



“Trust speaks to being confident about what you have communicated to the funder in terms of there being a need, and you have a proven solution to address that need or gap.”

A Conversation with Lena Zamchiya and Zviko Tsiga of [Friendship Bench](#)

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Can you introduce yourself and tell me more about your work?

Lena Zamchiya: My name is Lena Zamchiya. I'm the chief operating officer with Friendship Bench. Friendship Bench is a Zimbabwean and not-for-profit organization that is working in the field of providing or delivering access to mental health services at grassroots level. We are an Indigenous organization and our founder is Zimbabwean.

Our mission as Friendship Bench is to get people out of depression. The work that we do is preventative. Our long-term vision is to have a Friendship Bench within walking distance for all. We have a national footprint, operating in all 10 provinces in Zimbabwe. Our current direct beneficiaries are persons from underserved communities, peri-urban and rural populations living with common mental disorders. Friendship Bench was founded in 2016.

Sanne Breimer: Can you say a little bit more about the communities you serve?

Lena Zamchiya: It's a community-centered solution, driven by the need to provide affordable or at no-cost services to individuals who are seeking mental health wellness or therapy. The idea is that anybody that exhibits some form of issue around anxiety or the beginning stages of depression are then able to access support by way of cognitive behavioral therapy or talk therapy through our grandmothers or community health workers. Its beneficiaries are from young people to middle age, to the elderly. It's based on the needs that they have around supporting their mental well-being.

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

Lena Zamchiya: When starting an intervention it's really around ensuring that you've got enough evidence to show proof of concept. The Friendship Bench is very reliant on evidence and we're very research-focused. We started in 2016 and conducted a randomized control trial. That randomized control trial just validated Friendship Bench's effectiveness in addressing common mental health disorders. In that trial, we were able to involve 573 participants across 23 clinics. That trial enabled us to demonstrate significant reduction in depression symptoms among those who received Friendship Bench's culturally adapted problem-solving therapy compared to the usual care of people going to a psychiatrist or a psychologist and having those conversations around their mental well-being.

Sanne Breimer: Thinking about the support you've received, what was something that surprised you and turned out to be very helpful in scaling?

Lena Zamchiya: Unrestricted funding enabled us to really support our scaling strategy. Prior to that, we were based in six out of the 10 provinces in Zimbabwe. That funding then enabled us to reach the remaining four provinces and ensure that we have a national presence in Zimbabwe to enable us to train a lot more of the grandmothers and community health workers, to enable us to increase the reach, and go deep and wide.

It also supported our decentralization process because through the support, we were then able to build capacity in each of the provinces by way of putting forward human capital to support programming in those areas. We were also able to add supportive teams around our implementation teams and develop systems and infrastructure to enable the program to be delivered from a provincial, as well as, a district level.

Aside from the funding, other support that we've received is just in terms of organizational development, where through thought leadership support and mentoring, we've been able to access leadership training opportunities. The mentoring support of our communications and marketing teams has enabled us to go deep dive into questions around how we can increase our visibility. How do we create more awareness about the work that we're doing so that a lot more people can have access to the intervention? Also being able to hire a lot more of our team members was also an opportunity presented to us, which enabled us to scale and ensure that we have the right human capital to support the intervention in terms of the scaling opportunities.

Sanne Breimer: The organizational development support and the help in creating more visibility and awareness, was this part of funding that you received?

Lena Zamchiya: It was part of being in the network and regarding Rippleworks in particular. It was one of the additional opportunities that they provided aside from funding, to say, these are the varying opportunities that we provide as a partner to continue strengthening and building your capacity to enable you to become successful in the work that you are doing.

Sanne Breimer: What does funding look like for the business? You mentioned access to unrestricted funding.

Lena Zamchiya: Specific to Rippleworks, it was unrestricted, but at least 90% of our funding for Friendship Bench is unrestricted.

