

## EPISODE 6: REIMAGINING RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:00:12] Hello and welcome to the Global Health Matters podcast. Humanity is increasingly facing challenges that hinder the well-being and thriving of all people. More than ever, collective momentum is needed to find solutions that can support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. For today's episode, I spoke with two guests, Karlee Silver and Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi. Each of these guests held a different perspective on how research ecosystems can support finding answers and solutions to global challenges. Karlee will reflect on global efforts to identify and test innovative solutions. Tembeka will reflect how research management offices at universities and other institutions, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, can support solution development to current challenges as well as those lurking on the horizon. We will first hear from Karlee Silver. Karlee is the CEO of Grand Challenges Canada. By clearly defining the bottlenecks affecting global health progress, Grand Challenges Canada has provided direction, leadership and an opportunity to a wide range of people to become involved in the discovery, innovation and research of new solutions. If you've listened to Episode 4 of this podcast, we included the Social Innovation Initiative, Mamas del Rio in Peru and Colombia, which is one of these innovative projects which received support from the Grand Challenges Canada. Grand Challenges movement has also been replicated in country and regional levels to strengthen the local research ecosystems. Hi Karlee, thank you for joining me today. You've been with Grand Challenges Canada since the organization was founded. How has Grand Challenges Canada played a leadership role in the discovery of solutions to current day challenges?

**Karlee Silver** [00:02:19] I've been with the organization since it launched in 2010 and we've really stayed true to the idea that we are supporting innovation to save and improve lives of underserved people in Canada and in low- and middle-income countries. We have obviously learned a lot in those 10 years, but if I reflect on that core, it really remains. We're looking for people who are closest to the challenges. A grand challenge is a significant barrier that, if overcome, will lead to transformational impact

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:03:04] Through that process of identifying those challenges, have you gone through a process of defining specific research questions or specific bottlenecks that are really impeding certain sectors or certain outcomes when it comes to health? How did you go about that?

**Karlee Silver** [00:03:24] The grand challenge of that process of identifying the grand challenge is a core part of what we do. Most recently, we deployed a Delphi study, so looking for researchers around the world, experts in a certain area, to help define through an iterative process, what are the key challenges that exist and the key questions that are out there? That's what has helped us define the challenges that we still carry forward for the global mental health program that we have for the Humanitarian Grand Challenge, creating hope and conflict. That we work with many partners in order to move forward. But we've also used other mechanisms and more and more what we're doing with the process of building consensus around the challenges that exist in the world, are to be involving experts who get their expertise through lived experience.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:04:32] It's interesting how you've engaged the communities and those that you're working with and you mentioned that you've gone through the process of identifying these priorities. How do you keep momentum and focus with these stakeholders and maybe especially those in low- and middle-income countries that may not be around you? How do you go about that?

**Karlee Silver** [00:04:55] One of the moments that has stuck with me over the last decade doing the work I'm doing, is that the first grant program I ever oversaw we targeted researchers at institutions in low- and middle-income countries. They were the only ones who are eligible for the funding. And through this, we ended up flipping decades long dynamics between collaborative partners in different countries, who actually was ultimately accountable for the grant money and for the outcomes that were being obtained. And from what seemed, I think to me at the time, like a fairly simple move of wanting to have those who were closest to the challenges take the lead, I heard countless stories emerging from those who received the grants of finally feeling trusted and feeling valued and feeling they could exercise self-determination for the first time in their career. And it realized how, you know, what could be fairly simple criteria can actually have massive ripple effects in how the world perceives someone.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:06:17] As a significant funder of innovation, including in low- and middle-income countries, Grand Challenges can and must have interacted with traditional research systems and knowledge generation systems in these countries and maybe disrupted them. Can you tell us how that played out?

**Karlee Silver** [00:06:33] Our goal isn't to disrupt the system. Our goal is actually to find the best ideas. But we're realizing that as we go in the best ideas, the result is that we're not following the same kind of hierarchical structures that exist, we're not prioritizing the same types of people that other funders might prioritize in order to fund. And we're proud of that.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:06:59] Now, if I can play Devil's advocate a bit, Grand Challenges Canada has done very well in enabling the discovery and research of individual solutions. However, we know that without a strong research ecosystem in a country, the ongoing discovery of solutions to local challenges can happen. How has Grand Challenges Canada supported local research or solution discovery ecosystems?

