



“The call would be for donors... who can start engaging with the government so that they can give me money.”

A Conversation with Wairimu Nyandia of [Food4Education](#)

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Tell me about your approach and what Food4Education does.

Wairimu Nyandia: My name is Wairimu Nyandia, currently the COO of Food4Education. Last month, I hit my fifth year at Food4Education.

I joined when the organization had one kitchen and we were feeding 10,000 kids. Now we have 29 central kitchens and 105 decentralized kitchens, and we're feeding half a million kids every day. Being part of that has been nothing short of amazing, but also being at the forefront of this, which I think the growth organization has experienced. The implementation of processes, the creation of dashboards, using data analytics to be able to help us minimize our costs and deliver our meals efficiently have been a mind-blowing experience. I joined as a finance manager, so my background is in finance.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You were trained more in the business side and the finance side?

Wairimu Nyandia: Yes, I did my CPA (Certified Public Accountant), and completed a Bachelor of Commerce degree. When I was joining Food4Education, it was like, oh, they needed a finance manager. I was like, yes, this is interesting. Then, as the organization grew and we didn't have an operations department, I was like, okay, let me see what operations look like, and how we do the sourcing.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did your funding models grow as you were scaling?

Wairimu Nyandia: I mentioned in 2020, which is when I joined, we had one kitchen. Now, I think the growth has been over 50x (times). That meant the funding we needed in 2020 only came from philanthropy and parents. The parents were paying super subsidies and still do, but one of the things that we were so clear about is we needed the government to come on board and be part of the trifecta that funds Food4Education.

This is in addition to the fact that we needed to expand the people who fund us, we never had big shots then. As we grow, one of the things that we need to be able to understand is, as you're feeding more kids, it means your cost is expanding at the same rate. For context, we only had a demographic of parents who were paying KSh (Kenyan Shilling)15, and the cost per meal was KSh 35. In mind, the difference of KSh 20, we had to fully depend on philanthropy.

This is exclusive of the CAPEX (Capital Expenditures), the cost of building the kitchens, and the overheads. If you bulk that up, we almost needed an additional KSh 60 to be able to meet our needs. That changed pretty quickly with expanding the pool of funders that we had, but also a fun fact, the first government partnership we had was in 2020, but this was in the form of a kitchen construction. We didn't fund our second central kitchen. A member of parliament is the one who built that kitchen.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Was it you who brought that person on or how did they get involved? And, have you scaled the government partnerships as you've been scaling philanthropy?

Wairimu Nyandia: Yes. The member of parliament had heard about Wawira (Njiru, executive director of Food4Education) for a minute and was like, oh, this is interesting. He wanted to be able to do something for his community. Members of parliament, in their budget, are not allowed to have a recurring expense, they can only spend CAPEX. Hence why it was easy for him to build a kitchen for us.

By the time I was coming in, that's when the construction was kicking off. In October 2020, we launched our second kitchen, which was constructed by the Member of Parliament. It meant we had a funding model that we could be able to leverage with other members of parliament. What changed immediately afterward in 2022, we had our first conversation with a governor who's in charge of a county who wanted to pay a subsidy per child.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you say your funding model, you first said that they opened up the second place, or you opened up your second thing. There's this one idea of doing it where they open up and they own a location. Then there's another one which is the subsidies. I'm curious which one you guys have fallen into.

Wairimu Nyandia: It's a mixture. It's a hybrid of both. Out of the 29 central kitchens, 13 have been built by...a mixture of members of parliament and governors. We have both models we will scale with, which is basically, the construction because there's a very huge saving when it comes to the construction of a kitchen.

A central kitchen right now costs us up to \$400,000. Then there is a subsidy part, and this kicked in with a county governor of a county called Murang'a. What we started with was a different product, which wasn't a lunch meal, it was fortified porridge. What he did, he's like, I have this money, I can't afford to pay for the 40,000 kids, I want to pay

for them to be able to eat a meal. Can we co-create a product that we can feed them? That's how porridge came about in 2022.

As for the cost, we had to do a pilot that was fully funded by Food4Education that ran for six weeks, and we needed to show the ease of logistics because it's a rural county, and the infrastructure is different. For six weeks, we spent our own money to be able to do that. By the end of the six weeks, we had a product, which is fortified porridge, 300 ml (milliliters), hot and it's a breakfast product. With that, the cost of a cup was KSh 17, and the governor said out of the KSh 17, I have KSh 13 and you have to subsidize the KSh 4.