Zviko Tsiga: The majority of our funding is unrestricted. As Lena shared, right in the beginning we were very much research-focused. I wasn't around [at the time] but I know the grants that we've had from the Wellcome Trust, The Perry Foundation were very much to support our initial work around the randomized control trials and building evidence. That was very much restricted research funding. Around 2020, that's when we pivoted into an implementation organization. That is when we started deriving more unrestricted grants, as we started the implementation of Friendship Bench, getting into provinces, and preparing ourselves for the scaling strategy, which kicked off between 2022 and 2023.

Sanne Breimer: Can you say more about the scaling strategy? How would you describe that process?

Lena Zamchiya: The idea is that we used a hub-and-spoke approach, utilizing the decentralization strategy where initially a lot of our programming came out of our head office, and so there was a cost issue around teams moving from Harare [capital of Zimbabwe] into the provinces. When we looked at what our scaling strategy was, we looked at the hub-and-spoke, where our central office is the hub, but it was important for us to then have spokes, which are the implementation teams. We wanted them to actually reside in each of those 10 provinces so that we can have a provincial or district footprint, but also be visible in each of those provinces.

It's easier for implementation because the teams are actually housed in those provinces, and it makes it easier in terms of travel, access to the varying primary healthcare facilities, engagement with the varying stakeholders at provincial and district level. That pretty much sums how we looked at our scale strategy. The implementation teams are our spokes. You have your central piece and then outwardly are the spokes that are then fueling the engine, which is the main piece of the organization to enable implementation to happen on a larger scale.

Sanne Breimer: You mentioned grandmothers play a big role in your projects. Can you share more about how grandmothers assist in mental health issues?

Lena Zamchiya: Our original delivery methodology was founded on the grandmothers. We started off with about 14 grandmothers. The idea around the grandmothers is that these are individuals that are rooted in communities, they are trusted sources, they have years of lived experience, and they're respected members of the community. Because of their experiences and their age, they are able to create a safe space or an environment where people can trust them to be able to speak and open up about issues that are challenging them. That later translated to issues around mental health concerns. They're a trusted source in the community, respected and full of wisdom.

The initial idea was to bring them on board to be able to communicate that this is an intervention that creates a safe space, a safe environment where people can have a conversation and talk to and be open with a grandmother, who's a trusted source on a park bench. The grandmothers are provided training through our team so they can then deliver talk therapy through a task-shifting approach.

Sanne Breimer: What role does trust play in your relationship with funders? How can a funder cultivate trust?

Zviko Tsiga: From the beginning, Rippleworks has given such a good example of what this trust-based relationship would look like. Historically, you have to prove yourself. You have to show us that we can trust you. You have to prove to us that you know the work that you do. You have to prove to us that you have integrity, you have systems, you have all of these things.

While it is expected, due diligence procedures for an engagement, even in business outside of the nonprofit sector, I think particularly within the NGO sector, we have seen that there has been a lot of mistrust. What trust means is really collaborating with local leaders, because for a long time, particularly international NGOs would have junior staff as Zimbabweans, and the CEO and the senior leadership team are experts from somewhere else, to be the ones that are upright to come and monitor local people, and that has shifted immensely. That's one of the main things around local leadership, local CEO, local founders, local ideas. At Friendship Bench, we use a culturally relevant model that is suited for a context that is born out of innovation by a local person responding to local needs. That trust in us and our capabilities is important.

Trust is instead of spending time writing 20 to 30 pages of proposals, asking 60 to 70 complicated questions, time is spent in collaboration and engagement, and in conversation, cross-learning between us and the funder. Because we are here, we

know best what's happening within our context. So really spending time in conversation and engagement and visits to be able to see the work that we're doing matters.

It's also about reporting as well. In what way do we have a more conversational collaboration, cross-learning, reporting, instead of pages and pages of reports and teams who are in programs spending time writing instead of doing the actual work that they need to do. Trust starts from there. Also the language we use, defining terms around the Global South and building an understanding of historical events that precede us, that shape our present moment, that are important for us to be cognizant of as we engage.

Rippleworks has embodied a lot of these principles around respect. Even as we scheduled calls, it was never, 'We are available at 6:30, please, here is the link.' It was always, 'You tell us when you're available for a meeting, and we'll schedule around that time or if you're busy, let us know,' which really equals leveling the playing field around engagement.

