

Ep.3.21 - Adam Tomasek

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SPEAKERS

Adam Tomasek, Ed Clemente, Announcer

- A** Announcer 00:01
Welcome to The Michigan Opportunity, an economic development podcast featuring candid conversations with business leaders across Michigan. You'll hear firsthand accounts from Michigan business leaders and innovators about how the state is driving job growth and business investment, supporting a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem, building vibrant communities and helping to attract and retain one of the most diverse and significant workforces in the nation.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:29
Hello, I'm Ed Clemente, your host, and today we're fortunate to have Adam Tomasek. He's the supervisory division chief in the private sector engagement hub of the United States Agency for International Development, also known as USAID. That's a big title. Adam, thanks for coming to the show.
- A** Adam Tomasek 00:48
Thanks for having me, Ed, great to be here.
- E** Ed Clemente 00:51
And I'm going to let you, just to make sure people understand, break down what that means. Because that's kind of a long title even for you, I'm sure. So what do you tell people you do when you first meet them?
- A** Adam Tomasek 01:01
Well, first of all, let me start with the organization and the part of the federal government that I

work for. So as you said, United States Agency for International Development, also known as USAID, it's not an overly well-known federal agency here across the United States. But what it does is, it is the leading agency for foreign assistance within the U.S. government. And what I do within that agency is work to ensure that what we do, through public resources, through taxpayer dollars, is to enhance the engagement with business and industry. How can we work with them better to stretch the public sector dollars farther? And achieve really important development and humanitarian outcomes all around the world.

E

Ed Clemente 01:52

And can you give us maybe a quick example of like, maybe someone, your boots on the ground, some companies you might have helped in the U.S. and where that aid went or something like that?

A

Adam Tomasek 02:04

Yeah, sure. Putting it in context. You know, our agency globally, on an annual basis, we program around \$30 to \$40 billion of U.S. government foreign assistance. Sounds like a big number, right? I think you and I, Ed, we'd appreciate that number a lot. Put it in context, it's just over a half a percent. So under 1% of the overall federal budget spend annually. So sounds big on the outside, you look at it closely and it's really not that big. But what we do with it, and particularly the office that I'm in, is look for those opportunities, where we know that business and industry leaders around the world, be the large Fortune 100, 500 companies, many of which you know well in the state of Michigan, or others, small, medium, even micro enterprises. We look to work with them to be able to achieve both their commercial outcomes, their commercial priorities, while also delivering back social and economic returns to either the communities or the locations where they work. So some of the examples. You know, I know that in Michigan, there's a lot of Fortune 500 companies that work across the state. But there's also a lot of big Fortune 100, 500 companies that also have operations in the state of Michigan. So from the likes of Ford and General Motors, I mean, we've worked across the automotive industry, in the manufacturing sector to work with them in the countries where they sourced some of their critical goods from, so we've worked with the industry in places like Vietnam, where a lot of sourcing happens. We've worked with a lot of other companies where they're sourcing critical minerals and worked directly with the government and the communities on the ground, to ensure that what they're doing makes good business sense, but also has really strong social, environmental, and good governance outcomes as well. So the list goes on and on. But annually, we're doing I think, as of our data is relevant to about two years ago, or updated to about two years ago, I think we had a little over 700 active partnerships globally. About 100 to 200 of those are new each year. And we work across over 100 different countries around the world.

E

Ed Clemente 04:40

With all these different organizations you work with, do you have to keep like data to send to the states what you do with each state or do you send data to Congress? Like obviously, someone must be caring about what is the real level of engagement with domestic goods versus sort of international shotgun approach to things, right?

A

Adam Tomasek 05:07

Absolutely, we do a lot of reporting, as you can imagine, reporting is a critical part of being in the federal government, especially for an agency like ours, where our funds are appropriated by Congress. So we do annual reports to Congress on how we spend every every dollar they give us. What's really interesting about the way that we can talk about our work that we do, given that we aren't just making grants or providing contracts to what we call implementing partners and organizations that are doing everything from education, work to capacity building, training, technical assessments, things like that, what we're able to do is we're actually able to tell a really colorful story about how we can take \$1 of US government assistance. And we can leverage that. It varies depending on the project, depending on the partner on where it's happening, but anywhere between two, and we've seen at times up to \$17, \$18 per one U.S. government dollars. So we can actually tell the story about why it's a good investment of U.S. taxpayer dollars for us to be working directly with business and industry around the world. Not only are we delivering better livelihoods, better educational programs, you know, helping farmers have better livelihoods, ensuring that there's more food on the table, food security issues, things like that. But we can also talk about how the U.S. government's investment enabled a much bigger outcome than we would ever be able to pay for directly by ourselves.

