



“It’s better to get validation from another doer than an expert because you know they're also in the weeds.”

A Conversation with Dee Punungwe and Ko Chijota (GGEM Farming)

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Please introduce yourself and tell me about your work.

Dee Panungwe: I am Dee Punungwe. I am co-founder and head of design and operations at GGEM Farming, which is a social enterprise founded in 2018. Our goal is to feed Malawi. The work we do is focused on building a resilient food system that will allow us to achieve our vision of a well-fed Malawi. We are doing this by creating a platform where we provide farmers with support services that enable them to get to a point where they can be our regular suppliers.

Following that, we buy, process, and sell everything from as many of the farmers as we can access across Malawi. We are able to provide the food logistics that turn the food that our farmers grew into the food that people across Malawi, particularly those in low-income communities, eat. Our work is to continue to develop and grow this food system and all the pieces along the way that will help us to build resilience, especially in light of climate change and economic changes.

Ko Chijota: My name is Kondwani Chijota. I'm also the co-founder of GGEM Farming. My role is primarily head of growth and marketing, so I mainly feature on the farmer side, doing a lot of farmer engagement as well as selling all the stuff the farmers grow.

Sanne Breimer: What would you say is distinctive about your approach? What is something that others would find surprising?

Ko Chijota: It's designed by farmers, for farmers. We have an agricultural background, and GGEM Farming was born of our own experiences as farmers in Malawi. Being people who have some sort of means and access to information, we reacted to the challenges and the gaps that we saw and experienced by figuring out how we can develop and give solutions to somebody who's less fortunate, or who has less opportunity or access to information than us.

We're also distinctive because we close the loop. From the farmer's side, we train, we supply and develop seed, we supply farmers with input fertilizer and such, and we buy from the farmers. After we buy, we do the whole nine: we process, package, and manage the food logistics to get it to market. I think closing the loop is the most unique thing we do, and we do it so we have something that is viable in the long term.

Dee Panungwe: GGEM is engaged in a lot of the work because it's managing the entire value chain. We are very concerned with staple food production for southern Africa. All of the crops that we are engaged with are crops that we firmly believe not enough people are able to farm, or not enough people are motivated and funded to farm. Inherently, staple foods are supposed to be more affordable, but in a sense, these foods would make less money for commercialized farmers.

What that's meant over time is that we are getting less commercial production of the crops that are eaten within southern Africa, and a lot more of the land that is most fertile, productive, and desirable is being used for higher-value cash crops because we are living in capitalist times. What GGEM is trying to do is figure out how we can feed Malawi. Feeding Malawi is akin to feeding the region. We all eat similar types of food. Concentrating on staple foods now and staple foods for the future, as well as cash crops of diverse varieties that are vital components of everyday meals within the region, is also something unique about our approach. It's closing the loop in terms of resilience.

Sanne Breimer: You mentioned that for funders, it might be more challenging to invest in that. Can you expand on that?

Dee Panungwe: GGEM Farming is not a cheap solution. It's complex and it's been complicated for decades. If we look at the trends over time, we are affected by climate and by economies changing over time. The affordability of farming for smaller farmers has become less and less over time. When we say we're trying to solve this problem, it's not just the training piece, it's not just the fertilizer piece, it's not just linking farmers to a market. It's investing in the infrastructure to ensure that we are bulking the right type of seed for farmers to access at subsidized costs.

It means that we are going beyond training and we are doing a lot more on-the-ground interventions throughout the entire season. It means that we are the market, as Ko said. We are not linking people to a theoretical market. We are literally showing up, buying produce, and paying our farmers. In the beginning, it was strictly through cash because that's what farmers understood, and there wasn't a lot of trust between farmers and institutions, but as we've grown and developed trust with our farmers in our different communities, we've been able to migrate to more digital means of payment.

