

“The young generation is leading in this field”: Zuzana Figerova of The SHM Foundation on a participatory, community-led approach to youth mental health

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Please introduce yourself and tell me what is distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health. Something that others might find surprising.

Zuzana Figerova: I'm the Head of Development and Philanthropy at The SHM Foundation and the Ember Mental Health Fund. I oversee a portfolio of programs in mental health, including youth mental health, and work on our philanthropic strategy with our partners, whether it's our co-funders or our grantees.

The SHM Foundation has been working in global mental health almost since its start in 2008. We set up psychosocial support groups for adolescents and young people affected by HIV in South Africa. That's how we started working in youth mental health in 2014. What is unique about our approach is that we co-designed the programs with the adolescents. They are at the core of every program that we run.

We use this participatory approach and work with a small number of adolescents because they need detailed and holistic support. We are not much about scale and big numbers, but we treat every adolescent deeply. We provide them with the full psychosocial or educational support they need.

We support them in education, whether it's secondary or tertiary, and into employment. Over the years, we realized it takes a long time to ensure they are fine and able to tackle life. That's why we take a very slow, individual approach with each young person that we work with, not just in South Africa, but also in Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Sanne Breimer: Once you became active in global mental health, South Africa was the first country. Is there a certain reason for that?

Zuzana Figerova: There was a need because the rates of HIV infections were one of the highest in the world. We have a team on the ground that's running the program.

Very sadly, the HIV rate is still rising, and that's 12 years later. Obviously, girls are worse affected than the boys. Their families also face economic hardships. Over the years, we added the component of education and employment support because we realized that providing psychosocial support on its own is simply not enough. They need support to earn their own money and support their families.

Sanne Breimer: The Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas: building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and helping them build a sense of community and belonging. What does your work focus on?

Zuzana Figerova: We belong to the group of building resilience within the ICONIQ cohort, but we cover all three areas.

The sense of belonging is about building communities. Over the years, we have built a large community of young people in South Africa and other Southern African countries. If we support one adolescent, they can impact another 10, the closest people in their community.

We try not to use the word resilience anymore because the adolescents don't want to be resilient. They want to be supported and nurtured. The mentors in the group told us in a workshop that they don't always want to be the strong ones.

The agency comes through our participatory approach. We want the young people to be at the center of the health system.

The South African trend is that young people visit the clinic and have to accept the treatment as it is, while it's not designed with them in mind. The hospitals aren't a very nice environment. It's about giving them the power to be at the center of the health system so they can work with medical professionals to design a system that works for them.

Sanne Breimer: What is happening in the field you're working in that you're excited about?

Zuzana Figerova: We support organizations working in the global mental health field in Africa, Asia, and South America. A year and a half ago, we held a callout for grassroots organizations working in global mental health.

An overwhelming number of the 1,600 applications came from youth-based and youth-led grassroots organizations, which we found very interesting and exciting. We had a high number of applications from Kenya, and almost all organizations were youth-based.

The young generation is leading in this field and setting up grassroots organizations to provide excellent mental health care in their communities. That's what we are excited about. We now have a new cohort of these interesting organizations.

For instance, in Madagascar, they are supporting imprisoned youth. Another project in South Africa is helping children to overcome trauma through mountain biking. An organization in Kenya is supporting students at universities throughout the country by running psychosocial programs and well-being support. It has a great impact on student retention.

We have another organization in Mozambique that uses activities such as songs, comic strips, or poetry to promote mental health and collective healing through music, arts, and storytelling. They work with women and girls who experience gender-based violence. We are excited about the amazing variety we see on the ground in youth mental health, and that the youth are leading these initiatives themselves.

Sanne Breimer: Was there a moment in time when youth initiatives accelerated, or is there a reason for that to happen?

Zuzana Figerova: I don't know. We started the program in 2014, but we saw this in the past five years. I wonder whether it has something to do with the COVID-19 pandemic. The global mental health field flourished post-COVID because people realized they needed support. Many of the organizations we support and fund started around the pandemic.

