



**“Trust allows us to experiment.”**

## **A conversation with Nivi Sharma of [Bridges to Prosperity](#)**

**Sanne Breimer**  
**February 25, 2025**

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

**Nivi Sharma:** My name is Nivi Sharma, the CEO of Bridges to Prosperity. I've been with B2P almost four years. It started as a small organization solving a problem for one community at a time, providing physical access from point A to point B by building a bridge. We could see the power of connectivity for a community that was generally rural in nature and very isolated [beforehand].

Around 2019, the organization went through a strategic shift. Instead of building one bridge at a time, or 5 or 10 bridges at a time, and trying to scale [our work] that way, what if we develop a strategy to solve this problem for the world? That strategy was written by my predecessor as CEO, Avery Bang, who is now with the Mulago Foundation. That strategy was to think first about the size of the problem - not exact numbers, but an order of magnitude. About a billion people lack safe access to basic necessities and opportunities like markets, schools, hospitals, clinics, and social communities to get to their churches and friends. **But if we were to build bridges for all these one billion people, we would need to be financially about the size of the World Bank. It was clear the strategy needed to shift, from building lots of bridges to getting bridges built.**

The three pillars of that strategy were, one, evidence, i.e. making an irrefutable impact case that dollar for dollar, a bridge results in good development outcomes. The second [pillar] is advocacy, so to scream and shout about [these results] from the rooftops, to tell governments, funders, and investors to invest in infrastructure at the last mile or first mile, and to invest in rural areas because a lot of development can be unlocked there.

The third pillar is technical advice. If you're willing to build more bridges, whether it's a government or in the development sector, we're willing to help with engineering talent, cables to build those bridges, needs assessment, or software. We want to put the right tools in the right place so as many people can build as many bridges as possible. We've built over 650 bridges around the world, providing three million people with safe access, and becoming more sophisticated as an organization as we build a lot more data. For example, if you look at a map of where our bridges are, you don't see a blue line that shows a river.

One incidental problem we ran into was discovering that over 60% of rivers and waterways in Africa are not mapped. That's one of the things we had to tackle to help governments make the smartest infrastructure investment decisions. They need to know where the need is, where the barriers are. Water is now pretty well-mapped and so are schools, hospitals, clinics, and populations. We've started building AI models to help governments make good, unbiased decisions around their infrastructure investments which have, especially in this part of the world, traditionally been heavily influenced by political bias, i.e. who's in power and where they're from.

**Sanne Breimer: When was the venture founded? Can you provide an example that illustrates the impact of your work, and how you know it's working? What about your approach led to that success?**

**Nivi Sharma:** We've never fallen neatly into one dimension of impact affecting poverty, education, healthcare, or agriculture, which seems to be how the development world wants to be carved up. We're intersecting access between all these sectors. The one metric we've tried to boil down in building our technology is travel time. We've seen that travel times for children going to school can be reduced from 2 hours to 15 minutes, if you build the right infrastructure. We've done that kind of analysis in Côte d'Ivoire. Maybe bridges didn't get built, but schools got built closer to where kids are. At the end of the day, our job is to ensure that everyone has safe and dignified access to education, health care, economic opportunities, and social well-being.

We've seen several examples of farmers being able to get to market, children being able to get to school, and women or sick people being able to get to clinics. We've done an economic impact study in Nicaragua that showed a 30% increase in household income as a result of bridges. Interestingly, that study was done during a drought period, so it wasn't heavy rivers that had been overcome. It was the mindset shift of farmers, thinking that if this bridge is always here, and they always have guaranteed access to markets, then the kind of crops they're going to invest in also changes. That's an important nuance to understand about the work that we do.

For example, women are more likely to apply for a job at a garment factory because they know they can get to work every day, and children are more likely to stay in school if they're not getting their clothes wet on their way to school, or having a risk of dying on their way there. Absenteeism is a leading indicator, but the real metric we look at is how to reduce travel time. It's something we take so much for granted in our own lives, looking on Google Maps to get to a meeting, and choosing the right route. We take for granted, especially for pedestrian or non-motorized populations which include over 90% of the world, that farmers and people in rural areas must traverse very steep, slippery [routes] that end abruptly in a flood or [heavy] rain. We need to value their time as much as we value our own time.