Lena Zamchiya: Trust also speaks to being confident about what you have communicated to the funder in terms of there being a need, and you have a proven solution to address that need or gap. You are in the community, you know what the issues are, and you know how those issues need to be addressed. Trust needs to be applied in that scenario. Trust also speaks to not imposing 'the funder or the partner's ideals' because you don't want to take away from what has been identified as a gap, and what the solutions are, and what the outcomes will be once it's been supported.

This is what we think when you're giving a directive from afar when you're not sure about the environment and the issues or the challenges that are being faced in the communities. Trust really speaks to those not being applied and giving freedom to the entity to be able to instill confidence in you that we've identified a problem, we've got the solution, and we have the mechanisms of how to be able to deliver outcomes to enable success.

Zviko Tsiga: Another note. I've seen a lot of funders in their eligibility criteria saying you don't have to have an RCT [randomized control trial] to apply. I'm curious about the idea and meaning behind that. It's important for any intervention, particularly in us delivering a mental health intervention around evidence because there are clinical tools that are used around an RCT. What has happened in the last decade is every NGO feels the pressure to do an RCT before they can prove themselves. That's probably an emerging conversation around our funders requiring an RCT for you to prove yourself.

Sanne Breimer: That's really interesting. You started very early on doing your own RCT, was that because you felt we need this for future funding?

Zviko Tsiga: It's not that it's needed for future funding, but our work is really clinical work because you are assessing people's mental health. We've got a validated screening tool that our grandmothers use as an assessment around the risk of depression. Then, you have to, after six weeks of the last session, do the assessment again to see how the score is going. It's very clinical work. To be able to engage with people at that level, it needs scientific evidence. Is the model working to be able to have a bold statement like our mission that says? Our mission is to get people out of depression, and how do you say that without scientific evidence? This is different for probably a feeding program or another program like a tutoring program that might not necessarily need a randomized control trial.

Sanne Breimer: Regarding the project support, the capacity building assistance, how does Rippleworks' process of deciding what capacity building support to provide differ from what you've experienced, and how did this impact your work?

Lena Zamchiya: It was more a collaborative process of understanding who we are as an organization, where we've come from, where we are, where we intend to go and the resources that we require. There was an opportunity at different intervals for us to engage in discussions around what it is that we were trying to do as Friendship Bench, what type of support we need.

It was different from most organizations or funders that ask you to submit a proposal. It was conversational and about them trying to clearly understand how our model works and what our needs are. What they were then able to do is consolidate all of that information and present it to their leadership as a proposal to say, this is an organization that we believe in and we must fund because they've been able to make significant inroads in the area of mental health and there's still opportunity for them to do a lot more.

They did ask us questions and we also sent a couple of reports. They asked for additional information in terms of our audited financial statements, around compliance, specifically trying to understand our governance framework. For instance, who sits on our board and what other funders partner with us. Also understanding our staff complement and our medium to long term strategy. All of those nuts and bolts really helped them understand and fully appreciate how we operate as an organization and what our intentions are going forward.

Sanne Breimer: What would you say are the gaps in this model?

Lena Zamchiya: A lot of funders ask you to submit a proposal and it can be quite labor-intensive because there are tons of questions that you have to answer. For a lot of

the proposals or funders, it's not a one-size-fits-all. You have to be able to tweak the information to suit the funder and the questions that they're asking.

For Rippleworks, we appreciated the fact that there was a lot of engagement and conversation and discussions around what it is that we do and what it is that we need. It was really a collaborative process in terms of arriving at a proposal to then ask for funding.

Sanne Breimer: What do you think funders misunderstand about capacity building?

Lena Zamchiya: The funding landscape has somewhat changed a bit. There are still a few funders that are more aligned to supporting programmatic efforts, and so not recognizing that in order to deliver the intervention, there's a human capital cost associated with it. That component often goes unfunded or is difficult to fund. It's trying to convey that understanding that you have to invest in people to be able to ensure that the organization is able to achieve its objectives and goals around what it intends to pursue or achieve.