Sanne Breimer: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work?

Zuzana Figerova: Ember is the fund through which we fund the grassroots organizations working on global mental health. Since 2018, we've supported over 50 grassroots organizations directly, many of them were at the early stages with low budgets, sometimes not even \$5,000.

As we've provided them with in-kind support and invested in them, they have grown into strong organizations and are on the path to sustainability. Many of them brought in co-funders and significantly increased their organizational budget. Ultimately, they could impact more people in need of mental health support. In the program in South Africa, we are the practitioners; we run the programs ourselves.

To date, we support around 500 adolescents, many of whom have university degrees and jobs. It takes a long time to support a young person; it's not a quick fix. They are living with HIV, but they are healthy and have happy lives, with a job and a degree. We are proud that they found a purpose.

Sanne Breimer: Do you also collect data, or how do you measure your impact?

Zuzana Figerova: Yes, we have an impact team that collects the data. We've produced a number of papers on how we measure impact, what's important to us, but also what our approach to scale is. We've done over 900 interviews in the past year to select our cohort. Our impact team has been working on the report for the past six months, and we will release it soon.

Sanne Breimer: In terms of impact, you mentioned in the beginning that you're not necessarily focusing on scaling and big numbers; instead, you take a slow individual approach. Do you see scaling as less effective, or have you tried scaling before and it didn't work out?

Zuzana Figerova: We are not opposed to scale but we also believe that there is not one solution that fits all. Scale for us is supporting a high number of organisations rather than supporting just a small number of them.

Sanne Breimer: What do you look at for a project to be successful, or how do you measure its success if it's not necessarily in scale? What could be metrics that other people can learn from?

Zuzana Figerova: We want organizations to have something unique in themselves. We have three pillars, one is about sustainability. Some organizations want to sustain themselves in their community, so we support that. They don't necessarily need to grow, but they need to be strong enough financially and organizationally to sustain themselves without struggling.

Another group of organizations is all about replicating their model in different regions or countries. If organizations want to scale, we support them in doing so. If they are already working with large numbers, we help them reach even higher numbers by giving them funding.

And lastly, we don't want to do the top-down approach, typically from the Global North, because we believe that it removes local agency and leadership. We believe that what's best for the communities is not necessarily what's most scalable.

Sanne Breimer: Can you describe something that you tried that didn't work, but that you learned from?

Zuzana Figerova: Yes, there are plenty of things. The top-down implementation, the power at the top, definitely does not work.

The traditional philanthropy, where the funder is the boss, doesn't work. It needs to be about transformational philanthropy where the partnership is equal and the grantees and the funders are at the same level, as they have a lot to learn from each other.

Sanne Breimer: What type of interventions aren't necessarily scalable?

Zuzana Figerova: The SHM Foundation or Ember isn't rejecting the concept of scale. Every funder needs to be able to decide what works for them and what their strategy is. We just advocate for a more nuanced community-centered approach that aligns with the directions of the field, for diverse interventions that collectively support mental health across the globe.

We have projects in different geographies, and everyone is addressing the needs of their communities. For instance, we have two hospitals in Uganda that are providing the

psychiatric department with a context-specific approach to mental health that probably would not work anywhere else. Both hospitals are in rural southwest Uganda.

It's remote, and they see their patients at home. It may not scale in different geographies, because usually people come to the hospital to receive mental health help. In Uganda, people don't want to go to the hospital because there is a huge stigma around mental health, and they feel ashamed.

These hospitals visit patients at home, give them medication, and provide them with psychotherapy. Other hospitals could learn from them, but it's not a model that can train millions. It's context-specific.

Sanne Breimer: Does it also mean that you don't have your own methods, but you tap into a community and see what is happening there and then strengthen the things that work already?

