



“Transparency and vulnerability has been a big piece of my funding relationship.”

A Conversation with Sabrina Habib of [Kidogo](#)

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

Sabrina Habib: My name is Sabrina Habib, and I am the co-founder and chief exploration officer at Kidogo. The name Kidogo encompasses everything you need to know about the organization. Kidogo means small. It comes from a Swahili proverb which means all great things start small. That for us means if you have this vision of the world, and you want thriving economies, communities and countries, you need to start by investing in the youngest generation. These are young kids who don't vote yet, and very young kids, especially the zero to three-year-olds, who haven't even hit the formal schooling system yet. If we can invest in those young kids and provide them a solid start, they will go on to enter school, do well, get great jobs, and be productive, contributing members of society in order to transform their countries. That is the essence of Kidogo.

Sanne Breimer: When was it founded?

Sabrina Habib: We started in 2014. The idea of it, the ‘moment of obligation’ as some would frame it, came in December 2011. I was in an informal settlement in Nairobi in a dark 10 square foot corrugated metal shack. My foot hit something, and when I looked down, it was a baby. I picked her up and saw babies all around me, quiet, no sound at all, even though they were not sleeping. I learned this was the best childcare option for working moms in the informal settlements. That one center represented what we now know is 8,000 centers in Nairobi's informal settlements alone, with thousands upon thousands more across the country.

That was the moment I realized there's got to be a better way. I did a lot of work to understand the problem better. It took two years to dig into potential solutions and present those solutions to other organizations, knowing that my partner (now husband) and I were not the right people to do this work. We didn't come from these communities, even though our ancestry is East African. Our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents were all born in East Africa.

But nobody was taking up this challenge. None of the large nonprofits felt this was part of their strategic priorities. We thought if not us, then who? We decided to give it a try. We left our jobs and a master's degree program, and in 2014, we started Kidogo. We just wanted to see if there was something we could do, and 10 years later, we've now grown into the largest childcare network in the country.

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

Sabrina Habib: The mission of Kidogo is to support thriving kids of working parents. In communities where women need to work, with no family support structures around like grandmothers, who may be living in rural areas, and where formal schooling doesn't begin until age five or six, young kids are often left in a few different circumstances. The majority are left in these informal daycare centers. The problem we found was an existing infrastructure of daycares tucked into the shadows that operated independently without any type of support, training, coaching, nutritional support, or know-how on how to manage so many children of that age. We've designed a model that takes this existing infrastructure, provides a little bit of support, and helps these independent daycares, led by women we call 'mamapreneurs,' run thriving childcare micro-businesses serving parents and families in their community.

There are three main outcomes in this model. The first is kids. How to make sure children receive a good start to life? Our impact results show kids who are developmentally on track, meeting or exceeding developmental milestones, reduced cases of malnutrition, stunting, or wasting, and fully ready to enter school and do well.

Secondly, we see impacts on the 'mamapreneurs' who run thriving childcare micro-businesses. They have more confidence and better respect in the community. For so long, they've been told they were not good enough to become real teachers, and that caregiving is something anybody can do. Part of Kidogo's mission is to elevate the childcare profession. We have nearly 2,000 'mamapreneurs' now who are better respected and seen as real teachers, shaping the minds of little ones, and they are better able to take care of their own families as a result of doing dignified work.

Third, we see impacts on parents and mothers in particular, ensuring they have peace of mind knowing their children are safe. We've got a current RCT randomized controlled trial funded through the Gates Foundation to quantify these impacts.

Sanne Breimer: How were you funded from the start? How has your funding journey gone until the current situation, and where do funds come from now?

Sabrina Habib: We started with our own savings. When we knew we had something here, we took six months to save up everything we could. My husband moved back in with his parents to save rent, and we saved \$15,000 to start Kidogo. It funded everything. We hired our first staff. We launched our first child care center, then a big foundation took a bet on us, and put in quite a substantial amount of money to help launch Kidogo from one center to multiple centers. Then a series of fellowships came

our way that brought some funding and community, and then mainly we've received support from family foundations.