Both of them go hand in hand. There is an element around integrating your programmatic human capital expenses within the program so that it's embedded because our program staff are the delivering agents. They're the boots on the ground. They're our foot soldiers. Compensation needs to be made to enable the work to be done. It's changing. A lot of funders appreciate that a program does not run by itself. You've got to fund the human capital piece.

Sanne Breimer: Can you share your thoughts on being a recipient of the talent grant through Rippleworks? Have you implemented it already?

Lena Zamchiya: We were quite excited about this opportunity through this talent grant because like I mentioned earlier, a lot of organizations or funders, in terms of organizational development, their focus is not so much there, it's more on the delivery of the intervention of the program. This was a unique opportunity for us to really look at talent retention, look at building the capacity of our current talent around professional development.

We have a senior leadership team, but they're quite new in the space of leadership. It's building their capacity to be able to lead others. It is also helping them to understand what it means to be a leader and to develop those leadership qualities. We've had opportunities where we've had consultants come in and train our team on how to be effective leaders and how to be effective managers. We also have an element in terms of providing stipends for our teams to also pursue their own professional development.

If you're in monitoring and evaluation, have you identified a course where you can then pursue so that you can then further strengthen your own professional ability around M&E or its development? There is also team training, which is trying to build team cohesiveness and strengthen our teams. We've identified opportunities around culture regeneration and transformation because we also believe that it's important as an organization evolves, we need to also look at culture, the cultural dynamics of how we operate, and our cohesiveness as we embark on our activities as a team, so strengthening the culture piece.

Then also aspects around change management. We're an organization that is constantly evolving. We're iterating. We are working towards government adoption and integration, and so that brings with it some change. We've also gone through a leadership change as well. It's also helping our team understand that change is inevitable; it's necessary. But how do you put in place a cushion around them embracing change? It can be positive and negative, but it's highlighting the benefits of change and ensuring that they buy into the change management process and then addressing any issues that may emerge through that change process. We've started those elements, but it's still an ongoing process.

Sanne Breimer: Can you share more about Leaders Studio and its impact? Would you change anything to make it more useful to you?

Lena Zamchiya: From the Leaders Studio, they were able to build capacity for our communications and marketing team. That was done through a mentoring process where they brought in an expert, and they also had in attendance one of their team members to guide our communications, marketing and development teams. There was a specific ask that we presented to them: how do we increase visibility and how do we generate funding by way of increasing visibility and awareness? The two go together.

I don't think I would change anything. A lot of what they offer resonates with organizations, and you can really pick where you are in terms of your growth trajectory as an organization. If you're a startup, there are opportunities that they have within the Leaders Studio for you to access. If you're in the middle of the curve in terms of your growth stage, there are opportunities.

Also, it's not just centered around the CEO or your senior leadership. Other members that are heads of department can also access opportunities. These opportunities span across the organization, just in terms of enhancing your skills, strengthening your expertise, and developing your leadership potential.

Sanne Breimer: Since you received both funding and capacity support with talent grant and the Leaders Studio. What did you think about the combination or the sequence of the support you received?

Lena Zamchiya: The Leaders Studio is more in kind, whereas the Talent Grant is a funded initiative. It works hand in hand. What we may not identify in our professional development strategy or through our skills audit, the Leaders Studio can complement. It's complementary in aiding us to then continue building our human capital, strengthening it and looking at talent retention.

Also, an employee feels motivated, they feel valued because there's investment that is being put towards their professional development. It's just not about work and ensuring that they deliver according to their KPIs, but there's an investment that the organization is putting towards their own professional development.

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

Zviko Tsiga: It goes back to that question around trust-based philanthropy. Leaning into those principles is very helpful and. It's true collaboration, engagement, thought leadership, cross learning and engaging. Power dynamics are always there, but really making it equitable engagements. To really help an organization's success, unrestricted grants are really helpful. Separate organizational development grants are also really helpful.