**Karlee Silver** [00:07:26] Yeah, it's a really great, great question. So really, when we first set out, it was to build and connect communities of innovators who are closest to the Grand Challenges. And so, over the decade we've done 1300 innovation projects across 100 different countries, all focused on specific global health and humanitarian challenges. But this in itself had an interesting first kind of spin off of where the innovators were located, had a different picture than other funders. And so rather than being concentrated in Canada or the US or Europe and working in Africa or South America or India, we see this different depiction where the weight of our innovator is the bulk of our innovators exist in on the African continent, in South America and on the Indian subcontinent, etc. And one of the most kind of early signals to us that there was something going on at an ecosystem level was when Grand Challenges Africa launched in 2015 and Grand Challenges Africa is one of the kind of family of Grand

Challenges organizations. There's 14 of us and we all work together in a loose governance system to learn from each other and to work together on specific challenges. It's one of the reasons why Grand Challenges Africa and Grand Challenges Canada has worked very closely together ever since that. It's actually not because money is changing hands, it's because we have a very shared interest in seeing the African research and innovation ecosystem thrive and where we're working is leading towards that. I'd also say that the next kind of big challenge that we focused on was trying to build the appropriate scaffold for innovators to navigate from a bold idea through this like valley of death, through to transitioning to scale. And that's the sweet spot for Grand Challenges Canada. And so we've identified common barriers within that valley of death that limits transition to scale and sustainability and have cocreated support systems with local entities in order to tackle them. And so one of the many barriers that we've been addressing, the one we've been addressing most recently, is related to the interaction between innovation and the public sector. And so many innovations rely heavily on integrating within the public system in order to achieve scale and sustainability, and there's a ton of different challenges for an individual innovator to achieve this integration. And so over the past year, Grand Challenges Canada has worked on three different levels to generate and test mechanisms that can pull those innovations to scale rather than keep pushing the innovations forward. We've been working with the World Health Organization's innovation hub that's recently launched to match country demand with the supply of the tested innovations that come from Grand Challenges Canada. And so in this way, we're starting to kind of put different pieces where individual innovators don't have to be. They get to do the stuff they're really good at, which is testing these new ideas, iterating on these new ideas, making sure that they've got a path to scale and sustainability and they can be supported in order to be tackling some of the real challenges that arise as they move into scale.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:11:08] You have funded more than 1300 solutions in more than 106 countries, what do you think is needed by researchers and research institutions in countries to better manage the solution discovery process?

**Karlee Silver** [00:11:23] Some of the biggest reflections that I've had in thinking through how do we best do this work? How do we best make sure that these researchers, these innovators who are closest to the problem actually are set up for success is really how I would frame it. And some of the biggest things that I've realized over the last decade are the following: funding for the work has to be what is most important and pressing to the innovators and the researchers in that context. The second is really funding with flexibility to learn and to adopt plans as we learn I think is critical. It's one that Grand Challenges Canada keeps negotiating with our funders. It's one that we try very hard to pass on to the people that we're fortunate enough to support, because the idea that we would all go into solutions, knowing how they're going to unfold over the next 3 to 5 years is impossible. And if we want to make the most of the opportunity that we are creating with these funding opportunities, we need to be flexible and understand how learning and how iteration and how pivoting can actually come to the fore. The third one would be around reporting and accountability requirements that are valued by the researchers and the funders. And this is a really tough one. We have, when we're talking about really large amounts of money, we're often talking about governments that require some level of accountability for their taxpayer money in order to make sure it's

being used well. At the same time, we can very much shut down innovation, research, creativity, by simply requiring so much reporting burden that people don't have time to actually do anything else with it. And so understanding the kind of sweet spot between where a researcher sees really important evidence and results coming out of their work. And that's the kind of stuff they're going to want to report on and how that jives and can help to reinforce the accountability for that money with the funder, I think, is a critical one. And the last thing is, there's no way we're actually going to come up with solutions without actually working together. And so the connections for anyone in the world to others that can amplify and accelerate their work is critical. So I think those are the big ones: funding the work that is most important to the innovator, flexibility within that funding, finding that balance between the reporting requirements that work, that speak both to accountability and to what's meaningful for the researcher and those connections to other like-minded people in the world who are going to amplify their work.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:14:44] You mentioned the Grand Challenges movement has catalysed similar country and regional led initiatives. How did Grand Challenges Africa come about?