All of those pieces do not make a cheap solution. All of those pieces are how we are seeing impact, and dynamic impact at that. Getting funders to want to engage in a different kind of narrative about smallholder farming, and a narrative that moves away from the individual farmer towards a viable, resilient food system has been challenging, and it has taken us time because we were farming. We stepped into a world that we weren't very familiar with, but we stepped into a world that already had quite a strong narrative.

Standing parallel to that narrative has been an interesting part of our journey, and definitely worth it, because we've been able to communicate what we're experiencing, what we're seeing, and what we believe is working, and we've started to develop a pool of farmers who get that.

Sanne Breimer: Regarding the support that you received from funders, what's something that surprised you and turned out to be very helpful to scale?

Dee Punungwe: Multi-year funding. When we started, multi-year funding was a unicorn in this space. We would hear about it here and there, so we knew it was possible. Our first bit of multi-year funding happened about three years ago. That was exciting because all of a sudden we could talk to more funders about it and say, there are these people who have committed in this way. It brought relief because the reporting burden is less and you can forecast.

This was a pivotal moment for us because for the first three to four years, Ko and I were the majority of the team at GGEM Farming; we couldn't hire people without knowing that we would have funding to continue to support them. We were already here, living in rural Malawi, and we were game to continue the work. Multi-year funding changed the game for us because it allowed us to start growing our team. We went from having roughly 11 people to having 96 people in a two to three-year span because we had more people committing to us on a long-term basis.

Ko Chijota: The second surprising thing was people understanding what we're trying to do in terms of the amount of infrastructure we need to put in place. When we first started the journey, everybody was farmer-centric. They wanted all their money to be

put close to the farmer, to supply them with fertilizer, supply them with training, et cetera. However, all these things in a vacuum, without infrastructure, mean nothing.

If you train a farmer and you give them fertilizer, you've done a wonderful job, they've grown more food. But where are they selling their product? Where is it being housed? The systematic issues go way back. There's logistics, there's infrastructure, and there's everything else.

Rippleworks was one of the first people who saw how important infrastructure was, and who said, we will cover that gap. They asked questions like, how many warehouses do you need? What kind of machinery do you need? They understood, in terms of buying, processing, and selling, how critical that part is in terms of making everything else work.

In terms of Malawi, the government had already been running a subsidy program for maize production where they would give subsidized fertilizer and subsidized seed to one million farmers, but after the farming was done, there was no other help. People were stuck with this commodity, and literally anybody could go and name their price.

Great that they can produce and have maize, but you can only eat so much maize. At the end of the day, people need money to survive. There are medical bills, food, school fees. The challenge became how to change that maize into money that can sustain them for another year or two years going forward. The infrastructure support makes such a big difference there.

Sanne Breimer: Can you talk a bit more about the narrative that funders were used to, and how it is, or isn't, applicable to the current situation?

Dee Punungwe: One of the strongest narratives out there is that, to solve the African hunger situation, or to solve the African agriculture situation, we need more maize. I don't think anything is further from the truth than that narrative and that belief. We were quite surprised by how strongly people were leaning into that understanding. I think it was from a lack of context and nuance. In the beginning, we found ourselves explaining quite often that beyond maize, there are several options, foods that our grandparents would have insisted our parents feed us as we were growing up.

Through the singular focus on maize within the region— and I would say this is something more of a nuance for the southern African region, where we've seen so much focus and investment in maize production— we've lost a lot of things over time that were better for us nutritionally. What's exciting is that there are better solutions out there, and these solutions just need a reintroduction into our region. We get to start a new narrative that says there are other crops. Diversification is important. We can't

continue to talk about diversification theoretically. We need to figure out how we are investing in this piece.

We didn't start off doing much research or work around diversification. However, over the last couple of years, we found that the more hard-hit we are by climate shocks, the more aggressively we need to move towards diversification because following climate shocks, maize is one of the biggest losers in terms of productivity. It requires a lot of fertilizer. It requires a lot of water. People don't have the money for a lot of fertilizer. The water piece is changing for us every season because of climate variability.