That's where we are today, primarily funded by family foundations that fall into almost two different sectors. One group is focused on early childhood development and women. The second is sector-agnostic funders focused on scaling and growing impact, irrespective of sector. It's interesting to sit in the middle of this tension as we try and garner the support we need, knowing there are different depths of impact for each individual child as opposed to the breadth of impact on a community. How much to think about advocacy and systems change work versus scaling direct operations. Certainly, as a founder, I experienced that tension on a daily basis.

Sanne Breimer: What big foundation supported you in the beginning?

Sabrina Habib: I'm so grateful to Grand Challenges Canada, which had a specific program called Saving Brains. We were very small, very much an idea with lots of potential but nothing proven yet. Similarly, Hilton Foundation came on shortly thereafter to help give us the funding needed in those early years to get to where we are today. Another foundation, Jasmine Social Investments, came in year three and has been with us ever since.

Sanne Breimer: How important is trust in a funder relationship?

Sabrina Habib: Trust is everything in taking a bet on an entrepreneur, because the model inevitably changes whenever circumstances change as you learn more. The external policy environment also changes, but ultimately, funders bet on the entrepreneur and our ability to build good teams that deeply understand the problems from all angles, are adaptable and flexible when there is change, and iterate when things are not working. Transparency and vulnerability has been a big piece of my funding relationship. Trust means being very open about what's not working, what we're learning from that, and how we are pivoting.

Sanne Breimer: Can you say more about the tensions and differences between funding opportunities that involve scaling versus those that are more community-focused? How do you handle this tension in your daily work?

Sabrina Habib: Funders take a bet on you and see your potential. Funders also come with their own lenses of what's important to them. It is always a little bit of a balancing act for funders to support an organization, while also making sure it fits within their own portfolios, theory of change, goals, and objectives. Where it can go wrong is when funders want to fit an organization exclusively into their own strategy, and inform the organization's strategy rather than thinking about the problem in the sector in a broader way. There's a tension in balancing between the impact on thousands of children versus the depth of impact on each individual child. Regarding advocacy, sometimes there is a tension between advocacy versus systems change.

What we do is one thing, but what you call it can rub certain funders the wrong way. How we navigate this tension is just by being clear about what's important to us. Over

the last 10 years, it involves an impact triangle with three priorities. First, we will not do anything unless it is quality. Even as we grow, quality must be maintained. Then there's sustainability, which means many different things, but the heart of it is learning how to sustain our mission without being reliant forever on donor funding.

Secondly, how do our 'mamapreneurs' stand on their own two feet with no financial flow from us? We give training, support, resources and tools, but we do not give money to our 'mamapreneurs.' That's a big piece of our mission. It's also about talent. Having an almost exclusively Kenyan team is part of sustainability for me.

The third priority is scalability. The problem is too big for us to play small. How do we reach as many children as possible and think about what that means for the larger policy systems change landscape? It's about bringing funders along on that journey of what's most important to us. That's the best way we've been able to navigate it. We know that at some point, we may no longer be a fit for certain funders and we need to be okay with that, which is very difficult.

Sanne Breimer: It may mean saying no to money, right?

Sabrina Habib: Yes.

Sanne Breimer: You received support from Rippleworks in the form of Leaders Studio, Executive Office Hours, and project support capacity building. 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?

Sabrina Habib: I've so appreciated the Rippleworks model. Not only are we trying to solve these intractable social problems as social entrepreneurs, but we're building a business as well, which has all of the complexity of human resources, finance, and legal departments, often in difficult contexts. There's competition for talent, finances, and other resources, and you're working in countries where legal environments can make things more complex. When you're small, you put every dollar you receive towards your program, and yet investing in your people, finances, and structures can often feel as if there's just not enough support or money to make those investments, even though they are necessary to achieve your big goal.

Rippleworks came in to support us for one piece about onboarding. When you find good people, how do you set them up for success within the organization? This was something in the grand scheme of things that we could put our dollars towards. Even though something like that is so important, we would never have made the choice to put money into hiring an expensive consultant to help us.

Rippleworks paired us with somebody that we would never have been able to afford otherwise, and supported this process on a very time-bound project basis. The person we worked with was able to upskill our team so that when the project ended, our team was able to carry that process through. We now have a very strong onboarding process as we continue to grow our team, which is nearly 150 people now.