Going back to the idea of thought leadership. This idea of when funders are really thinking about strategy, particularly if you already have a cohort of grantees, have deep engagements around strategy shifts and learn from them or consult with them. Consult as you develop new strategies, as you shift so that it's really set in context around the geographies that they want to impact and around the issue areas that they impact.

Lena Zamchiya: Let the organization get on with the business of the day because they are the experts and they know what needs to be done. While some may think that they would like to take on a helicopter approach, others may feel that it's important to just let the organization run with what they are successful at doing. Then every so often they have check-ins just to assess progress and determine how things are going. It's about relationships. What relationship are you building with your grantee to enable them to then continue with the work that they're doing and to reiterate the confidence and belief that you have in deciding to connect with them and fund them?

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

Lena Zamchiya: The biggest challenges that we've experienced are around receiving a huge grant, but it's a one-off. They've got a specific mandate that it's a one-off grant and there's no room to re-engage and look at an additional commitment. That can throw you off. What we've also seen is that we've received huge grants and you get excited that this money will then enable you to do a lot more, but when the grant ends, you're then left with a huge operating budget, which you can't fill because that large grant was one-time.

Zviko Tsiga: To build-on to what you said Lena, I see a lot of this conversation around post-big bets. These big bets are multi million dollars, and what does it mean post-big bet. Big-bet funding should be open in terms of grant time. You receive \$2 million and the grant contract is two years, so you have to use that money within two years. While others have the privilege of having other funding that's available for them to put in endowment and use that, or some organizations like Friendship Bench are growing and are at the beginning of scale. This was an opportunity to really kick off our scale strategy. It might be helpful to make them a bit more open-ended in terms of time used to spend the money.

Thinking about what could help us get to the next stage of scale, the obvious thing to say is to say more funding towards the scale strategy. But for us it links back to our priorities. What are the things that we're prioritizing that will allow us to scale? A lot of time or investment around learning as we scale, this is around our M&E (monitoring and evaluation). What are we learning as we are scaling? How is our current implementation informing the next stage of scale? I would also say more funding and cross-collaboration within the sector for organizations that are in similar settings and scaling and at different stages of scale to be able to have engagements. All of that requires more money to be able to catalyze those engagements.

Lena Zamchiya: Another challenge that we've also encountered in the funding landscape is around donors shifting their thematic areas where, for instance, mental health, there would've been a funder with us for three years. Then there might have been change at the governance, board level or leadership level where the mandate has [changed]. Even the philanthropists themselves who are funding may say, 'we need to shift direction.' So maybe they provide a sunset grant and then thereafter they're no longer a partner. Those are the challenges that we've also encountered.

Zviko Tsiga: One more challenge is also the turnaround time of securing funding. From initial engagement with a donor to closing the grant, it can take up to two years.

Sanne Breimer: What are the top three things that you need to unlock your ability to scale and sustain?

Lena Zamchiya: To the top of three things to scale, it's sustainability. When you're looking at scaling, how sustainable is your intervention with the scaling strategy? Do you have the necessary framework and structures to ensure that when you do scale the intervention, it is sustainable beyond what you've been able to do?

This aspect of fidelity, because as you scale, we go deep and wide, there are concerns around compromising on the quality of delivering the intervention. Questions around fidelity are key, because as you scale, you need to ensure that what you're measuring relates to what was shown in the RCT (randomized control trial) and then thereafter through your learnings.

Also around scale, what we would deem important, especially for Friendship Bench is identifying a key strategic partner to scale. For us, that's the government recognizing that they can and have the ability to become the donor. We as Friendship Bench are limited in our resources, but we can leverage on government that already has the infrastructure. We can then institutionalize the intervention within their framework or their infrastructure. That will also enable us to become sustainable in the long term.

Sanne Breimer: So you don't currently have government funding support but you wish you get more support from government in the future?

Lena Zamchiya: Yes, but it might not be financial, but more so in-kind support. The idea is that we would then work on a cost card or a costing model to be able to translate the in-kind support that they provide to what it is equal to in dollars or the local equivalent.

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much. It was a pleasure to speak to you.

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.*