

EPISODE 36. BONUS EPISODE: WHAT'S BEHIND YOUR FAVOURITE PODCAST?

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Garry Aslanyan [00:00:06] Hello and welcome to the Global Health Matters podcast. I'm your host, Garry Aslanyan. For all of you aspiring podcast enthusiasts in global health, in this bonus episode we'll bring you something different. I'm changing seats with our producer, Lindi van Niekerk, to look behind the scenes of the Global Health Matters podcast. Lindi is a medical doctor, a global health researcher and a media creative, and since 2021 she has been working with me on pioneering this podcast, and I very much enjoy working with Lindi, as we have a shared goal of connecting silos and amplifying diverse voices in global health. It takes a village to produce a podcast, and I am so grateful that we have a team of such skilled professionals. If you are curious about what it takes to host or produce a podcast, this conversation is for you.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:01:13] Hi Garry. Thank you for changing seats with me today and giving me a chance to interview you.

Garry Aslanyan [00:01:18] Okay, let's see how that goes.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:01:20] Sure, let's kick off. Can you remember the moment that the idea of a podcast came into being for you?

Garry Aslanyan [00:01:27] How? Well, I think the most important moment was when I actually wanted to find a podcast that focused on global health and I could not find one. Hence I said, "why is there no podcast focused on global health?" I did a bit more research and realized that perhaps that's a gap, and I said, "maybe we can do it". That's the moment.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:01:53] And then how did you go from that lightbulb moment to actually gaining the support within your organization, within TDR, to turn it into a reality?

Garry Aslanyan [00:02:03] So I think it's not a secret that when it comes to reaching audiences, and I use that term quite broadly, that could be the audience of a policy-maker or audience of an ordinary person who needs to know about certain things or who wants to know about certain things, the communication has always been a weak part of it. As a research programme that supports research focused on neglected issues and infectious diseases of poverty, we suffer, or those who work in that area suffer, from the same problem. Having a podcast and using that as a new medium that is quite successful in other areas was not that difficult to convince within the organization that we could explore how we could use a podcast as a medium to communicate, or to engage, or to reach those that we want to reach.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:03:19] And in terms of podcasts, why a podcast not more webinars or not more conference presentations? How in terms of reaching audiences would that be different?

Garry Aslanyan [00:03:29] All of those things have their place. The conferences and webinars are increasingly recorded now and they can also be accessible. Obviously, conferences a bit less because conferences, if they are paid, they are behind a paywall. A podcast that is not behind a wall, people could reach that, or receive that, or engage in that discussion that they're listening to in their own time. Also perhaps the inspirational moment, and that really I'm speaking from experience, because my own experience listening to podcasts that are perhaps in various areas, or in topics or issues or hot topics of

the day, I felt that at the end of episodes, some of them had a very strong inspirational moment for me as a person or for me as a professional, where I wanted to use that in my day-to-day activity, behaviour, outlook at things. So I think that's an additional thing that perhaps the podcast does.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:04:43] And maybe to carry on with that idea, you often speak about people coming to you wanting to do a podcast but not fully understand that the content or the delivery is slightly different. How could you explain that to people?

Garry Aslanyan [00:04:56] Right. Well, that would be just an electronic book, right? So we don't do that, and you know well how boring that might probably be. But again, report has its own place. Perhaps the difference is that when it comes to creating an audio, and it's not like I knew this or any of us who worked on it knew that from the beginning. I think we came to realize after the experience that when there is no visual, there is no image, or letters to read or anything like that, the type of information that gets imparted or is shared by the guests needs to really help the listener to situate themselves in the same environment, or milieu, or context where the guest is sharing that. So it's a bit harder. So you could have a report that you basically read or share and 80% of that will basically go in and out from people's ears. So keeping that type of engagement is harder. And that perhaps comes with time of learning how to ask the right question and how to engage the guest and ensure that they share that insight in that particular manner that is going to be received, in a way, by the listener.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:06:32] So you speak about it's more a conversation and it's not reading a report. What makes it a good guest? So who's the kind of person that really would be great on a podcast, who's not just the voice artist coming to read the report?

Garry Aslanyan [00:06:45] Potentially everyone could be a guest. So it's just a matter of how much work you need to do with them to really understand what you could get out of them. So a good guest would be that they are able to share the most salient points in a very succinct manner, without realizing that if they don't, their listener might not really follow them. So that definitely is a good quality of a guest, and a guest, perhaps, who is able to transform you again to that environment where they have felt it. And again, a good guest is who speaks of their own experience with no inhibition. If they have to explain something that is done by others they work with, they may not do the same passionate expression. So it's to find the right person to speak about the right thing. And if they've done it, they will tell you and you will get that out of them.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:07:53] And as a host, that takes quite a lot of skill and art. What about being a host do you find most enjoyable and most terrifying at the same time?