We have been trying to say to everyone in this space that we need to see farmers as people with potential to do more. We need to acknowledge farmers as the people who have been feeding us all along. If we think we have a food security crisis in Africa, or in southern Africa, or in Malawi right now, we need to be fearful of what this same space will look like in five or ten years from now if we don't figure out how to understand the variable needs of farmers.

Farmers themselves can be categorized into different groups. Another narrative we've bumped into is the smallholder farmer bracket. Within that bracket, we've got many things going on, but if we don't take the time to understand farmers at different levels, then we can never invest in them accurately because we're saying that one size should fit all. That's falling apart in front of our eyes season after season. We've had to take a step back and conscientiously say that one size can't fit all. We need different solutions for different types of farmers. Some require more investment, some require less.

Some farmers will be more suited to subsistence and can get some additional investment so they can grow a cash crop and get money to pay for things. Even here in rural Malawi, you have to pay for things with money. Centralizing a market solution where we, as GGEM, ensure that we're helping farmers produce something they can bring to us, that we are ready to buy, has been a totally different narrative for farmers. So often, the narrative has been that maize is the solution, and just making sure farmers have the seed and the fertilizer for it will suffice. I would say those are the two key things that we walked into six years ago.

Sanne Breimer: What would you say are the bold shifts that are needed in the funding/supporting landscape to truly center the voices of those closest to the problem?

Dee Punungwe: GGEM has been very fortunate in terms of the funding partners that were sent to us because honestly, we are working with amazing people. I would say a lot of them have been so successful because of their own investment and because of

having the right program officers, or impact directors– the right people who build relationships with their doer partners.

We have found the most success in situations where the program officer has plenty of context around working within our region, where they have taken the time to understand our nuances as countries or as doers in specific areas within a country, and where they've taken time to visit and experience the problem we are sitting with. It's very different from working with a potential partner and instantly seeing such a huge gap between our understanding and our lived experiences that it would be hard for them to build trust with us, or for them to feel like their money will achieve impact. From there, you start to branch out into other little problems. Problems around the definition of impact, problems around the definition of sufficient scale, and the rate of scaling.

There is then the issue of cost. It's often the cost versus the complexity of the problem because we don't have the same understanding of what we are dealing with. Rippleworks has done really well with that in the year we've spent with them. We weren't applying for anything. We just spent a lot of time with them, trying to use every service they had because we thought, here's an opportunity to get experts. We didn't have much of a team, and we saw that their experts can stand in as team members. Our Rippleworks projects allowed us to ask questions, answer questions, and sometimes say there is no answer for this because there's not enough data on it. They built a familiarity with us, our programs, and our ambitions, and it was after that experience that we heard there is the possibility of funding.

We have had a similar experience with another funder who also spent about a year with us just getting to know what we're doing, and we didn't feel that time was wasted. We felt as though, during the process, we were getting to learn and we were getting to tap into experts.

Our time was well-used because at the end of it, we were able to refine our thinking and our direction. Having the right kind of staff– who are passionate about solving some of these big questions that don't always have a cheap or simple solution and who want to sit in these issues and think with the doers– is critical.

Ko Chijota: Gaining the context and learning from it is always invaluable.

Dee Punungwe: It's important to have people who are willing to learn with us. It's a problem of the sector that over the years, solutions have been developed in a box, and that is deemed acceptable. They're familiar.

Sanne Breimer: By in a box, do you mean isolated, as in one solution for one problem?

Dee Punungwe: Yes. Over time, people have become comfortable with saying, if your model looks like this solution in a box, then we will happily fund that because we know what to expect.

If we've been doing that for decades and things haven't changed, shouldn't we have more appetite for something more dynamic? Isn't that [lack of progress] the catalyst for change? We've been very fortunate to work with people who were willing to listen to another side and who didn't see it as a risk to our grant funding, but rather as using our grant funding to explore more solutions and more potentials for impact. People who use the impact space to actually create impact are better to work with than people who use the impact space to get to an assured deal.