In that model, the parents don't contribute to anything, it's purely philanthropy, the KSh 4, and the government gives you KSh13 for every kid daily. That officially kicked in, it was the 20th of February in 2023 when that officially kicked in. We are actually in our third year in that partnership, and that has killed our growth with subsidy. Right now, we have Murang'a, which is fortified porridge, and we're getting KSh 13.

That later changed because the agreement was always to get the government to get closer to the full cost of the cup of porridge, which now they're paying us KSh 16 shillings. We're only subsidizing KSh 1, which is amazing. Then we have Mombasa County, same model, early childhood learners, 10,000 of them, we get KSh 30 per plate, so that's another different amount.

The biggest one is Nairobi County. This is the latest one and has made so much news even this week. Wawira has just come from meeting the president, and he had lunch with the kids. Every day we're feeding more than 250,000 kids, and we get a government subsidy from the governor, and he pays us KSh 25 for every kid, and then the parents give us KSh 5.

Those are the different government funding models we have. We have some that build a kitchen, we run it, and then we have a subsidy. The subsidy differs from county to county, just because of the resource allocation. Depending again, if the governor wants a parent contribution like the Mombasa one, he pays the KSh 30 in its entirety and the parents are not paying anything. In Nairobi, he's paying KSh 25, and the parents are paying KSh 5.

That has been how the government model and funding have worked. It started with one construction of a kitchen, but right now we have multiple kitchens that have been funded by the government, but also a subsidy we're getting per child.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How has the funding around USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and some of the global trends affected you, or have they affected you at all?

Wairimu Nyandia: We didn't have any funding from the US government at all.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: But does it affect how your government feels?

Wairimu Nyandia: No, that hasn't, and also because we're not working at the national government level, we're working with counties, so they still have their budget. What we have to do consistently is be able to retain those relationships. It's relational. What I mean by that is, they'll have an event, they'll invite you, and you have to show up. This is more because of how the government runs in Kenya, you need to maintain the momentum of updating them.

I'll give you an example. The governor of Nairobi this week was hosting the president. Today's the fourth day. One of his biggest projects is the school feeding, where he built 10 kitchens. He not only built 10 kitchens, he's also giving us a subsidy over KSh 25, and this is the second year. It's quite a big investment that he'd want to showcase to the president.

The moment we were told that they would be coming to our kitchens, we had to have dedicated team members, and this included Wawira herself, who on Monday spent the entire day with the president and the governor. Today and tomorrow, that's exactly what's happening. That's what I mean in terms of relational. You have to be able to interact with them, tell them the impact we're having on the ground for them to see the work, to see the kids eating, the kitchen, and the food being produced.

That's how I feel like we've been able to maintain the momentum and also because the impact is there every day. If you go to a kitchen, you'll find food being produced daily. It becomes a very easy sell, that's how I'd look at it. We've not been affected, either with the counties that we've been working with, and two of them, this is the third year, Nairobi County, this is the second year, and we've not seen any issues. We want to continue. The North Star for this would be to have a school feeding policy at a national level.

Even with this momentum, we want school feeding to be a topic that makes news so that people can be able to understand its importance. We hope to have a national policy that talks about the importance of school feeding, such that it's not reliant on the person in power, whether it's a president or a governor.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How are you tracking impact, how are you tracking your success? Is it health-related, like if you're tracking based on how much nutrition and stuff, or if you're tracking based on participation in class?

Wairimu Nyandia: It's more the latter. This is because, for nutrition, you need to have a baseline when it comes to health. There is a department currently focusing on that, and we're building it. We've just hired our head of impact, which is very exciting, who now will be able to tell us, maybe let's not focus on attendance or focus on enrollment, and get more metrics around this. Presently it has heavily been on attendance, enrollment, participation, and performance.

In 2023, we had a study, a nutritional assessment of what our meal is contributing to what a child is consuming on a daily basis. This was in collaboration with SIF (*Secours Islamique France*, or Islamic Relief France) and we're retesting those metrics, and now including products like fortified porridge that weren't there before. We're building on that

to be able to have as many data points to be able to show the impact our model has on all the kids that we're feeding.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Tell me a little bit about your relationship with Rippleworks. When did they come in on the funding journey and were you doing capacity stuff, project-based stuff, and unrestricted grants?