**Karlee Silver** [00:14:53] I'll give you my perspective in terms of where I think the Grand Challenges Network and the individual organizations are developing something quite powerful, that again was not the purpose of what we started with, but has been a really fortunate, I guess, effective of what's happened. So Grand Challenges Canada as I mentioned earlier is an anchor partner in the Global Grand Challenges Network. And there's a few anchor partners: Gates Foundation, Grand Challenges Canada and USAID. But there are 14 partners that are in the Grand Challenges Network, and all of them are representative of either a country or a region. So they exist in India, Africa, South Africa, Ethiopia, Botswana, Brazil, Peru, Israel, Thailand, Korea, China. And this is a loose governance system where we don't have any formal agreements to do this. We convene twice a year, those organizations, to learn from each other, and we create more formal agreements when money actually changes hands and when we're focusing on very specific challenges together. But what this allows us to do is also kind of learn in how we are doing our work. Grand Challenges Africa is one of the more exciting ones that has emerged out of the Grand Challenges movement, and I say that because it is the only one that is a regional focus. And part of its goal is by pulling together the African research and innovation ecosystem to define the challenges that are most important to the continent, to actually put in place the right supports, the right brains and the right ecosystem in order to actually make change and make sure that research agendas are led and for the continent. And this ability to actually support the emergence of these types of research and development initiatives that are led by the domestic government, that are resourced by the domestic government, is very aligned with the financing agendas that exist for the Sustainable Development Goals. How do we unlock resources and prioritization from the governments that actually need to take responsibility for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals? And I think it's extremely exciting to see where countries are now recognizing that without a research and innovation agenda, those SDGs are unobtainable in the next nine years. We're kind of all on the back of our heels here, so we need to actually understand how we are going to leapfrog progress, and that requires a departure from the status quo, which is exactly what research and innovation provides.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:18:04] Karlee, it's very good to hear that Grand Challenges Canada has had additional positive effects in strengthening the African research and innovation landscape. This work can now be taken forward at country level and led by local actors. I want to thank you for joining me today, and for sharing the research leadership strategy of Grand Challenges Canada. Your work has enabled many other actors to also become leaders in developing new solutions to pressing global challenges.

**Karlee Silver** [00:18:33] Thank you very much.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:18:42] My next guest for this episode is Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi. Tembeka has dedicated her career to research management in several institutions in South Africa. The role of research management has been considered a quiet enabler of success of the research enterprise. Tembeka shared with me how the professionalization of research management can be reimagined as the next frontier, that of research leadership. As Tembeka will explain, a new cadre of research leaders will not only focus on current day challenges, but also those emerging in the shadows. Welcome to the episode Tembeka. You had an exciting career in research and I know you remain ever passionate about it. To start, could you maybe share how your career has evolved over time from being a social worker to becoming a director of research?

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi** [00:19:41] Yes, Garry. I started as a young social worker and I wasn't focusing on research, but I started by collecting information on organizations that were bringing solutions to my clients. I had a number of nongovernmental organizations, governmental organizations and individuals that I could tap into when I needed solutions to problems. At that point, I wasn't thinking of what I was doing as research, it was just collecting information that I could use in my day-to-day work. I was invited to Fort Hare (University) to join the staff there as a field work supervisor for social work students who were doing practicals. And in that process, in that one year, I realized that the best way to help students is to teach them to ask questions and find answers to those questions to be able to internalize the information that they were gathering by themselves. But after a year, I was offered a lecturing position, and by that time, the concept research was a big part of my vocabulary. And I wanted to teach students how to ask questions, how to investigate issues, how to find answers to social problems through proper investigation. And this became a big part of what I was doing as a lecturer. During that time, I was invited by CSD, the predecessor of the National Research Foundation....

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:21:45] That's in South Africa.

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi** [00:21:48] Yes. And in 2000, I was summarily removed from the Department of Social Work to head a research and rural development institute at the university. I was dubious about this because I loved teaching social work, but I thought it was some kind of promotion and recognition of my competencies. But you know what happens in life. Then I moved to Border Technikon to start and develop a research office in Technikon which had no research history at all. And this is the time when the South African Government was transforming Technikons into universities of technology, and they were then expected to be involved in some research activity. So my mandate there was to inspire academics to do

research and to publish and to develop their qualifications into master's and Ph.D.s.. So from there, I just swam in this pool of research management, and at a certain stage, I realized that I had to develop more research administrators and research managers.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:23:22] You said back in 2002 you already got engaged in other organizations that looked at research management as well and started helping with kind of developing that field. Have you witnessed any changes in the last 20 years in this environment and what's your observation around that?