Once you find people who are more risk-averse, you can pinpoint which industry they are most likely getting their funding from, and see that they're using those principles to fund in the impact space. You can start to tell if it's got more of a microloan lens, or if it's got more rigidity in it. You can also see that some of that spills into how they create their funding opportunities. Those sorts of approaches don't always work because if you are going to invest in the impact space, and if you want to see change— which has been really hard to come by— then there is some demand for those who sign the checks to have a bit more flexibility and trust in the process. If you spend the time to build the nuance and the context, then you will likely get to a point where you can be on a journey with a doer rather than simply funding the journey.

Sanne Breimer: Do you feel that many years go by and people just continue doing what they're used to doing, without really looking holistically at the problem?

Ko Chijota: With most funding, you have key milestones that are generally already informed by a preconceived idea, rather than being based on the facts we're dealing with now. We already have an idea of how something should work, so we're going to base those milestones on that idea, and you have to fit into it. Ultimately, the world is a very dynamic place. How it worked 20 years ago is not how it's working now.

Sanne Breimer: Was it also necessary for you guys to come up with new research and new evidence to convince funders it should be done differently?

Dee Punungwe: It's still necessary to do that now because we need to look into doing independent studies, and we need to look into how our work can be validated. That can be costly for an organization that's on the smaller side. I wouldn't say we're big in any way, shape, or form, so it's not only costly in terms of money, but it's costly in terms of the number of hours we would have to put into it, plus the hours we put into every season. There's really no good time to get that validation, but we have worked very hard

to figure out what kind of impact we can show people right away so they can see that this is working.

For us, a low-hanging fruit in terms of impact is looking at the volume of food we're able to aggregate from our farmers and looking at the incomes being earned right here in rural Malawi; it's very easy. Before GGEM Farming, smallholder farmers earned less than 2 million each season. We'll be able to continue to increase that number as we get bigger.

For us to get bigger, there needs to be more investment in our ability to hold the food that the farmers produce, process it into a product we can provide the food logistics for, and then sell it back into low-income communities. All that is from the fact that we've supported the farmer in being able to produce something they can bring to the market. Every time, we can say we bought this much, we paid our farmers this much, and consumers bought this much from GGEM. For us, that's sufficient evidence.

Ko Chijota: We're not hiding any data. We can provide a list of everybody we bought from and say, give them a call, and ask them if we bought something.

Dee Punungwe: There's still a need for more validation, especially as we are trying to get more funding to grow the program. Funders might think it's easier than it actually is to get that general validation, and to get it done on the ground. It means you're engaging in an entire research process. Typically, this happens at the time you want to become a much bigger organization, so strategically, there are likely many other things you are engaged in. That's one thing that isn't thought of from all perspectives when it's asked for.

Sanne Breimer: The support you got from Rippleworks includes the talent grant, the Leaders Studio, expert office hours, and the capacity building/project support. Starting with the latter, how does Rippleworks' process in deciding what capacity building support to provide differ from what you've experienced? How did this impact your work?

Dee Punungwe: It's totally leader-led, and you get to make decisions, which is very empowering because there is no script. You assess for yourselves what your gaps are. Often, we've assessed what we thought was a gap, and then during the process we realized one thing is less of an issue and another thing is more of the issue, and we've been able to pivot and still move forward.

They will take the time to understand the nuance of your issue, or your challenge, or your opportunity, and then they find an expert who will partner with you throughout that process. Whether that's going to be one-on-one hours, or whether it's on a project level

over several months, they will do their part to find you someone who's going to walk through the journey with you. What I particularly appreciate is that they don't just find you an expert and then walk away; they find you an expert, and then they come to all of your meetings. They organize the time to make sure things are moving forward.

They administrate the whole process so you can come to a systematic conclusion. I've appreciated all of that time. We've had longer projects sometimes, and shorter ones at other times, and there's been such flexibility in how they make the best use of our time. I love that the question has always been super open. What would we find helpful at this time? Then they fit us in and administrate the process.

Sanne Breimer: Are there gaps in this model as well?