Wairimu Nyandia: It must have been May of 2021. It started with the project, what they do, they come and tell you, oh, we have these experts. What are the problems you're trying to figure out? I remember thinking I had so many. One of the things is that in 2021 we had three kitchens.

I remember at that point, I was telling them that I need to be able to have my kitchen managers have an efficient mindset when they're running the kitchens, be the owners of the cost per meal, and be able to make the connection. If I add more labor, it has an impact on how much my cost per meal looks like. That's how it started, they linked up to an amazing expert, and that program ran for six months.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Which program ran for six months?

Wairimu Nyandia: The program that explained how to embed an efficiency mindset in your team. I still have the team that went through that entire curriculum and have since grown significantly in the organization. They're no longer running kitchens, but they've joined the operations team at the admin level.

Wairimu Nyandia: That was the first thing. As soon as that ended, the project ended, and we started asking for money which was one of the outcomes after the project with the expert. They gave us unrestricted funding of KSh 2.5 million. It helped hire experts. We needed senior hires in the organization, and we were able to make key significant hires, including revamping how the fundraising department and the finance operation looks.

There was a huge catalytic effect that we were able to make hires that we didn't have at the time, and the organization needed. The rest went towards the program, like the expansion.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you have any feedback about the Leaders Studio and any of those other things that you had from Rippleworks?

Wairimu Nyandia: A lot of people have been involved in that, not just leadership, but also senior managers and managers. The feedback we've always received is how useful it has been because they're on different topics. It may be conflict management or how do you equip members of your team who haven't done team management to be able to do that. I think the feedback would be I want them to continue with that. I have participated in two, and I would definitely join only if my time allows because you don't want to sign in and then you manage to join one.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you think has made their capacity training so useful?

Wairimu Nyandia: I'd talk more about the projects and less about the Leadership Studio. Like what we did with it, how do you instill the efficiency mindset? The next one was the org (organization) design work that we did last year and the experts. I remember us brainstorming internally and we were asking ourselves, what have they gotten so right to be able to continuously offer this? I think it's their pool of experts. I don't know how they get them, but they're able to understand and be the conduit between a client, who's in this case like Food4Education, and can understand the kind of an expert we need.

This is dependent on scale, and the size of the organization. I'll say our structure is very complex. You have so many units and within those units you have subunits, but being able to get an expert who within a month can understand the needs of the organization within, I don't know what the selection criteria looked like. Last year in New York, I remember telling Lulu (the expert we used in 2021) that I needed her back because we have a pool of 30 kitchen managers who didn't go through that experience and I'd want [them] to do that. She told me to fill in. There has been a delay on my end but I feel like the selection criteria of the experts they work with are impeccable.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How many requirements and touchpoints are helpful from a funder?

Wairimu Nyandia: I'll give an example of something that happened recently with the org design worker. The team in the People and Culture department that was leading that project exited towards the end of the project. You've gone through it and the lead, director of people, and the senior manager left. The experts in the team from Rippleworks had visited us for an entire week to be able to understand that. During that process the touchpoints are important. You have weekly calls, they're two to three hours.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you say, during that process, you mean the process where you're working with this expert?

Wairimu Nyandia: Yes. The weekly touchpoints were amazing. They have all the documents and the presentations. They send the agenda ahead of time. The thing that got a little bit confusing for multiple reasons was of the team that was leading, two of them left. They needed to end the project. The project ended with half of the team that was engaged, but still, they were like, oh, can we have a three-month check-in? I am like, no, because even the implementation of the work that you've done won't happen because now we have to go back to the market and hire a CPO (Chief People Officer).

Hiring a CPO took three months. She literally joined at the end of January and this project ended at the end of September or early October. Our three-month check-in was falling when the CPO joined, and we had kept them updated on what was happening. Two weeks ago, they sent emails that said, we'd want to see, then we can do a

check-in. I was like, instead of doing a check-in, can we use this session for you to meet our CPO and take her through the work they had done? I think there was a miscommunication because they came and were like, oh, so let's do a three-month check-in. I'm like, there's no check-in.