E

Ed Clemente 06:52

Yeah, I listened to another podcast just recently about the sort of correlation between sort of a democratic government and capitalism somewhat to a degree, because I believe that, like when you see tensions between us and the rest of the world, but this type is sort of like diplomacy, in a much more economic sense, that probably has more boots on the ground value than people realize as a great economic opportunity to do things as well as create a better image, too, of the country because it's easy to get confused by all the sort of false positives that come out all the time.

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Adam Tomasek 07:35

It's a great point that you make, and it's one of the things I would say that we continue to struggle with year in and year out, how do we better tell our story about the value of our agency and the work that we do to the American people. And as we're talking here, and thinking about the context of even in a place like Michigan, where we should be able to better communicate, better explain why it makes sense that what we do. I can say it's a fantastic piece of work that we are able to do, because it is a very bipartisan agenda. There's always politics in government, right? But I know, in many ways it's an advantage to what we do, because ultimately, what we're talking about is promoting American prosperity by making really targeted, efficient investments in other countries around the world, such that there are great benefits locally. But we also see the backside of those benefits in places like Michigan and beyond. And in the United States.

E

Ed Clemente 08:43

I don't want to dwell on this point too much. There was a debate I was actually listening to on

this podcast, but he was using a 200-year benchmark, to say once the industrial revolution really started taking place, how the quality of life for people around the world just kept improving. You know, you can look at just in length of time people live, birth rates, all those kinds of things. You know, capitalism has a two-edged sword, of course, but it also has improved, I think, in some ways, it's hard to dismiss the idea of how much humanity has done better. And why this is so important. I think what you guys do because you're often making differences in developing countries, too, right, so it's not that simple.

A

Adam Tomasek 09:37

No, I would agree. I absolutely agree with you, it is not a very simple calculus as to, a straight line so to speak. If we step back from some of the work that we do in the details, ultimately I think there's an aspect of values that are at play here. And you know an American value of helping others, as we've seen in so many different ways over the decades, is really at play in terms of what we do, and being able to bring not just a handout, but as many people have said, a hand up, an understanding of what the situation is being able to bring tried and true practices and expertise from parts of the United States to another country, help build their capacity. We're really focused on self-reliance, we understand that. It's not just about how much money can the U.S. government take and direct to other countries, right, we see that, obviously, with the other parts of the government as not only having much bigger budgets, but also aspects to what are the ultimate outcomes that they're trying to achieve? And you really touched on the core issue there. It's about the humanitarian objectives, how can we help people have better lives? How can we help them be able to create a better business or have more productivity out of their farm, be able to have their kids go on to the types of educational opportunities that we care about here in the United States? So there's a real aspect here of being able to put into practice, if you will, the values of what we see as being an opportunity as being, as our tagline often says, from the American people, right, in terms of what we do.

E

Ed Clemente 11:26

Yeah, I always think of, you're not giving people fish, you're teaching them how to fish, right? And that's pretty basic, but I think it's sort of a true thing, you could probably take that as a common denominator in almost every country. Because, at a certain point, you can only deliver so much the government.

A

Adam Tomasek 11:45

That's right. And unfortunately, the challenges are not getting any smaller, or any less complex. When we talk about things from COVID and the global pandemic from a few years ago, or what we see now in terms of food insecurity, or what we call democratic backsliding, right, instability, political instability, social unrest. Unfortunately, there's far too many complex and long-standing crises that U.S. government does have a very big role in playing in terms of trying to address but you know, it kind of goes back to, I think it was Benjamin Franklin. He said, it's often hard for people to understand why we would do something, but an ounce of prevention is a pound of cure. [Yeah.] Ultimately, in many ways, what we're trying to do, right, stem the tide of some of the biggest challenges that are being faced around the world, but do so in a way where we're looking toward a much more resilient, more stable type of outcome.