Dee Punungwe: Adding the expert office hours for in-between issues was really helpful because sometimes we don't need a whole project, but we need to speak to someone about what our strategy looks like. They can find that person. You can be quite isolated in this work, and you can get quite used to describing your work in a way that other people can't interpret. It's been very useful to have the expert office hours for someone else to be able to say, this is what I'm understanding and this is how I would say it better. It's a short-term thing, and it's quite useful.

Ko Chijota: In terms of a gap, I don't think we've had somebody from the continent yet. Most of the experts have been from Silicon Valley, based in the US. We haven't had an African expert dealing with the issues we encounter, like the red tape and stuff like that. It [would be great to have] a business leader or somebody in the agriculture space within Africa who has built something, or somebody from a tag of brands or something like that in southern Africa.

Dee Punungwe: I'm sure leaders in the region would participate. There are a lot of huge, successful companies across Africa who have people with great experience, who would make great experts.

Ko Chijota: We have some issues that somebody in the States would never understand.

Dee Punungwe: Someone in India might have a better chance of understanding an issue in Africa.

Sanne Breimer: Regarding the talent grant and the Leader Studio, did you make use of that support already?

Dee Punungwe: We're in the process of it. We have done a lot of hiring since then, including our workforce and development lead, who we were able to hire because we

knew the grant was coming through. We knew that we would have someone to direct all of those activities. It removes some of the hesitancy when we can predict that we're going to be supported for a certain task. Then, we can figure out who the right experts are to build our organization. You don't realize how big HR is until you are in the middle of everything.

Ko Chijota: Until you're growing in number.

Dee Punungwe: We are making use of that and very grateful for it. We're sending everyone in lead roles to the Leader Studio. Every time we hear of an offering, we send it out to our leadership teams. Someone has always participated. They get to interact with people on their level of work, and they get to troubleshoot ideas, peer to peer.

Sanne Breimer: Are you leaders, or are your middle managers coming into contact with experts from Rippleworks?

Ko Chijota: Both. They come in contact with experts as well as other middle managers from other organizations around the world that Rippleworks supports. We share ideas and challenges, according to the context that we operate in. Essentially, I don't think there are any new problems. I think most issues you go through in terms of leadership are issues that somebody else has gone through before. Sometimes, it's better to get validation from another doer than an expert because you know they're also in the weeds dealing with the same issues.

Dee Punungwe: Those spaces get very candid as well.

Sanne Breimer: What did you learn from that? Can you mention something concrete?

Dee Punungwe: Working across different generations requires different things. A lot of the people that we work with on the grant in Malawi are young people, and the cultural context of their experience is quite different from their managers' experiences. For example, the people that we employ the most are boots on the ground, people who have lived all their lives in this region or in this village. There's a lot of upskilling that we need to do to get them to a more professional level.

That in and of itself is a crazy amount of work because you're simultaneously facilitating a college experience and a work experience. It's a lot of intricacy. In all of that, you are just a manager who did not expect to be doing this kind of work. In that instance, it's a really good experience for us to watch our middle management people in a room with other people who have already gone through this, or who are a little bit ahead of us, so

they can say, this too shall pass. That peer-to-peer learning is really helpful for sharing other ideas and solutions, and even encouragement.

It might be a teething problem and you just need to get through it. It's also been a really good confidence-boosting experience because you can start to feel, in middle management, like this is only happening to me. [It's helpful to] be in a space where you can see that all of us have a similar type of role, and all of us are going through it, or have been through it. When you're in impact work, you can sometimes be hard on yourself. It gives a bit of relief to see this is fairly normal, and there are ways to fix issues, especially people issues, which tend to be the biggest issues in a growing organization.

Sanne Breimer: What would you change about the Leader Studio to make it more useful for you?

Dee Punungwe: I like the cross-context piece because there's so much dynamic learning that can happen. All of it is done virtually, but it's always great. However, learning is always easier if it's in person, but that would be an absolute nightmare to facilitate. I wonder if there will ever be capacity for a Leader Academy where people apply, meet in person, and have an intense experience, then come back to us with so much more confidence and amazingness.