In the event where the business continuity is known, assuming the team stayed, it's amazing. A three-month check-in would make so much sense so that we can go back and say, we still need further help when it comes to A, B, C, D, or can you review our new org structure and how we're thinking about it? In the fit-for-context model, maybe they can adopt an understanding, as in is the status quo when we exited from the project still the same? Probably even writing an email before the three months. Even like, hey, what is the landscape looking like?

It doesn't have to be a call, it can be a simple email wanting to know what is the progress as opposed to waiting for a three month check-in, and then there's a two-hour call that ends up being 30 minutes. It's like, there's no check-in. Please send the materials to the new CPO.

Also, we've had a situation where after the Efficiency Mindset project, the three-month check-in was amazing because there was continuity with the same team, and I found that cadence great. It's also like, can this person come back and train the current cohort so that you don't have our first cohort of kitchen managers who are amazing and think about the business the way we want them to, compared to a new pool of kitchen managers...three years later that need to go through the same process.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: It's clear what you were saying about the kitchen efficiency model. This other one you were saying about the organization design, was from the unrestricted grant?

Wairimu Nyandia: There wasn't money for that. There was an expert we were given.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You found the expert useful for that one as well. This is a different expert than the efficiency one?

Wairimu Nyandia: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You found the expert useful but people had left, so you're not able to track the impact?

Wairimu Nyandia: You have to almost redo the work. [Chuckles]

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you think it is about the one with the efficiency expert that enabled people to stay and grow within your organization and within this org design work that made people leave? Do you think it was a coincidence?

Wairimu Nyandia: They were just not great hires on our end. It was a misalignment. The two people leading that unit weren't the people the organization needed. When we

caught it, it was just a coincidence that coincided with when the expert work was happening.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some mistakes you made down the road that you think other people would learn from, and what's some advice you would give to people doing what you're doing?

Wairimu Nyandia: The way I look at what we're doing is thinking of flying a plane when you're building it, and the complexities that come with it because then you buy a certain piece, and then you realize, oh my god. This piece cannot fly this plane for another thousand miles, or something like that.

What that has looked like in Food4Education is hiring people when we were at 50,000 meals daily or 100,000 meals daily, and the organization wasn't what it is now, and hope those people grow in capacity and skill set to be able to handle the organization at half a million meals every day. When we were a \$10 million budget company, we couldn't afford to hire a CPO, but can afford it now because of the money we've been able to raise.

How to hire really good talent when you're still very early on in the organization, and this talent starts at the company when you have a \$5 million budget, and they are still the same people who will run the organization when the organization is at a \$50 million budget. I think the talent piece and the fact that you have constraints of resources early on. Thinking, should I hire someone who's asking for \$100,000 annually, or should I hire someone for \$60,000 and then see if this person draws? That kind of balance, I feel like I've seen how they've affected us later.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What's the right answer to that question?

Wairimu Nyandia: My call would be what Rippleworks did for Food4Education. Giving them an unrestricted grant so you can hire good talent. I know what that did for our organization in this case. Our head of policy and partnership and our head of fundraising were able to give them competitive terms because of such a grant. If someone could come in early on, we didn't have such exciting numbers initially, saying we're feeding half a million kids every day, but [if] someone believed in us and gave us a huge amount of money we could hire the right people.

The call would be for donors to be able to do such a thing where it's not, go build a kitchen, I need a head of policy who can start engaging with the government so that they can give me money, and I'm seeing those fruits two or three years later. We've made good hires. We've made not-great hires that have exited, but we can't compromise.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are three things you need to unlock scale and sustainability that are not funding? You mentioned one, which is talent. What would be the other two?

Wairimu Nyandia: The other thing is something we're doing right now. I'm setting up a unit, I'm calling internal consulting that's sitting under operations. This would be advice for a company that is scaling as fast as Food4Education is. Because you're not looking back, you're adding kitchens and numbers daily, and also because parents are telling you, come feed our kids. And you have the resources, but you need to take a step back to be able to say, is this process working? Are we documenting everything as we should be documenting?

I'm starting with a team of four people. What these people are doing is taking a project and evaluating it. It's like, is this working, and will this scale us to a million? I know it still sounds as though it's talent, but this is more, Can you have a team that is not scaling, but a team that's looking at the processes? Are they working as efficiently as you want the processes to work? It's the team that is looking at the pieces you built and being able to say, this piece is fit for a million meals a day type of plan.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you so much.

Wairimu Nyandia: Bye.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solution Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*