Rippleworks does something different from other funders, which is to support an entrepreneur in other ways. Money is wonderful, but supporting an entrepreneur in ways that are necessary to build their business and help them achieve major goals is something an entrepreneur wouldn't normally prioritize or be able to fund themselves.

Sanne Breimer: Are there also gaps in this model?

Sabrina Habib: Perhaps the only gap is who you are paired with. In our example, we got an expert in human resources who was wonderful but didn't necessarily understand the Kenyan context, especially when it comes to HR priorities and motivations, which don't always fit with what we see in North American examples. I'm not sure about Rippleworks' process or who are the consultants they pair with organizations, but if they mostly come from the global majority, there would be a gap when dealing with issues that can be very contextual.

Sanne Breimer: What do funders not understand about capacity building that would be useful for them to know?

Sabrina Habib: It goes back to trusting the entrepreneur, leaders who know what they need, rather than offering some great person to help us do a certain thing. Not that Rippleworks did this, but just in general, it's difficult when capacity building projects are pushed onto the entrepreneur as opposed to asking about their needs and how to support them. Managing that dynamic is important. I've seen it work well in other cases when a funder offers a menu of options and vetted consultants to work with you on specific projects, and says, "You tell us what would be useful to you."

Many of us are first-time entrepreneurs. We fell into this not thinking to be CEOs, and not training for this role. We are learning on the job, and it's a steep learning curve. I never thought I would be leading an organization this big. I just saw a problem and wanted to help in some way. Here we are 10 years later, and I still feel there's so much I don't know.

I can imagine it would be helpful to have some type of gap analysis at this stage of an organization to show what needs to be on our radar as we move into the next stage, or to point out that over the next three years we need to make sure these HR systems are in place. You don't know what you don't know. It would be great to have some type of landscape map, gap analysis or checklist that shows our next stage, the problems that often happen when making a funding jump in organization size, and the things that need to be in place. It could be very beneficial to have a funder see these gaps as opportunities to support us.

Sanne Breimer: You got help with onboarding new people for your organization. Did you also get support for existing staff, or did that happen through Expert Office Hours or the Leaders Studio, or was it all one package?

Sabrina Habib: Their support was focused on how to bring in new people and set them up for success. It was mutually determined that this support was where we wanted to focus our time. Perhaps it is a limitation, understandably, of the Rippleworks

project-based support, to focus on just one thing to tackle very well. In the grand scheme of things, it solves one small problem, but when an entrepreneur is dealing with 100 different things, it would be lovely to have follow-ups on other things that open up as a result of this one project. It was really useful, and it'd be lovely to do another project with Rippleworks on something else.

Sanne Breimer: What have been the biggest challenges in the funding support you've received in general, and more specifically in scaling your business?

Sabrina Habib: There's so much that works with philanthropic support, and there's so many areas where things are broken. On a side note, I've now stepped into the philanthropic space to lead a \$15 million donor-advised fund as a result of some work with Melinda French Gates last year. It's been fascinating to reflect on my own experiences with fundraising, and talk to my fellow colleagues and entrepreneurs to understand the barriers and reimagine how philanthropy could be done differently. I'm still very early on this journey, but as I learn more, I would love to talk and share.

Being an entrepreneur is hard, trying to chip away at an issue that feels intractable, whether it's childcare, early childhood education, water access, healthcare, or whatever. We are all spending all of our mental energy to figure out these issues. The ideal would be to take these smart individuals who are obsessed about a problem, and focus their mental energy on how to chip away at this problem so it is no longer a problem, and set up the next generation for success.

When you speak to entrepreneurs and think about all those who have 'made it,' i.e. those that have won big prizes, the Audacious Project, the Skoll Award, et cetera, the number one issue on everyone's mind is fundraising, even once you've made it. That means there's something wrong with our sector. All of us, myself included, spend so much time and mental energy every day on fundraising and positioning ourselves in a way that fits other people's portfolios, sitting in the tension of different interests with people in distant places where money is held, trying to understand the contexts. There must be ways to do philanthropy differently because we are all spending so much time chasing this money, when money does exist, and find different ways to deploy it to ease the burden on entrepreneurs.

