

Diversity and sustainability offer significant investment opportunities, a profile of Unconventional Ventures

With #QVCS, Maddy Ness profiles different funds to give founders and entrepreneurs the information they need to choose the right investor. Today we interview Nora Bavey, cofounder and General Partner at Unconventional Ventures.

I emigrated from Iran to Sweden in the 80s, and spent most of my childhood and teenage years in the Stockholm suburb of Rågsved. In my twenties, I began work as a youth worker, helping kids stay out of trouble on the other side of town in some of the city's wealthiest suburbs. This opened up a whole new world to me. Speaking to the parents of some of these teenagers, I was introduced to "their" world of work with many of them being senior executives in the IT and technology industries. This was all completely new to me, but it piqued my interest, and I found myself spending hours researching the sector online.

It didn't take long until I got myself my first job in the tech industry. But it was clear to me that I stood out. Everyone else had a degree from the Stockholm School of Economics, and so did their parents, and their parents too. I was a

proud graduate of the “school of Google” and my parents certainly hadn’t even heard of the prestigious business school.

The tech scene was homogenous and exclusive and I quickly realised I needed to play my part in levelling the playing field. This realisation served as the catalyst for the creation of my ed-tech company, UNITECH, designed to make education more accessible through online learning. UNITECH took off quickly with some of the world’s biggest IT giants interested in partnering with me and I soon found myself ready and excited to begin fundraising for our first investment round.

But excitement quickly turned into frustration as I found myself being asked more about my background and the country I left at the age of four than I was about my innovation. In the Nordics, door after door shut in my face and I realised I had to try my luck further afield. I packed my bags and took a two week trip with my family to California. There, I was met with a completely different mindset from VCs. My background and my status as a mother was suddenly irrelevant and even uninteresting in relation to the tech company that I was seeking funding for.

This pivotal experience eventually led me, a year later, to take the leap into VC myself when I accepted an invitation from Thea Messel to collaborate in creating what is now Unconventional Ventures (UV). Our mission is to break down the barriers faced by diverse founding teams and unlock their full potential.

Which industries are you working in?

UV currently works with a broad range of companies across the impact tech space. This includes innovations in climate tech, health tech, D&I tech, sustainable fashion tech, sustainable transportation tech and enterprise SaaS.

What do you look for in a founder?

At UV we are exclusively looking for diverse founders and founding teams within impact technology. Our reason for this is that, for too long, a lack of representation in the tech industry has hindered innovation. Cognitive divergence is necessary for teams to identify and solve a broader range of issues. Take the Apple Watch as an example: this is a product that has been redeveloped several times in different colours, shapes and sizes, but no impactful adaptations to the core technology have been made.

Ultimately, I am looking for a passionate founding team that has drawn from their life experiences to develop an effective solution to a societal or

environmental problem.

Can you talk about your current portfolio?

In September 2023, we announced the second close of our €30M impact-focused fund. So far, we have invested in companies from across Europe including the UK.

Climate X calculates, at an asset level, the probability and severity of weather events decades before they happen, enabling any decision-maker to place mitigation and resilience at the heart of their strategy. Dora has developed a dispatching system with an integrated marketplace for forwarding and trucking businesses, enabling CO₂ measuring and optimisation. Equality Check's product supports clients in collecting and reporting on data, interpreting results, and choosing adequate measures for improving workplace DEI. Fjong is a fashion rental platform utilising overstock from high end brands. LEIA HEALTH is building a global data-driven female health solution, starting with closing the gap in reproductive health by digitalising postpartum health. Ocean Oasis has developed a system for floating renewable desalination of seawater. SciFree's platform aims to promote open access to scientific knowledge by providing free access to research articles.

What does the future look like?

What the future looks like greatly depends on where VCs are placing their investment today. Supporting early-stage startups that are focused on impact will prove pivotal in solving some of the largest issues threatening society's future.

Securing a greener and fairer future requires VCs discarding the belief that prioritising impact is a charitable objective entailing profit sacrifices. With a wealth of research evidencing that sustainable investments perform better, the numbers alone should incentivise VCs.

Think of it this way: if you were given the ability to foresee the winning horse in a race ahead of time, wouldn't you place your bet on it? In the world of investments, the winning horse is undoubtedly solutions that address the enduring societal challenges, such as climate change, healthcare, and education.

What makes Unconventional Ventures different?

UV is Europe's first impact VC firm to invest solely in diverse founding teams and founders with impact at the core. Our investment thesis is built on the fusion of diversity and sustainability as the most significant investment opportunity. We honestly don't think it makes sense that this should make us unique, but as of today, what we are doing stands out from the work and focus of most other VC firms.

What one piece of advice would you give founders?

I would urge founders who may not have reached their goals yet to recognise that the entrepreneurial landscape is presently far from a level playing field. Structural barriers and inequalities often unjustly impede the progress of passionate and hard-working individuals with innovative ideas. However, it is important to keep in mind that adversity serves as fuel for innovation and resilience – and that every step you take carves a path for those that will come after you.

Nora Bavey is the cofounder and General Partner at [Unconventional Ventures](#).

Article by NORA BAVEY