A

Announcer 12:51

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E

Ed Clemente 13:07

You come from a very rich, interesting career. And I should put in the biggest plug for you that you're actually from Michigan, in Owosso. Yes. [Owosso County proud.] Yeah, so your first university was U of M, right?

A

Adam Tomasek 13:25

That's correct. Yeah. Even though growing up basically on the doorstep, not too far from the campus in East Lansing and Michigan State. My aspirations did take me down south to Ann Arbor.

E

Ed Clemente 13:38

It's all right. That's a great university. And I find interesting, just from our prep call, like a lot of people, right, you weren't sure what to do, and you probably wouldn't know you're on this path. But after you got your degree kind of took a left turn a little bit, right?

A

Adam Tomasek 14:00

Well, yeah, I guess it depends on how you measure the left or the right. A right turn.

E

Ed Clemente 14:04

I don't mean it in the political sense. You didn't exactly follow the path for the degree necessarily.

A

Adam Tomasek 14:12

No. Yeah, I did and I didn't. It definitely wasn't a backward turn. Let's put it that way. But yeah, that's right. I did, I finished up my undergraduate studies at the University of Michigan and was really wondering what was next, you know, where was I going? I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Ann Arbor, and go back there as often as we can. As I was mentioning to you earlier, I was standing on the steps of the Michigan Union. And it was the exact location where President John F. Kennedy had created his vision or at least first publicly talked about his vision for creating the United States Peace Corps. And it really hit me as being an opportunity to go beyond what I

knew, beyond what I was comfortable with, really get me out of the classroom and out of all the laboratories that I was doing work in. And so I followed that path and spent the next what was supposed to be about two and a half years, ended up being a little over three years, in a small little country in the middle of South America, Paraguay, right in between Brazil and Argentina and really found my footing there, if you will, or my professional passions around being able to work very locally, help people on some of the things that matter most to them and really take an approach where, by looking at the issues that I think we so often take for granted, from our backgrounds, that those things really matter. And that there's a lot of good that can be done, if you just put yourself in the position to be able to help others.

E Ed Clemente 15:58

Well I am going to also plug a couple more things for you so you don't sound like I'm making you brag about yourself. But you also got a degree from Cal Poly Technical, right? Cal Poly. You also, I thought interesting, you went to MIT for Sloan, something at the Harvard Business School, and then the Yale School of Management. But then the one I had a look up, I didn't know it. IMD which is in Switzerland. So did you go to school in Switzerland, too?

A Adam Tomasek 16:29

Well, yeah, as you just laid out, I bounced around a little bit.

E Ed Clemente 16:35

In a good way, though. I couldn't get into any of these.

A Adam Tomasek 16:38

Well, let's be honest, I mean, a lot of the work has been postgraduate work, executive programs that I'm extremely grateful for, from both current and previous employers. But IMD is a very interesting program. It's considered, either the top one or top two annually, business schools within Europe. And it is based in Switzerland. And prior to joining the federal government, I worked for the World Wildlife Fund for a little over a decade. And it was actually through a program that they had established for taking an international group of emerging leaders and allowing us the opportunity to study international business and international management at IMD. So it was a multi-year executive program that allowed me to literally sit with young professionals, mid-career professionals from all around the world, and really dive into what does it mean to have a sustainable business? What does it mean to, you know, addressing the types of challenges that we're facing around the world? So it was a fantastic opportunity. And if you ever get a chance to go visit their campus, you? You absolutely should.

E Ed Clemente 18:02

What city is Switzerland?

A

Adam Tomasek 18:04

It's in Lausanne, which is just around Lake Geneva from Geneva. You're right on the on the Swiss-French border. And you couldn't ask for a more picturesque landscape a little different than what I grew up with in Owosso. So I'll say it that way.

E

Ed Clemente 18:19

The mountains of Owosso. The Owosso Alps.

A

Adam Tomasek 18:23

I wasn't looking up at the Alps or the Matterhorn, that's for sure.