We've shifted our strategies. We've just completed a randomized control trial in Rwanda studying hundreds of bridges, focusing on travel time and the economic livelihood impacts of the bridges. We looked at farmer income and profit level, household income levels, labor markets, education and health. So far those results have been phenomenal. This is a surprising intervention and we can't believe it has been overlooked for so long. Our work ahead of us now is to scream and shout about these results, and tell people to stop overlooking infrastructure as a development intervention.

**Sanne Breimer: What is something that surprised you about the support you've received that turned out to be helpful to scale your business?**

**Nivi Sharma:** When we shifted our strategy, we lost a lot of our donors. When we founded the organization over 20 years ago, the traditional philanthropic approach was to give money to ventures, who would then report where that money went and who it helped. Funders didn't want to send money to Africa only to be told it was spent on capacity building. People wanted to see steel and concrete in the ground. We appreciated the financial ability to pivot our approach from [directly] investing in building bridges, because even though that will bring growth, we won't be able to scale against this problem.

If we invest in things like advocacy, evidence, technical assistance, helping governments write standards for manuals, and change their policies around infrastructure, that's a harder thing for some of our traditional donors to wrap their heads around, because it's very hard to attribute the work we do to the impact we have. One of the biggest ways [to support us] has been unrestricted funding, and funding that's strategically aligned, rather than just directly building bridges.

**Sanne Breimer: Was it hard to find funders to give unrestricted and strategically aligned funding?**

**Nivi Sharma:** Yes. We've had a lot of funders on the journey with us, which has helped. Voices in the philanthropy world, like Mulago and Rippleworks, who believe strongly in unrestricted funding, have told their peers to do the same. It's been hard, but we haven't had to fight that battle ourselves. It does feel like a wind change in philanthropy in that direction.

**Sanne Breimer: What evidence do you have that it helped?**

**Nivi Sharma:** Clearly the acceleration in the number of bridges that get built, not ones that we ourselves built, but those we help to get built through technical advice and advocacy. Our graph is now a hockey stick [model] as opposed to linear growth.

**Sanne Breimer: What role does trust play in your relationship with funders, and how can a funder cultivate trust?**

**Nivi Sharma:** We've found that funders are who they are when we meet them. They're not making exceptions. We don't have a higher trust-based relationship with a funder than [another venture] in their portfolio would have.

Trust lays in a strategic shift of an organization, and it lays the groundwork for patience in looking at whether an [investment] pays off. Even my board sometimes doesn't exercise that same patience and trust with the leadership of our organization. It pushes back on whether to spend a few thousand dollars to go to the United Nations General Assembly, [because they think] we're [just] a blip on the map there, so what's the benefit of that investment? It's hard to justify that because we went to UNGA and bumped into this person at this session, we ended up with an opportunity to plug into an infrastructure corridor in Zambia.

Trust allows us to experiment. It allows us to have our voice heard and be amplified in spaces where we wouldn't otherwise. That's core to the work we have ahead of us. Yes, we need to build bridges and show evidence, but what are we going to say at the end of this randomized controlled trial, that Infrastructure is good? Of course, infrastructure is good. The work is now, how do we change general policies to shift 2% to 5% of infrastructure investments from urban to rural? How do we shift this mindset of urban first, and constant focus on urban planning, to include rural planning for a networked rural infrastructure? That's a tall order. We need our funders to trust we're making the right investments to influence the larger agenda in play.

How do we cultivate that trust? It is in the leadership of our organization. Every single person on my executive team is here to work for a non-profit, and let's face it, at non-profit salaries. Every single one of these people could be earning three or four times the salary they [now have]. They've invested not just in the mission of Bridges to

Prosperity, but in seeing a systems-level change and being a part of that. Being able one day to tell grandchildren about the small part they played in the future of Africa. Our executive team are all thinking deeply about this problem. They understand their specific part of the puzzle thoroughly, and they want to do what's right for the rural communities we serve. That's the bedrock of trust with our funders.

