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A Conversation with Aisha Raheem of [Farmz2U](#)

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Can you introduce yourself and tell me about your work, and when your venture was founded?

Aisha Raheem: My name is Aisha Raheem. I am a founder and CEO of Farmz2U. We're a supply chain technology company working on improving food systems, with a focus on Nigeria and Kenya, where we currently have operations. We focus on two key areas.

The first is how to improve the financial flow of payments for agricultural produce between farmers and buyers. At the moment, an average of 10% of the final value of the raw materials that have been used for a product go to the farmer. Sometimes, with certain products like cocoa, it's much less than 10%. This makes it significantly unprofitable for farmers to continue production, and it also puts a long-term risk on that value chain. If there are fewer producers, there is less supply. That's one key way in which we seek to improve the food systems on the continent, starting with Nigeria and Kenya.

The second way we do this is by reducing the time that buyers spend on supply chain activities, as well as improving the lifecycle of that product's journey. For instance, buyers of agricultural produce are fast-moving consumer companies and processing companies. They can spend a lot of time sourcing the products that meet their quality requirements, especially in light of things like the EUDR [European Union Deforestation

Regulation] and the EUSDD [European Union Corporate Social Due Diligence Directive], which are regulations that seek to improve the sustainability of products entering the EU markets.

Buyers have to spend a lot of time identifying which producers fulfill that requirement. There's time spent on other activities as well. If we reduce the time that buyers spend on supply chain activities, we will ultimately reduce the cost of supply chain operations. We address the food system challenge from both the producers' (farmers') end and the buyers' (fast-moving consumer goods and processing companies') end.

Sanne Breimer: Are you helping buyers understand sustainability regulations, like the EUDR, more efficiently?

Aisha Raheem: Yes. The work that we do at Farmz2U is from the grassroots. We're working with smallholder farmers and emerging commercial farmers and starting to digitize their operations.

There is the concept of informal markets in the African context, where there are lots of activities that occur in the grey area. One of the key things that we're doing at Farmz2U is starting to digitize that grey area. That helps a lot for building visibility of what is happening on the ground. Buyers are using field data and data points that Farmz2U provides through our interface platform to evidence that they are complying with the supply chain requirements of the EUDR or EUCSDD. They're evidencing that the produce in their ecosystem has been grown and sourced sustainably.

The alternatives that buyers have to date are very limited in the sense that, first of all, many farmers don't even know that things like the EUDR exist. There's a company called Trase.Earth that has just released documentation saying such regulations should take in more insights from the farmers who are directly impacted by these problems.

We're also working with institutions like UNIDO [the United Nations Industrial Development Organization], who have made supply chain visibility one of its priorities. We're working with them on designing projects that double down on this type of work. We're helping buyers learn, in a lower-cost, technology-driven way, how the produce they use is sustainably sourced.

Sanne Breimer: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work? How do you know it's working, and what is it about your approach that led to that impact?

Aisha Raheem: In the past, we were heavily focused on local buyers, but because of the proof points that we've gained, we're now expanding into the UK and EU markets,

where buyers that source products from Nigeria and Kenya have expressed the need for the products and service we're offering.

Another example [of impact] is Leky Mills, which is one of the buyers we work with in Nigeria. They're a yam processing company, so they make snacks from yam. Nigeria is one of the largest manufacturers of yam. A lot of it goes to waste, and one of the key things that Leky Mills seeks to do is to improve and scale value addition when it comes to the yam value chain.

In the past, Leky Mills struggled with getting their products in a timely manner, which meant that they couldn't fulfill their orders. As a processing company, Leky Mills gets orders from grocery stores and distributors looking to sell packaged yam chips to end consumers. They were unable to meet those targets for a number of reasons: not being able to source the raw materials, not getting yam in a timely manner, and not getting the quality of yam that is required for processing, which is yam with consistent color and texture.