E

Ed Clemente 18:28

So, obviously, you've mentioned you worked with the World Bank, you worked at the World Economic Forum, which we've had on as a guest before, and the Asian Development Bank, and you did some teaching at the American University. So you've had a really fascinating career, which I have to say, I am very jealous of. I just feel like, [That's kind of you.] I just wish I was that aware of stuff back when I, which is not always that simple. But, I think that you're fortunate that you were able to find some path because I think every person who grows up, in fact the people I find the least interesting, are ones that think they know exactly what they want to do. I find people who really don't know what they're doing sometimes way more interesting than people who haven't had hard path.

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Adam Tomasek 19:20

You know, to put a bit of a spin on that, Ed, what I found was that there were so many things that did interest me, right? And what I really didn't want to do is just get tagged with with one issue, right? And that's, as you know, in a professional sense, sometimes that's a really difficult issue to navigate because you oftentimes build credibility by being known as an expert, or being the person that people refer to and say, Hey, this person here really, really understands that issue. They should be the one that helps you author this paper or gives that lecture. But what I was, and fortunate is a great word that you used, I've been extremely fortunate to be able to follow those different paths. And in many ways, I've found connections across them and through them. And a lot of that had to do with my interest in the world being a much bigger place than than just Mid-Michigan. And being willing to pursue those interests, pursue some of those passions, and thankfully, find places where I could make a contribution and sort of help out.

E

Ed Clemente 20:37

Yeah, I always like to think of life sort of as like a lodestone you didn't know existed until you look back behind you sometimes. Right? And you see, oh, I guess I always was going in sort of

look back behind you sometimes. Right? And you see, oh, I guess I always was going in sort of that direction. I just didn't realize it.

A

Adam Tomasek 20:50

You look up close at a painting, right? You see one thing, you take 10 steps backwards, you see a whole other pattern. It's still the same painting. Yeah, definitely not one of the one of the old masters who could paint that. But it has become my life story, that's for sure.

E

Ed Clemente 21:11

Yeah, I've always considered myself a generalist, which is good and bad. But I think more people, it's easier to talk to people when you are a generalist, they say versus an expert sometimes,

A

Adam Tomasek 21:22

And be interested in what they're about, what's their story? What did they learn, right? And we talked about Peace Corps earlier, that was a really big piece of it, of moving into a situation where English was not being spoken. There was a few words here and there of English, right, that kids had picked up off of radio programs. But you know, being in those situations where you are willing to be uncomfortable, but you're also craving to learn and better understand. And I think putting it in that context is is a really meaningful, and I've found it to be an extremely rich experience.

E

Ed Clemente 22:04

Yeah. And that will also prevent us from asking the question, the advice you'd give yourself in high school, because I think he just said it, in a way. Because I think that you sort of lived something that you couldn't have planned, which is great. Just down the last couple of questions, but what are some of the future trends you see, actually, for your industry, of USAID, and how you think even a state like Michigan could play a bigger role in it or those kinds of things?

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Adam Tomasek 22:37

You know, one of the benefits of of doing the work that I do is that I'm not just daily talking to other people within the federal government. The policy wonks as we tend to call them here in Washington, DC. Because we are so focused on working with business and industry and understanding what is it that we could do together? In terms of future trends, a lot of what we're seeing has been that nexus between what's important for the U.S. government to be paying attention to and what matters, or what could matter to our private sector, or business and industry colleagues, really kind of signal a couple of things. One is in the digital space, right? And we can think about that in a lot of dimensions. But really here, what I'd emphasize is What does access to the internet or access to digital technology mean, in a place like Zambia,