Ko Chijota: Everything has to be so condensed if you're not locked in, and most of the time it is. Then, they have to cater to everybody, so it would be at odd hours of the day, or in the evening, after you've already had a full day dealing with people. You have to bring yourself into another space of dealing with people, into a learning space, which can be a bit taxing because everything is so condensed. As Dee was saying, if there was an opportunity for something like that to happen, like an academy, even if it's just a week, where people could go and just drill down, I think the results would be fantastic.

Dee Punungwe: We often take for granted how much middle management is doing. It's heavy lifting. It would be great for them to be at the same level as others and experience that without their overlooking bosses.

Sanne Breimer: Regarding the expert office hours, can you share an example of something that you were able to take from the experience that was immediately useful to you?

Ko Chijota: We did something around marketing and customer persona identification as well as investor persona identification to see what that fits in. It's something that we applied quite immediately, but we were terrified of the amount of work you need to do to get somebody's persona.

It was a missing gap in terms of how aggressively you need to do your research in terms of personas. For us, it was our customer, a potential funder, and even a potential farmer. What kind of persona are we looking for in somebody who can take full advantage of the situation and strengthen the organization?

Dee Punungwe: That's built into everything, even our strategic update. We have become very persona focused, and we're trying to hone in on the question of, if we understand you, how do we best invest in you? That has factored into everything, across the board, without us really noticing because of the time we spent on that piece.

Ko Chijota: It's even factored into HR. We're understanding the people we're working with better because we're asking them, what is your motivation?

Dee Punungwe: We're more motivation than qualification focused. That's off of the back of expert hours, as well as working with reports-facilitated experts. I would also say it was a good engagement because we were uncomfortable throughout the process of figuring out personas. Culturally, that's something we wouldn't do. To hear that this is the normal practice, and for us to define for ourselves how much we're willing to do, made it a free enough space for us to understand and go through the whole piece.

The very quick expert hours we had— and that I feel like we took so much from— were around strategy and how, when you are changing, updating, and overhauling your strategy, do you communicate best with your team? What resonated was that you need to create resonance, and you need to repeat yourselves over and over. We started, and have already seen the difference. The team is repeating things now, which is quite cool. It's now their idea.

Sanne Breimer: Do you see the results of that immediately?

Dee Punungwe: Yes, instantly. That was a conversation we had in December, and we're already seeing clear results in February. I think the success of all of the Rippleworks offerings is dependent on how much you, as a team, are willing to take them on. The more that leadership is engaged in the Rippleworks processes, the more successful the program or project will be, and the easier it will be to address questions.

Sanne Breimer: Is there anything in the expert office hours that was less useful, or that you would change to make it more useful?

Dee Punungwe: It could be useful to give a peer-to-peer option for expert hours. Recently, we found it helpful when someone else introduced us to another doer who's much bigger and more experienced than us, and we have absorbed everything. We get someone from our team together with them and they have a conversation. If

Rippleworks were facilitating something like that as well, I think it would be quite useful. It doesn't always have to be an expert outside and beyond all of our work. It could be experts within the pool of social impact.

Sanne Breimer: Where do you get the most funding from at the moment? Is it foundation grants, the private sector, or governments?

Ko Chijota: Mostly foundation grants, and mostly from the US.

Dee Punungwe: Second to that would be working capital, which we're getting from a consortium of more impact-based funders, also mainly based in the US.

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

Dee Punungwe: When you're new to the space, then it takes the time it takes. There are a lot of nos involved, and you have to build the resilience to keep stating your case as it is. One of the big problems we still have now is with communication because we communicate differently. We're experiencing the world differently. If most of our funder base has a very American ear, then we need to learn to adapt to that. That can be a big language shift. It can make or break you. Being as simple, clear, and concise as possible is something that we are constantly working on.

Sanne Breimer: Do you have a practical example of that?