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi** [00:23:46] Definitely there has been a great movement. When we started as universities, we did not have a mandate for research and therefore there was no need in the universities for research management. Those researchers who were interested in research did research by hook or by crook. But when the Department of Higher Education started enforcing research to be an integral part of academic work, then it became necessary to have people to manage it, to support researchers, to assist with sourcing grants. Research management as support to researchers became necessary, became important and all the universities established research offices to provide that service. But the issue at that point was that people who were employed in those positions did what they knew and what they thought they were expected to do. And there was no uniformity, there was no standardization of skills or competencies, there were no qualifications. So people really did what they could afford to do. It was realized that these people need some form of training. And so the development of the professionalization of research management started in that way. And even though we do not really have university courses in general that train research managers, we have a lot of workshops and other forms of training and support for research management. And that has developed over the years.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:25:55] How does that leadership role of research manager come to help as well in working within that university environment? How did that play out and how do you see that in the future?

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi** [00:26:10] What really emerged was that there were research administrators and then there were research managers who were managing the whole enterprise with the researcher. But then with time, there appeared to be a group of research managers who were focusing on the future, who were actually now being leadership instead of management, who were now moving away from operational activities, of helping and supporting researchers, but to strategic planning and forecasting so that researchers can focus on current problems, but also problems of the future. And this was something that came both from the research management side and from the researchers side. That some researchers just naturally started looking at future problems and trying to solve those. And it was one of those things that the professionalization of research management did not focus on. But it just evolved naturally. And those people who were in that way inclined, who were instrumental in developing the processes and the systems of looking into future research or into solving future problems. For me, this was one of those areas that I tended to focus on towards the end of my career. But what I think should be intensified is the leadership in research management. The people who are doing strategic planning, the people who are developing systems, the people who are working with those researchers who are futuristic in



their thinking and in their research activities. Because this issue of preparing everybody to support the solution of existing problems is actually very operational, but we need to look beyond the operational aspects of research management to the area where research is planned to solve future problems. And in that way, we will keep research relevant and we will make sure that research is always used as a tool to sustain and maintain healthy and good societies with less and less social problems. Because social problems will always be there, but we need to deal with them.

**Garry Aslanyan [00:29:47]** Tembeka, in that future leaders, what kinds of competencies or how best can they support the research and strengthen universities? What would you expect them to have as their skills?

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi [00:30:06]** Skills and competencies for research leadership are really the ability to develop systems, structures, and also help researchers to think more of not where they are, but where they want to be. We have a lot of passionate researchers who are already thinking at that level, but the kind of support that research management is providing is not sufficient for their needs, because we are still looking at operations, compliance, keeping time and those kinds of things. But we are not looking at opening up the minds of researchers to go beyond the present, to go beyond what is to what could be, to go beyond what they are expected to do for now, to what they would be expected to do in another 10 or 20 or 50 years. It is this kind of futuristic thinking that enables both the researcher and the research strategic leadership in research management to deliberately leave the present and focus on the future.

**Garry Aslanyan [00:31:46]** Many of our listeners are in countries where they're building their research capacity. If you were to give advice to some of the universities in these countries, how can they afford to think about the future? And how can this kind of leadership approach work? Maybe from your experience, you worked with bigger and smaller institutions in the past. What would be your advice for those kinds of settings?