Unrestricted funding is massively important. When you take a bet on the entrepreneur, you give them the money to move the way they need, and trust them to make decisions. There are problems with complicated, nuanced, and unclear application processes. Somebody once described donor funding as having dietary restrictions you do not know about. Even if on paper, you look like an amazing fit but then don't get funding, it can be because there was something unknown that wasn't shared. We could all save so much time if we are just super clear and radically transparent from the beginning about what we're looking for.

One of the biggest issues I'm seeing is that funding is held in the global majority, and yet doers often reside in the global minority. This creates a massive chasm that needs to be bridged by unearthing community-driven and community-led solutions. People who

know the most about local issues, problems and solutions often live in places that are furthest away from where the purse strings are held. As much as possible, getting funders into communities and countries could help address that.

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

Sabrina Habib: Due diligence is important, and understanding an entrepreneur's motivations and perspectives, then ultimately betting on an entrepreneur and trusting that process. The basis of everything between doers and funders has to be trust.

There's unconscious bias, how to trust people that don't look or speak like you, and haven't gone to the same schools? Everyone is very well-meaning at the end of the day, and yet there are things we can do to make this easier. It goes back to radical transparency on what we're looking for, and getting closer to communities and countries, not necessarily expecting doers to come to places where often it is impossible to get a visa or very expensive, and instead have funders go to them.

Project-based funding does such a disservice to solving the real problems. If you know you only have funding for a short amount of time, and it's completely restricted to one particular project, you lose all ability to innovate, without stability for an entrepreneur to think forward. It reinforces siloed Band-Aid solutions as opposed to making massive changes long-term. The onus also falls on the entrepreneur to keep those communications open, to bring your funders along with you and be transparent about what's not working.

Sanne Breimer: What did you bring with you before you started on this entrepreneurial journey that made it easier for funders to trust you? Anything else to mention?

Sabrina Habib: I was very young when I started Kidogo and had just done some internships or a little bit of work experience. I recognize my privilege, though. I straddle a couple of different worlds. I am a first-generation Canadian. I can speak and write proposals in language that may be well perceived by those that hold the money. My parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents are all from East Africa, and so I have a pull there as well, although I was not born or raised in the communities. We are very conscious of being close to communities. We have 140 staff and 139 of them are Kenyan, because you cannot solve a problem if you are located far away. You have to be rooted in the communities. That's worked well, and perhaps my demeanor of just being open and wanting to learn, share, and bring people along with me. A lot of where we are today is because of my privilege, where I grew up and went to school.

As a sector, we miss out on so much when we don't take bets on smaller entrepreneurs. People took bets on us, and that's why we are where we are today. There are so many other entrepreneurs out there who are focused on problems in designing solutions, but don't know these unspoken rules of philanthropy, or which conferences to go to, or

cannot afford conferences, or have visa issues to get to places where decisions and relationships are built and made. I started with a leg up that many others have not had.

Sanne Breimer: What are the top three things your venture needs to unlock your ability to scale and sustain? What type of funding is best?

Sabrina Habib: To get to the next journey in our growth, a big unlock for us right now is policy. We work in a sector that is not recognized by the government. There is no national policy legislation that recognizes children under the age of three. Because they do not count or seem to matter to the government, childcare centers are housed where they are completely underrepresented and underappreciated. There are no policies around childcare. Childcare centers operate in the shadows.

Growing Kidogo serves the broader goal of [creating] a functional childcare system where quality and affordable childcare is available to all families in Kenya, and then hopefully beyond. To do that, [we need to work] with the government. Childcare is a public good. Working closely with the government is key to creating policies, legislation, registration, quality standards, assurances and certifications. None of the elements of creating a functional childcare system exists right now.

We've got a great team spearheading this. We've built relationships over the last 10 years. We've got a seat at the table. We've had a couple of funders who have been right there with us. Funders provide funding to support this work, but there is an inherent power dynamic between those that hold money and those that need money, inclusive of governments. Our funders who sit at the table with governments are able to unlock doors for us in ways that we would have never been able to do as a grassroots organization, no matter how big. We've gotten quite big, and we are on the radar of the government, but when a funder who holds the purse strings tells a government official to look at this organization or invites us to join them in a meeting, that starts to position us in a way that has just been incredible.