**Sanne Breimer: How can a funder cultivate trust? What has been your experience with funders?**

**Nivi Sharma:** Before Rippleworks, I would've said it boils down to reporting requirements. A funder who just wants quarterly financials to know where every single dollar was spent is a funder you don't [want to] open up to and share your challenges or struggles with. You just put your head down and submit the report.

The other thing that Rippleworks did that I have not seen anywhere else in all my years in the sector was when they were making our investment memo. They asked us to list shared values, [and we could] say upfront that we understand the funder-beneficiary relationship has an intrinsic and complicated power dynamic. What can we commit to doing in a respectful way? That was a beautiful way to allow us to list what we would like from our partner. It also [created openness] when we were having challenges. We could say we were struggling with an issue, or maybe a bad call with another funder. We could ask Rippleworks for their advice and counsel. Very few funders are in our inner circle of giving us what I call 'open kimono' freedom.

**Sanne Breimer: You received talent grants, leaders' studio, expert office hours, project support, and capacity building from Rippleworks. How does their process of deciding what capacity-building support to provide differ from what you've experienced? How did this impact your work?**

**Nivi Sharma:** I wouldn't say Rippleworks decided what to offer. They left it very open-ended, asking what we needed and [telling us] whether they could find the talent to support us in that.

The first step was understanding the problem we're trying to solve, and then looking for the talent that might be able to solve that challenge for us. An example was the latest project we did. Travel time is the main metric we focus on, and we've been thinking we might need to do a publication to rank countries on how well they're doing with a safe-access index. We approached Rippleworks with this idea, and explained that it's a big effort to rank countries around the world, not a three-month or a six-month project, and that it would probably take us three to five years to release this publication. We needed to think about how to measure safe access, what to include in this publication to make it more than just numbers, and also how to measure everything and put color in

the publication. Rippleworks looked far and wide, and found someone with expertise on that scale of publication. We were very clear about how that project would play out. [They] were very clear that this is someone who can help you, because they've [done this] before, but we would need to add content because they're not an expert in rural infrastructure.

It started as a playbook and now it's changing to a different type of publication. Their approach has been to help us think through the problem by asking what output would be most useful to our mission right now, as opposed to what we initially thought we needed.

**Sanne Breimer: Are there gaps in how they approached it, or things that could have been done better?**

**Nivi Sharma:** Maybe we could have had more options, but we landed on someone who's very good. I was surprised we only had one option to choose from, but she's been excellent.

**Sanne Breimer: What do you think funders don't understand about capacity building that would be useful?**

**Nivi Sharma:** The complexity of the sector and the work we're doing. Mulago is guilty of oversimplifying that this is where you start and this is how the line looks towards growth. Who would have thought that we would have bumped into the challenge of mapping water along the way, and decided it's something we should tackle? Really appreciating the complexity of the work we do, and understanding the difference between organizations who do direct implementation and systems change. There's very much a lack of understanding amongst funders about how different we are as organizations. Using the same reporting template for every implementer, whether they are doing A or B, doesn't make sense sometimes.

**Sanne Breimer: You received talent grants. Did Rippleworks help you develop skills in your staff? What was the impact?**

**Nivi Sharma:** Yes. We've done the Leaders Studio. Several staff have done both the virtual and the in-person [session] in Nairobi. Our director of talent was a part of the Leaders Studio and developed the proposal for the talent grant, because with 100 people across seven different countries in five different time zones, it is very hard for us to build a culture, since undeniably there's nothing that works as well as being in person together.

We can do all the icebreakers we want on Zoom, but at the end of the day, just spending time with people, having meals together, staying up late, playing games, all of those things we do in person builds the sense of trust, collaboration, and teamwork we need. It's expensive, and it feels wasteful. Whenever there's a desire to do it, it always feels [to us] like there's a rural community that would be served with a bridge instead. That's a choice we constantly make. We appreciated the Rippleworks talent grant so we could say yes, let's do this because we're shifting strategies and possibly our name, and it's a crucial time to think this through.