Working with Farmz2U through our supply chain management tool Talon, we're able to address many of these problems for Leky Mills. First of all, we provide them with a broader supplier network. In the past, they had to rely on the suppliers they recruited themselves. This is where the informal network that we digitize comes into play, as there are a number of different actors in that supplier space. You have the smallholder farmer. You have aggregators, who are sometimes farmers, sometimes not. We focus on aggregators who are farmers. For instance, a buyer might have a 30-ton order, but a farmer can't service that order. A lot of the work that aggregators do is pulling products together that meet quantity requirements and can be sold at a profitable level, and you have aggregators at different levels. That supplier network is very fragmented. We're able to provide Leky Mills a better way to identify suppliers that fulfill the quantity and quality needs of their raw material produce, in this instance yam. They've been a customer for the last year.

A major proof point that shows us we're solving a huge pain point for Leky Mills is that they decided to sign a year contract with us, and they paid upfront for the subscription fee of the platform, which is not a typical move in our markets.

Other proof points are access to a broader supplier network and more confidence that the supply being received meets the quality requirements buyers have requested, which comes into play with our ability to digitize that informal network. In addition to digitizing that network, we use an organizational structure to ensure that best practices are being adopted by the farmer at every stage.

We're documenting the types of seeds being used and the chemicals being used in the process. We're documenting what is happening in the point of aggregation as well, and ensuring that the products are being traded at fair prices. This is where visibility comes into play. We're mapping out everything that is happening from the farmer who is growing the product to the buyer who is purchasing the product.

Sanne Breimer: Can you tell me a bit about the support you're receiving generally? What kind of funding do you get, how has that evolved since you started the venture, and what has been helpful in scaling different aspects of the work?

Aisha Raheem: Farmz2U started as a bootstrap company where, as the founder, I provided the chunk of capital that funded the company's operations for the first 24 months. That was in 2019. We got our first funders through a grant from the UK government, through something called the Africa Prize. This is an initiative under the Royal Academy of Engineering, which is an institution in the UK responsible for identifying innovative engineering features. Farmz2U was identified as one, so we got a grant from them.

Shortly afterwards, we got a grant from Lagos State, which is a state within Nigeria, for our work in food innovation. Our first institutional investments were a combination of equity and convertible debt, and that was through a US investor called Techstars. Subsequently, we brought in two other investors. Rippleworks is our second philanthropic investor. Our first was the Skoll Foundation.

Farmz2U is a for-profit business. We have a balance of grants, funders, and philanthropic funders, who are key partners in helping us drive the impact angle of the business we're building. They ensure that we're building our business in a systemic way that is addressing current problems as opposed to just focusing on the commercial perspectives, which are important, but not the only point of focus.

Sanne Breimer: What type of funding or support has been most helpful in scaling your business?

Aisha Raheem: Blended finance is very important because it's expensive to build solutions in the way that we are building them, [with a focus on impact]. Blended finance is a combination of technical assistance, grant funding, and equity. Debt is also particularly important, but it's been particularly hard to access in our operating markets in Nigeria and Kenya. It's much easier for an idea in the UK or the US to access a million-dollar facility than it is for a 10-year-old company with a proven financial record locally to access it, just because of how the capital markets are structured.

It would be much less expensive if we focused purely on the commercial aspects of the business, on profits only, and didn't care about upskilling the farmers, or the impact of traceability, or ensuring that the data being collected from the farm is accurate. If we ignore things like that, things can be done cheaply. This is where grant funding and philanthropic partners play a key role. They help us avoid making the mistake of focusing purely on profit and thus creating lots of issues from a societal and environmental perspective.

Sanne Breimer: What would you say is the role of trust in the relationship with funders, and more specifically, how can a funder cultivate trust?

Aisha Raheem: Trust is key in any relationship, and trust is especially important with our farmers. With funders, it's more about being on the same page. Sometimes funders can have unrealistic expectations. For instance, how accepting or how accessible is a due diligence process? If you are creating a due diligence process that takes a founder or a team away from their core business, are you doing them a disservice, or are you helping them?