Zuzana Figerova: Yes, you've described it perfectly. We support grassroots organizations, meet them where they are, and provide them with two different types of support. One is the in-kind support, which is mentorship, traditionally called capacity building. We designed it with them, mostly focusing on fundraising because they all want to increase their budgets. Some of them need help developing storytelling around their work, a website, a model mapping, or a theory of change. We provide them with financial support on top of that.

We've developed the method of in-kind support combined with financial support, mentorship, plus the funds, because we believe they have to come together. We don't, of course, tell them how to run the programs because they are the experts in their field. They know their communities. We only help to strengthen their organizations. We don't provide them with mental health training because we are not mental health experts.

Sanne Breimer: Aside from funding, are there any challenges that you faced or are currently facing that you haven't been able to solve?

Zuzana Figerova: The global mental health field is still not well funded. We sometimes struggle to show other people why to invest in this field because you can't see immediate results. It's a challenge to bring new funders and co-funders in the field. Another challenge is that many people running grassroots organizations are exhausted themselves. We try to provide them with well-being support to look after themselves and have the energy to run the organization. Well-being is another challenge.

Sanne Breimer: What is needed to show a funder that they need to fund?

Zuzana Figerova: Storytelling is a big part of our work. Our communication team is trying different approaches to show the work of the organizations that we fund. We've done a couple of short films and photography projects, and we use local artists to portray the organizations that they work with.

Sanne Breimer: What makes it challenging to convince funders?

Zuzana Figerova: It's not that easy to communicate the impact. It takes a lot of time because the organizations don't have strong systems or time to collect data. They're busy doing the work, so we are helping them to collect the impact. It's important for the funders to see how many people they've reached and the rates of people who are feeling better. It takes a long time to gather the data.

Sanne Breimer: Does your organization support these grassroots organizations with monitoring and evaluation (M&E)?

Zuzana Figerova: Yes. We also support them on the M&E because they don't have the capacity to record the data, so we help them to strengthen this area. For example, the hospitals in Uganda I mentioned, how many patients they're reaching every year, how many patients have been in their care and now no longer need the treatment. That's important data.

Sanne Breimer: What insights or teachable lessons can be taken from your work that others could use, in and out of the fields that you're working in?

Zuzana Figerova: We spend a lot of time talking with the grassroots organizations, just like you are talking with us now. Listening to people, talking to them to find out about their work, and meeting them where they are and supporting them from that point. It's one of the best approaches. If you are working in global mental health, it's important to also think of the well-being of the people who are running these initiatives because they are on the verge of burnout. Listening, well-being support, meeting people where they are, collaboration, and exchanging insights are important.

Sanne Breimer: Do you set up collaborations with other organizations to exchange insights?

Zuzana Figerova: Yes, we support them in finding and sharing their insights in conferences, or putting them in touch with research or academic organizations that might be beneficial to them, or with other people working in the field. We believe in this collaboration.

Sanne Breimer: Has being part of the cohort influenced your approach or helped you think differently about your work?

Zuzana Figerova: Yes, we learned many things from these organizations.

We've learned how dedicated they are, and that with few resources, they can do a lot, which is rare. They are very innovative as well. We know organizations where there are only three mental health professionals, but they are serving a community of thousands of people. They developed innovative models that can provide mental health care despite limited resources. They are very innovative.

Sanne Breimer: Are there any barriers to change minds in global mental health, and what would help to break through them?

Zuzana Figerova: People should just share their insights and collaborate. I don't think any organization can solve the problems itself. It should be like a collective approach to global mental health.

Sanne Breimer: Is there more of a collective approach nowadays, has that shifted?

Zuzana Figerova: Maybe it's starting to be more collective, and funders are encouraging the conversations. Many of the organizations that we support, always say that they are feeling isolated. They think they are alone and we tell them there are other organizations to collaborate with.

Sanne Breimer: Looking ahead, what's the most important question the Co-Lab should be asking right now?

Zuzana Figerova: I think you've asked good questions, and it is interesting that you gather these insights so that we can learn from each other. It leads to collaboration and a collective approach to addressing the current challenges.

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.*