We've also received office hours support from Rippleworks. [They encouraged us to tell them] freely what we need, [they were] not just giving us guidelines and parameters. They left it completely open and let us put everything on the table. Our investment manager said one of their portfolio beneficiaries sent her a picture of their CFO in the swimming pool that said, "Thank you." I appreciated it because we needed to see this very stressed-out person in a swimming pool. Just that little anecdote helped us realize, okay, we can breathe. We will achieve capacity building and professional development of X percent. We need to allow ourselves to have a bit of fun with this because, in the end, that might be the thing that helps the most and unlocks the most potential we have.

**Sanne Breimer: Did you tell Rippleworks you needed an in-person meeting, or was it something they understood from your conversations?**

**Nivi Sharma:** I had been saying to my leadership team and my VP of talent, I want a global gathering. How much is it going to cost? When can we do it? But when it was budget season, it just never felt it would happen. When RippleWorks approached us and told us about the talent grant, that was the first thing that came to mind, and then it was very clear they were open to having those funds go [for this purpose]. We're planning for a retreat for 100 people in 2026 to coincide with our next strategic plan. The first one was from 2021-2025, and we're launching another one this year for 2026-2030. We'll start next January with a strategy seminar for our next five-year strategic plan to bring everyone on this journey with us.

**Sanne Breimer: Has there been anything regarding skills development?**

**Nivi Sharma:** To be honest, we haven't utilized the talent grant yet, it's still in progress.

**Sanne Breimer: Same for the Leaders Studio?**

**Nivi Sharma:** No, many of our managers have done Leaders Studios. We wanted to use some of the talent grant to fund the global gathering. The other [plan] was to use it for leadership development, such as in-person courses for our entire executive team to spend immersive time together and think actively about leadership.

**Sanne Breimer: Is there anything you would change about the Leaders Studio to make it more useful for you?**

**Nivi Sharma:** I never did the virtual ones, but the people who did both virtual and in-person say that in-person is much better and has more impact. One of the things I might change would be to focus on more local leaders and trainers. They've generally done a good job of having that local experience. During the last training we did, [the trainer] described an experience of trying to help someone struggling with a problem by coaching her into thinking A, B, C. Everyone in the room looked at each other, thinking the conversation would never go that way [in reality]. The culture here is so guarded and different in these ways. The answer was good, but clearly the facilitator probably had less experience than the people in the room on coaching East African people, which is a unique experience.

**Sanne Breimer: Should the facilitator be from the region, or just better informed?**

**Nivi Sharma:** More regionally experienced or proximal facilitators [would be good], but that also narrows who comes to that training, especially if it's in person. The good thing about the Leaders Studio is that the trainers have had real-life experience, so they've been implementers themselves, as opposed to someone who's a textbook trainer, because these are very soft skills and none of them can be applied by the book.

**Sanne Breimer: Can you describe your experience with Expert Office Hours, and the possible name change?**

**Nivi Sharma:** A lot of people in our senior leadership team mentioned they didn't like our name and wanted to change it. When we launched a technology mapping product, it was called the GIS remote sensing mapping, but we wanted an African name. We landed on calling the map 'Fika' because 'Fika' in Swahili means to reach or to arrive safely. We've tested this name and it's landed well. What I appreciated about the office hours was [their guidance on] how to do a name change, the steps to take in consultation with a brand expert. It was very reassuring to know we didn't have to spend hundreds of thousand dollars on an expert. [They] told us to do a few focus groups and then go for it. Now we have all our ducks in a row.

We've got a marketing and communications director who is extremely organized. She has thought of everything that needs to be done. This isn't a half-brained idea. In those office hours they gave us the feeling that we've got this. It was more validation. [They talked about] how to reassure our board, how to make sure we don't leave any stones unturned, but also gave us validation that we didn't have to spend much more money on this.



**Sanne Breimer: Did you have many expert office hours with different experts, or just the branding expert?**

**Nivi Sharma:** This was with our marketing and communications director. We've had others, but I'm not sure which ones right now.

**Sanne Breimer: What might have made a session with another expert more useful?**

**Nivi Sharma:** Speaking generally and not specifically about [what we received from] Rippleworks, [I'd say] that rather than having an advisory session with templates, toolkits, and checklists. It would be good to have some real documentation of the challenge you're facing, with a checklist of what you need to do when you consider a name change and approximately how much it should cost. Maybe a bit more in terms of documentation.