Ko Chijota: The single word "platform". When we say we're creating a platform, from our perspective, we're saying we're creating a literal, physical marketplace. Not something online, not something on eBay or Amazon. It's a physical place, a warehouse where farmers can come and sell their produce. It took quite some time for that to translate because the moment you say platform, especially in Silicon Valley, it's eBay. Everything is on the digital page.

However, our cell phone penetration percentage is less than 30%, and that's just a normal cell phone, not even WhatsApp or a smartphone. In the Malawian context, that will never translate. No one will trust something they're going to click online. If I went to a farmer and said, click here on Amazon and they will deliver to you, they would laugh at me and say, no. Simple things that translate differently.

Dee Punungwe: We didn't realize that we had a mismatch in communication, and that they understood the platform differently from how we were explaining it, for a very long time. Anything we wrote down was causing so much confusion. It was based on two different pools of understanding.

Now language is a complete minefield because we don't know if how we're describing our programs lends to how they've traditionally understood the narrative of the work that we're doing, or what they're bringing to the understanding. Over time, we've realized that we need to spend a lot of our effort figuring out communication.

We need help to do it better, but getting the right help with communication is one of the most challenging things in this space. Everyone claims they can write you a great proposal, or do the content for your website, or all of these great things, but if they don't understand the true context of your work, it could be this platform situation again. Communication is a bigger issue than what we give it credit for.

Sanne Breimer: What would you say are three things you need to unlock your ability to scale and sustain?

Dee Punungwe: There are three easy things at the moment. The first is beginning investment in what we're calling our Resilient Seed Research and Development Hub. That piece of the work is critical because it gives us an opportunity to put theory into action. Right now, there isn't a lot of funding going towards helping Africa, or southern Africa, develop diverse, resilient seed. That's one of the things we want to do efficiently, and we want to manage it so we can subsidize the cost of seed because that's something we also take for granted.

For a farmer to go and buy certified seed, it's quite a show of success and wealth because it is not a cheap thing to do. By preempting our whole farmer engagement with us being at the forefront of developing and bulking seed, we can guarantee the beginning of all the food value chains that we want to continue to invest in. That's a new bit of work for us that needs funding and focus and the right expertise. From that perspective, we're ready.

Getting the funding to say GGEM wants to do this because it is valuable and creates sustainability is a whole other conversation, and potentially requires a whole set of other types of funders. They might find working with GGEM quite strange because research can be quite far from the agriculture that we've been invested in to date.

The other two pieces that would unlock scale and sustainability for us are much simpler. One is more infrastructure and processing equipment. Our dream is to have clean energy to process our food. It is incredibly expensive, and it's still in new status because we don't know who wants to fund it. How amazing would it be to say we are no longer burning any fuel to process all GGEM food, and we're feeding people with millions of pounds clean-processed, green food every year?

Ko Chijota: All of those things are linked by virtue of having patient capital, and that is missing here. While we do get working capital, the working capital loans are on an annual cycle. If we judge from history, and from all the big farmers we know inside and outside of Malawi, they've all got affordable, long-term patient capital. For whatever reason, this is no longer being offered to agriculture now.

With the issue of climate change, with the heavy lifting of the infrastructure, and everything else that you need to put in place, this work cannot be done in a year. The margins will just not make any sense. I think having conversations around bigger, long-term capital, perhaps something that's tiered in terms of hitting certain markets across the board, might be better for agriculture. Because the way agriculture is being funded now, especially in this part of the world, is not going to grow quickly anytime soon.

Sanne Breimer: Is there a role for Rippleworks in there too?

Dee Punungwe: We hope so. I think they are one of the more dynamic funders in this space. They aren't hesitant when it comes to being innovative around funding and discussing what is working, or what can work better. Trailblazing that kind of an innovation would be fantastic. With all of these things, it's about somebody starting and seeing what this model of funding can look like. We've seen great success in having a consortium of funders when it's something new because then, people de-risk it in their own minds. Maybe part of the role that they can take is to say, if people are willing to come along with us, we would be willing [to lead the way].

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much for your 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.*