or Bangladesh, or one of the outlying islands in Indonesia, where I used to live or the Philippines. And so, when we talk about global issues, that's an absolute issue that is going to have so much relevance to so many sectors and issues that we care about. Here in the United States, or even in Michigan, where we put numbers on it, it's frightening, right? Estimates are about 4 billion people globally do not have access to the internet. And you think about how much we learn, this conversation here or our kids learn within schools through access to technology. It's a really daunting number. But I would also say like in the context of what's it mean to Michigan, another areas around innovation and sort of disruption research. And we actually have some partnerships with universities in Michigan. And one of them I'll touch on here just briefly is one with Michigan State University, and actually one of their agricultural innovation labs. And one of the things that they're doing is they're taking what they've learned over decades of research here in the United States, and they're directly very locally in Michigan, and understanding how can they use research to advance the policy dimensions its food security, and so thinking about disrupting the policy system sounds kind of crazy. And people might even roll their eyes at What does that mean? I'd say, Hey, go visit the the Agricultural Innovation Lab at Michigan State, talk to them about why is it important that what they're doing in Africa and Asia, for farmers and farm families really matter to the way that food is grown, the way that food is processed, the way that food is traded, et cetera. So those are two things. The third one I touch on, which I know has been a very big issue in Michigan, particularly through the major industries, has been supply chain sustainability. You know, the disruptions that we experienced over the last couple of years. I mean, I can speak from experience, my parents waited nearly a year to receive a new car that they had already paid for. Because that final semiconductor chip was not available, right? And it was sitting there on the lot, they could see the car. But it took them months and months to be able to finally have the car ready for them to drive off and drive home. So a lot of what we're looking at in terms of future trends, it gets into these issues of supply chains. How can we make them more reliable? How can we lessen that distance or that risk across that distance, both from where things are manufactured or sourced to how they're moved around the world. And we see a lot of interest in the federal government space to be able to take the ingenuity and take the opportunities. And I know this is what you work a lot on in Michigan, particularly and really onshore, if you will, those opportunities to connect in what's being produced in a state like Michigan, and how can that have an open, a fair, an accessible, an understandable, a legal marketplace somewhere else around the world?

E

Ed Clemente 26:59

Well, anything I can do or we can do to help you connect with the MEDC on some of those projects, obviously. Sounds like he gave me a couple of future guests, too, that Innovation Lab. Sounds pretty interesting.

A

Adam Tomasek 27:11

Be happy to make those connections.

E

Ed Clemente 27:13

Yeah, and we've actually had someone that was the head of the MSU supply chain or logistics. They've been on the show already, because we've tried to focus a lot on supply chain.

A

Adam Tomasek 27:24

And they've got a fantastic college [Globally.] for supply chains and manufacturing.

E

Ed Clemente 27:31

The last question I'm gonna put a handicap on you. What did you like best about growing up in Michigan? I know you've come back quite a bit. But I want you to give me what you think you'd like to as a kid growing up in the state?

A

Adam Tomasek 27:44

Well, there's so many answers to that question. You know, and still having family there. It's a play, I will always be a Michigander no matter where I am in the world, I love the ability to be able to hold up my hand and point to it and say this is where I'm from, right? So so few people around the world can do that. But you know, quite honestly, the values of growing up in Michigan, stick with me to the day. I try and pass those on to my kids. The care and the concern that I was able to experience through having a really strong family network, from being able to go on camping trips, and now being able to take my kids to those same places, canoe out on a lake or kayak out on Lake Michigan, go on a fishing trip. Those are the memories that stick with me, and they always will. I've taken my kids to Sleeping Bear Dunes where I remember going to the first time when I was a little one with my parents. So much of it was about what Michigan was as a place, what it had to offer, but also to the people that, again, that I was privileged to grow up and around and with. It really just made it a place that I can't say anything bad about.

E

Ed Clemente 29:08

As one side note, how many countries have you been to, roughly, do you know?

A

Adam Tomasek 29:11

You know, I had a project over COVID when we were on the shutdown where I wanted to update my list and I'm still lacking a few but it's a little over 70. It's probably [That's all?] a little closer to 80. Well, I don't count ones that I've just been in airports in so it actually has to be feet on the ground, done something local but yeah, quite a few. But, yeah, I have quite a few on my list that I that I still need to get to.

E

Ed Clemente 29:51

Well, once again, I want to thank Adam Tomasek, he's the supervisory division chief for private sector engagement, I'm missing a letter or word in there, I think actually, but of the United States of America, I should say engagement hub, and with the USAID, the Agency for

International Development. Thanks, Adam. You're doing a great job there. And even with all the jobs you've had with the World Wildlife Fund and all those places, thanks for having a great career, too.

A Adam Tomasek 30:21

Well, thank you, Ed. Thanks for giving me the time to talk. I appreciate the opportunity and look forward to staying in touch.

E Ed Clemente 30:28

Join us next week where our guests will be Claude Molinari. He's the president and CEO of the Detroit Metro and Convention and Visitor's Bureau, also known as Visit Detroit.

A Announcer 30:38

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