**Sanne Breimer: Where does most of your funding come from - foundations, grants, private sector, or governments?**

**Nivi Sharma:** It's a mix between foundations and governments right now. What we were hoping, although the world sounds like it's turning on its head, was to shift towards big aid, bilateral and multilateral funding. We were hoping for that kind of funding, whether from the World Bank, or I don't want to say it, USAID, to fund an infrastructure corridor of just 2 to 5% to be allocated, if it's a \$100 million corridor, towards rural access on either side of that corridor. Right now, it's governments and foundations.

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

**Nivi Sharma:** Not knowing year to year when it runs out. One of our board members who's in a much larger development organization was asking us for three-year projections, and we just don't have that. We're growing and hiring people, assuming with a hope and a prayer that we're going to get it, but that's by no means guaranteed.

**Sanne Breimer: Do you often get certain years allocated to fund, or is it per year?**

**Nivi Sharma:** It's a mix. Some are three-year grants paid in installments, while others are multi-year grants that get renewed every year for the same amount. Rippleworks, for example, is a one-off. That's generally how it's worked in the past.

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

**Nivi Sharma:** There are two types of funders. The ones like Rippleworks are trust-based philanthropy. [My advice is] if you're not that, then become that. If you are, and this is my big ask of Rippleworks as well, you've got to work on bringing other funders on board with you. You've got to help other funders change their mindset about this as well, we can't [do it] alone. Just today, in 2025, I had to DHL a report to someone in Frankfurt. If we're going to change funding practices to help organizations spend less time on reporting and more time on doing the work, especially organizations that have proven their capacity to have impact, then this [change] needs to happen more often. There can't be a one-size-fits-all reporting standard for all beneficiaries.

**Sanne Breimer: What tools do you use now to get the word out? Is it content creation on your platform?**

**Nivi Sharma:** We have an advocacy team doing this in a meaningful way. Our director of advocacy is formerly from the World Economic Forum, and she has some lens into those stages. [We'd like] to be invited to have our voice on an UNGA panel [for example].

Another thing [that would be helpful] would be to give candid feedback to [our] leadership without waiting [for us] to request feedback, for example on our *TEDx Talks*, because we know funders talk amongst themselves. Just constantly being a friend who will give you feedback even when you don't ask for it.

**Sanne Breimer: What are the top three things you need to unlock your ability to scale even more in the future and sustain yourself?**

**Nivi Sharma:** One is always money. Money is a nice fungible asset you can always use. Two is to bring us onto more stages and into more conversations. We're at that point where we want to be on different stages. The RCT we're about to publish needs to be elevated, amplified and brought into larger discussions with funders to talk about it at a different level. I think about things like mental health, which was not an issue that anyone was funding a few years ago, and now it is. Wherever those decisions or agendas are being set, we would love our funders to elevate our name and our work.

**Sanne Breimer: Anything else you wanted to add to this conversation?**

**Nivi Sharma:** I'll reemphasize that we need Rippleworks to speak louder about how they approach their philanthropy, and ask their peers to consider doing the same. It's infuriating the way people act and behave at events like Skoll when we're all on the same page trying to save the world. We have different roles to play, but when there's not the courtesy to reply to one email or even several, it feels like we're being treated in

a lesser way because we're asking for money. [It's not as if] you're funding my personal lifestyle.

Talk to funders about how they treat implementers, how they communicate with them, how aware they are of the power dynamic, and try to see us more as partners rather than as beneficiaries. That's something I want to see more of from Rippleworks.

**Sanne Breimer: Is that also a global south dynamic?**

**Nivi Sharma:** Yes, I'm sure it is. My team sees that much more than I do because the CEO before me was an American lady. My team mentioned several cases where people never spoke [in a certain way] to her. There was one particularly influential voice in the sector that I had disagreed with, and I just wanted to speak to a female funder of color, but there was the only person in that world. Diversity needs to grow inside philanthropy as well.

**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.*