I think trust comes from the question of, why you, as a funder, are having this conversation with a business. Are you having it for a genuine reason? There are lots of markets in play when it comes to certain funders. I think it's important that funders understand that this should be a mutually beneficial relationship, and that they avoid behaviors that could be seen as predatory or unhelpful.

Building a relationship of mutual trust, where my values as a founder are aligned to your values as a funder, is the fundamental way to establish trust. If the values are misaligned, then it will be very hard to build on trust. Perhaps in those cases, the conversation shouldn't even start in the first place.

Sanne Breimer: How would you describe predatory behavior in this context?

Aisha Raheem: A predator tries to take over a situation or control a situation. A predator is coming from a position of wanting control, rather than coming from a position of offering support, collaboration, and partnership. A predatory behavior might be imposing a certain way of doing things without understanding why certain things are being done.

For example, banana leaves are currently being used as an alternative to plastics. Banana leaves as a tool for packaging food is an Indigenous way of doing things. They're what was used before plastics, which we now know are so bad. Now, we're reverting back to the indigenous way of doing things. A funder might think a certain idea is beneficial because they've seen it working in a certain ecosystem, or they might have

an appreciation for the Indigenous ways of doing things, and come from a perspective of, "Should we consider this?" A more predatory approach would be to come in and say, "We should, or we must, consider this."

Sanne Breimer: You received the capacity building assistant and project support from Rippleworks. How does Rippleworks' process of deciding what capacity building support to provide differ from what you've experienced in the past?

Aisha Raheem: Rippleworks was a breath of fresh air. Our first foray into technical assistance was with Catalyst Fund, which was an investor that helped us build our structure in Kenya specifically, and also improve on the existing processes we had as a business. They're venture capital, so they had a different approach than Rippleworks.

It was super helpful for Rippleworks to give us an expert who, first of all, was local, and who was very familiar with the problem we were solving as an organization. Rippleworks also provided access to an ecosystem of other funders and builders, so we were able to have more exploratory conversations about how we could experiment with certain solutions or problem sets that we're working on.

Our project was designed around a specific problem set, which was improving the quality of our supplier network and the traceability features of products in that supplier network. Having perspectives from other industries, beyond just agriculture, was very helpful as we were looking to scale the business and complete the project.

Rippleworks' way was very process-heavy, but in a useful way, so that before the products even started, we had very detailed requirements and assessments where we clearly defined the problem set. What are the KPIs that would mean success at the end of the program, or at the end of the project? Who are the key stakeholders? What are the resources available?

Rippleworks provided those resources in the form of an expert that worked with us. It wasn't a full-time commitment, but they did work with us about a third of the time. The approach Rippleworks took was very hands-on. They didn't come in with that predatory attitude of, We're going to tell you what to do. They came in saying, We're going to give you the frameworks you need to figure out what you should be doing with support from an expert, which I liked.

Sanne Breimer: Would you say there are gaps in this model as well?

Aisha Raheem: It's intense. Rippleworks is very upfront about their approach, and in letting us know, This should be something that directly benefits you as a business if you're going to take it on.

The approach that we took in managing that intensity was asking how we could best use our team's time in managing the solution. Essentially, the products that we worked on were a direct issue that we had as a team. It was in our roadmap. By working on that project with Rippleworks, we were working directly on something we're going to do anyway. That was a good way of addressing that issue of process-heavy, resource-heavy support.

Sanne Breimer: What, in general, would you say funders don't understand about capacity building, that would be useful for them know?

Aisha Raheem: They might not have the right perspective. I've seen that too many times. Knowing or appreciating that they might not have the right perspective is one key message for funders.

Sanne Breimer: What should they do to get that right perspective?

Aisha Raheem: Being on the ground and being local, but of course, lots of funders aren't local. It's hard to get the right perspective if you're not local, which is why the expert model that Rippleworks uses is quite interesting. How can they build the perspective outside of the Rippleworks framework of using an expert?