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi [00:32:21]** My understanding, Garry, to start with is that technology has broken down boundaries. And therefore, when we have this small cadre of leaders in research management, their services and the impact of their activities is not limited to where they are, but travels easily through technology to other countries and to other researchers who need those services. And for me, the people who live in under-resourced areas are capable of meeting operationally the issues that need to be met. But when they are short of the strategic leadership, then they can import the services, the resources and the kind of people they need. There has been a lot of research chairs, for instance, that were recruited from overseas, from the U.S., Canada, Australia and whatever, to come to South African universities to improve the quality and quantity of research outputs. And these are the people who are leaders in their research fields, who were then brought in to come in as mentors. Therefore, small universities in disadvantaged countries have a way of accessing these services, even if they have not been developed in their own countries. And I would reiterate that technology and communication has made this very easy because it has broken down the boundaries that divide us.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:34:31] So the leadership role in terms of setting these kinds of systems where knowledge is not seen only focused in one institution, and bringing and sending knowledge workers or those who produce knowledge, has become an important part, and you see this as something that universities with lower resources should start and try and do as part of that. And from your experience, that's worked quite well from the South African perspective. What about training people who work in research management at a regional level? Do you have any examples of any work done in that or any lessons that you learned?

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi** [00:35:32] I have been involved with scholars, researchers and research managers in other African countries. For instance, as part of SARIMA, I was deployed to Nigeria to found WARIMA....

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:35:57] WARIMA is West African Association

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi** [00:36:00] for Research and Innovation Management. Right. And I realized that they were under-resourced, but they were making an effort to bring in the services and the resources that they needed. The very fact that SARIMA was invited and assisted them in starting their own research and innovation management association was a way of saying, "we see what is needed and we can take this action to do it". But what I also liked about the Nigerian experience was that they already had some inroads with other organizations. I visited the University of Buao and there also there was a lot of under-resourcing, but there was a lot of enthusiasm about bringing in the necessary resources. Yes, funding was a problem, but the intention was there and where outside assistance was provided, they were able to move forward with their development of research and research management. Not at the same pace as the highly resourced institutions, but at least the journey had started and there was a movement which was looking good.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:37:57] Thanks Tembeka. In ending, we also like to engage our audience in this conversation. Obviously, this is just the beginning and we're going to use social media. Is there perhaps a question you would like to pose to them in regard to the role of research management in the overall research enterprise?

**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi** [00:38:24] You know where I am, I really feel like there is still a lot that can be done to transform good practice to excellent performance. And I'm thinking that in the pursuit of perfection, in the professionalization of research leadership, we could learn more from other people outside the research enterprise itself. So the question that I would ask would be, how can we move the professionalization of research management from good to great?

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:39:21] Tembeka, as you shared with us, you had a rewarding career. It clearly takes a lot of professional effort to become a research manager. Looking back on your journey, what do you think is required to support the next generation of research managers and research leaders?



**Tembeka Mpako-Ntusi** [00:39:40] That was always my wish. That young researchers could graduate to being research managers and that they would have this wish coming naturally. But I also thought, if we have these young emerging researchers having such a passion, we have a responsibility to help them get the skills and the competencies that they need to play that role. We, the older generation of research managers, were just thrown into this pool and we learned from doing it. But I think there is some wisdom in training people properly to be research managers and therefore perform this noble duty knowledgeably, but also with confidence. And I also think with time, we need to have some licensing or registration process of research managers so that we know that the people who are playing this role are efficient, capable and they are also ethical.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:41:33] Thank you, Temeka, for all that you have shared with us today. Your enthusiasm for this is palpable and I'm sure it will inspire many others. On behalf of the Global Health Matters podcast, we want to thank you for listening to this episode. I hope that you enjoyed the two perspectives shared by Karlee and Tembeka. The role of research leaders, whether by global organizations such as Grand Challenges Canada or a new cadre of research managers at local institutions, are imperative to achieving societal progress. I am sure that you, our listeners, may also have some thoughts to contribute to this discussion. We would like to hear from you. Engage with us either on social media or send us an email. To remind you, more information on our guests, their work and today's show notes are available via the podcast Web page. Next month, we will have yet another exciting episode, focusing on the communication of science. I'll be joined by three charismatic communicators of science. They will tell us about how they communicate science effectively to the public, the role of journalism and the hidden power of storytelling through film. You would not want to miss this episode!

**Elisabetta Dessi** [00:43:00] Global Health Matters is produced by TDR, the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases. Garry Aslanyan, Lindi van Niekerk and Maki Kitamura are the content producers and Obadiah George is the technical producer. This podcast was also made possible with the support of Chris Coze, Elisabetta Dessi and Izabela Suder-Dayao. The goal of Global Health Matters is to provide a forum for sharing perspectives on key issues affecting global health research. Send us your comments and suggestions to [tdrpod@who.int](mailto:tdrpod@who.int) and be sure to download and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thank you for listening.