Obviously, in order to do this work, you need people, and you need funding to pay for good people. Why are there smaller salaries in the nonprofit space, with people taking pay cuts in order to do charity work? I hardly took a salary for many, many years because we had donor money and we are very frugal. Resourcefulness is one of our values, but you want good people. The best minds in this world shouldn't be doing things at the margins of society. Instead of focusing on deeply rooted social issues i.e. childcare for all, public healthcare, if you get the best brains to work on these issues, then that is going to create the world we want to see, as opposed to having the best brains in certain sectors that are highly paid. How do you bring those brains to this sector? There has to be some level of fair compensation, and that requires money and making sure that there's equity in pay across the board, from your lowest level staff up to the top leadership.

More funding is necessary given the current landscape as funding is drying up. It's sad to see how this will play out. I'm thinking very deeply about this through my own fund, the Zera Fund. People are doubling down on their own portfolios, and understandably

so. It means a lot of very cool smaller stuff is going to get missed. How do we begin to elevate those organizations to get them resources to do the work they love to do? Funding is critical to get people to drive the work forward.

Sanne Breimer: Regarding USAID, were you affected by the funding freeze or not directly?

Sabrina Habib: Not directly. We focus almost exclusively on family foundations. We have not been affected directly, but I have been watching my colleagues go through this. It is so difficult, you plan for things, you hire staff, you've got program strategies, and overnight everything changes. It is a sweeping action that has ripple effects and real-life consequences on the lives of people. It's definitely a moment where we all need to figure out how to step up, think more creatively and boldly about how to get more philanthropic money into the sector from unusual suspects.

There's a lot of focus right now on donor-advised funds, DAFs. Billions of dollars are sitting in DAFs that could be unlocked to make the pie bigger for how much funding is available. It's an interesting argument though, because philanthropic funding shouldn't necessarily replace government funding. Governments should not abscond from their duty to support those in their own countries, nor as well as the global majority to support those in the global minority. Yet now is a time where we cannot have billions of dollars sitting in funds, unused, tax-free, earning interest, while the lives of people hang in the balance. It is incumbent on anyone with privilege in whatever form to roll up their sleeves at this moment and start helping.

Sanne Breimer: Anything else you want to share that we've not discussed yet?

Sabrina Habib: There is almost an interest in foundation funders to not give away money in order to propel the longevity of their own foundation. It could be so easy to make this black and white and polarized. Why are people who have money not giving it? As I've started to think about my own philanthropic journey, there's so much psychology around this. There's so much ego, not always in a bad way, if you've made a lot of money and you want to have a foundation in your name, and there's something where that money could go to solve this issue. In a black and white terms, why not? Maybe there is a desire to keep a foundation open in your name that passes on to your kids. There is so much more nuance around it.

Perhaps a funder needs to start spending some money, but feels paralyzed because they don't necessarily know how to make the right decision. Is there some type of bias in certain funders in resonating with a specific entrepreneur? There's so much in the shadows that informs the way money is spent. It's too complex to say there is a bold solution to redo philanthropy. There is a web of things that goes to the psychology of money, wealth and emotions in determining what resonates with you and how you trust somebody.

It works really well when entrepreneurs go on to lead foundations, or be program officers at foundations. My best relationships tend to be with those individuals, because

they get how hard it is and the complexity of doing this work well, with dignity and community. People who've been on this side of it are well-positioned to be on the funder side. The dynamic though is that they don't have the wealth. You may be a program officer or a grant giver of a family foundation or some type of corporate foundation, and still dealing with your own understanding of what's important to the person who ultimately holds the money.

I think about my own staff or the people I work with, and each of them is supporting six other individuals beyond their own family. They're paying for somebody else's school fees. That is philanthropy. Maybe part of the solution is just awareness of where giving is happening beyond the narrow definition of what we have. Anyone of privilege, it does not matter where you are or your income level. You could just be the wealthiest person in your own family. It is incumbent on all of us to roll up our sleeves and step up in whatever way we can. If we all do that in our small ways, and small ways for those with big pots of money would be a big way for everybody else, there is a way to make this a more just world where gaps can be filled in non-traditional ways.

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much.

Sabrina Habib: Thank you for making it so easy to speak, I appreciate it.

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.*