Part of it is being able to recognize that, as a founder, you don't have all the answers, and might need help. If you're working on it collaboratively, and you're open to learning the perspective of the local context, there is a better chance of coming up with an optimal solution. That, as opposed to coming into the conversation saying that the local perspective is not relevant, or that your own perspectives and views should be the gold standard. That's where you start to run into problems. If you have the flexibility to learn what those local perspectives are, there's a better chance of building something that is mutually beneficial.

Sanne Breimer: Have you seen some improvement in that sense in the funding community over the last couple of years?

Aisha Raheem: It's a mix. There's still a lot of room for improvement, but there are also people doing great work in this space. That alone gives a lot of hope and optimism. I know that the development finance space is not in its best moment. I think certain things are moving in the right direction, but not everything. It's a case of continuing to work towards that improvement.

Sanne Breimer: In the context of the recent loss of USAID funding, what do you think makes a funding system resilient, and how can funders help you become resilient?

Aisha Raheem: That loss of funding impacted us, and I know it's impacted a number of people at varying degrees. Rippleworks organized a call about three weeks ago where the aim was to rally people and start to put heads together as to how to navigate this uncertain period of the DFI [Development Finance Institutions] funding space. One of the key solutions is building more commercially viable businesses, because the most resilient form of funding is having customers who pay you as opposed to requiring more external funding. As a business, that's our focus at the moment, and we're looking into how we can build on that.

Sanne Breimer: What have been the biggest challenges in the support that you've received so far?

Aisha Raheem: The support doesn't last long enough. It shouldn't last forever. Such support should be training wheels, and you should continue riding the bike on your own. So as much as I'll say that's a challenge, I also believe that the aim should be not having to rely on that support indefinitely.

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

Aisha Raheem: You need to be resilient and persevere in a world that is constantly changing from a geopolitical perspective and from a technology perspective. The ability to remain resilient and focused on continuing to upscale yourself is more important now than ever. It's also important to have a very strong 'why' because it can be very challenging to build a business. If you don't have a strong 'why', it's very easy to give up at the first hurdle.

Sanne Breimer: How can funders help organizations develop a strong 'why'?

Aisha Raheem: Capacity building and technical assistance could really help. Too many people are doing things that they think the market wants as opposed to what the market actually wants. If your 'why' is misaligned with what you are building, it's dead in the water. Funders can help from a capacity building perspective in that area.

Sanne Breimer: What are the top three things that your business will need to scale and sustain?

Aisha Raheem: The first is capital to amplify some of the opportunities we've unlocked. Second is partnerships. Beyond funders, there's also a need to work with ecosystem players. For instance, we're currently working with the University of Oxford, where we're engaging SME [small- and medium-sized enterprise] buyers as we try to build on the

strategy I talked about earlier of serving buyers in these markets who have a need for supply chain visibility.

The last need is the team. We have a strong team at the moment, but as we scale and start to grow our capital requirements and scale more partnerships, the need for team members and human resources who are aligned from both an impact and a skill perspective, will be critical to scaling the business.

Sanne Breimer: What type of capital do you need to amplify some of the opportunities you've acquired? What direction funders should take in that regard?

Aisha Raheem: Technical assistance, grants funding, and debt are the ones we're particularly keen on.

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much for your valuable time.

Sanne Breimer (she/her) is a freelance journalism trainer, project manager and adviser for international media organizations including SembraMedia, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), European Journalism Centre, Thibi, and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). She founded Inclusive Journalism, aiming to educate (primarily) Western journalists about media representation and decolonisation through a weekly newsletter, online courses and retreats. Sanne works remotely and divides her time between Europe and South East Asia. Before moving into training, Sanne worked at a managerial level in national public broadcasting in the Netherlands for almost 13 years, focusing on radio, digital media and innovation. She is Dutch with Frisian roots.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.