, that people appreciate it, because it does set that thoughtful, reflective foundation for the conversations that are going to happen. And the other thing that particularly if it's a, if it's a very fun reflection, what you can find happening is that people will refer to it throughout the meeting.

Helga Svendsen 17:02

Yeah, it's certainly something I noticed. It's a really lovely way to open meetings. I'm not a member of the church, but I it's a reflective practice. It's almost like a meditation sometimes. And I think it really focuses the mind and prepares you for the meeting. I think it's a beautiful practice doesn't happen in enough board meetings.

Elenie Poulos 17:21

But I would heartily recommend it. Okay, so

Helga Svendsen 17:25

So the the accidental journey of Elenie Poulos, from finding yourself on that first board, for women, refugees working through act for pace, working through some of the challenges there. Now on a couple of other boards as well. What's next in the journey,

Elenie Poulos 17:43

I'm keen to expand some board work, this was a bit of a surprise to me, the more I engaged in governance work, the more I enjoyed it, I love it for a number of reasons. One is that I'm a bit of a big picture person, I think I like to approach my work, kind of looking at the whole thing. So systems, structures, processes, and how they get worked through to what happens on the ground, in order to make a positive difference in the lives of people. So I love being in a position where, where as a board member, part of your role is to support the operation of the organization in such a way that staff are encouraged and feel safe enough and are enabled and they have the right resources around them to do the work that they're there to do those things I really love about it. And the other thing that really engages me is the is the team decision making. And now that I don't work full time in an organization and I spend quite a bit of time at home at my desk, particularly images when I was working full time on my PhD, that opportunity to work on a team as a member of a team to come to a shared decision. I love that process when it's done well.

Helga Svendsen 19:10

I knew this would happen. It always goes way too quickly. So one of the key things you want people to take away from the conversation that we've had today?

Elenie Poulos 19:19

The story of the importance of values and mission and ethos and culture. Everyone in the governance community is talking about this stuff now. We have no excuse for knowing how badly things go when organisations, not for profits, and corporates alike lose track of their their purpose, and their mission and their culture and their ethos and that conversations around these things have to happen across the range of issues that boards deal with. So that's one thing the other thing I think picking up on the beginning with a reflection I think the value of shared story in order to help build a positive and open board culture is something that I think we don't talk about very much. And that we could make much more of.

Helga Svendsen 20:13

And is there a resource you would like to share with the tech on board community?

Elenie Poulos 20:16

The Sir James ethics Center has a video on fundraising dilemmas. sydney binaliis really excellent. It was done a couple of years ago, just after the big fuss around the the Sydney Binali when some of the artists in the Binali objected to the sponsorship by transfield. So it has a number of people talking about their, their experiences of that, but also people like Wesley not talking about fundraising, for the Sydney festival and the complexities of for example, accepting money from an alcohol company when you're trying to raise indigenous, arts, all of that, that kind of stuff. Really worthwhile. It's about 10 minutes, and it's, it doesn't have the answers. But if you're thinking about these things, it's a it's a really good resource to help frame some of the questions and maybe some of the, you know, the discussions that you might have around antastic.

Helga Svendsen 21:18

I'll make sure we put a link to that in the show notes. I haven't seen that one myself. So I'll make sure I have a look at it. And yeah, we'll put a put that in the show notes. Oh, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing part of your accidental journey. And part of the wisdom that you've learned over your time at being in the boardroom. It's so yeah, thank you for being with us here today and sharing

Elenie Poulos 21:38

Oh, thanks, Helga. It's been fun and it's been great to talk to you again.