Garry Aslanyan [00:08:03] Well, in the beginning it was all terrifying, because I had no idea what that actually means. Some people do a very good small talk, like you can go to somewhere and they'll come and find and talk to you and perhaps in five minutes you will be able to, without even knowing them, tell or share a lot of your feelings about this gathering or about that conference or that meeting, or of that event or that birthday party you are at. So I think understanding that you should be able to do that, and it's not easy, and it did not come right away. But then I linked to thinking, okay, well, when I go to these things, I'm not the most boring guest at the birthday party, I go and talk to people. So perhaps I can do just that. So I think that's important, to put the person at ease. And being on the receiving end of that, you realize well, if someone can take that out of you, I'm sure you can do the same with the person you want to engage.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:09:14] Some podcasts I know the host speaks all the time, and it's very much the opinions of a host. I feel you do a nice balance with sharing some of the things you think, but also giving the space for the voices and that we've heard from listeners. People really like the idea that they are hearing different voices. How does one strike that balance?

Garry Aslanyan [00:09:34] I'll go back to the original question that you ask about how we decided to use this medium as a way of sharing knowledge, evidence, research, etc. related to global health, and that basically cannot be done by one person. In global health, it's not an understatement to say that some of us may think we know everything and it is not true. These are absolutely... You can have years of experience. You can be the most experienced person working in global health and be in the thick of it here and there, and have done so many different projects. There is absolutely no way you can know everything. So there is always a need to be that learning. So to me, every time we work on an episode, every time I learn either a new perspective, new angle, new evidence, new setting, new approach, that I enjoy and I hope the listeners do the same. So I think learning, and that could not be done by one person. One person cannot know everything. It's not possible.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:10:55] I want to ask you about the challenges. It sounds really nice having a global podcast. What are some of the challenges that come with getting guests from all over the world, in different time zones, with different capacities on the show?

Garry Aslanyan [00:11:11] One can look at that as challenges, but also opportunities because, and I truly mean that, because even the actual team, who work on the podcast, really come from different places or are located in different places. I do have to say that the pandemic has actually helped us. If we wanted to do a podcast prior to the pandemic, it would probably have been ten times more difficult because the people that we reach out to, be that those working in the health care or in health setting, or in other professional or even those who are not really related to day-to-day their job is not global health, everyone through the pandemic has learned what a headset is and what a good connection is and how to choose the right microphone and how to restart their computer or close the door and put the cat in the closet, or whatever else they have to do. So we actually benefited from that, I think. So that was an opportunity. I think if we wanted to do a podcast prior to the pandemic and really wanted to make sure that we're not just talking to people in Geneva, in Washington, in New York and other places, we would have to go and find them and have face-to-face little set-ups or discussions that are extremely important, otherwise we cannot really tackle the topic of the episode. But that would take us years to develop an episode. So now, though, I think the pandemic gave us an opportunity there. However, technical access, bandwidth, inability perhaps to link to our guests in a more personal manner, and I experienced that just recently, having met a guest who I had never met in person and being able to speak to her at an event and having the luxury of getting to know them better. We miss that, of course, but at the same time, I think the benefits are there, but of course, challenges are still there.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:13:47] And I think you touched on when you said you met your guest in person. You are busy. You're making a podcast, but you're also busy building a global community of people who are connected. What do you think the value is of doing that?

Garry Aslanyan [00:14:01] I heard that people said about our ability to listen, to also be part of guests, or involved, is really the exciting part that people are not inhibited. I think that's important. I don't think anyone is scripted. We have a bit of a plan, of course, in our discussion on the podcast, but then after when they engage, both guests or our listeners who send us audio messages or they write us emails or they post things on social media, it feels that it's uninhibited, open, they can say anything they want in the way they want. I think that's extremely important because if it was, we must say this or this is what we want to say, which it has its place and perhaps these are other information type of events, webinars,

announcements, sharing guidelines where you really need to be clear. You cannot go around and say, we suggest that you do two or three times or it's up to you. But in a podcast you can do that because the purpose is not to communicate health information or to communicate facts completely, it's a personal, uninhibited discussion, but has an impact on how we approach things. I think they all become converts to... I think we've seen every single guest has been really... had a good experience and told us that that was really something that they enjoyed.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:15:56] It's really nice that there's a value for them as well that they get out of this. Maybe to gear towards the end, I'm curious to know about the value of the podcast and the impact that it has had. So maybe some of the stories, the feedback, how you've seen both within WHO, within TDR or just outside, what has been the influence or the impact that the podcast has had?

Garry Aslanyan [00:16:20] So this is something we discussed with the team. And again, if we get to talk about that, I'm happy to share that how different skill sets are involved and the different roles that are needed to produce a good quality podcast. We discuss this all the time in terms of how do we measure that. Of course, the most... Perhaps it starts with a number of people, a sheer number of listeners. So, having seen probably quadruple in the number, without boring you with numbers, but just to say that the number of listeners has always been going in the right direction, in terms of the sheer number. The reach to countries has also been going in the right direction in terms of sheer diversity and number of different countries or settings. So that's also good. We have encountered an expected issue that the podcast is in English, hence you are not going to reach every single person on earth because we only do this in English. We've tried different ways to support that through transcripts or translations, of course, but the fact is that it's only in English, hence there is a limitation on reaching listeners who speak other languages. We also know that there is a siloization of chambers where global health is discussed and it's done by stakeholders or a type of people who are involved in it. So you'll have more formal kind of global fora like the World Health Assembly, or some special sessions of the United Nations that focus on health issues, and that is a very different way. Then it's the conferences that are specific in certain parts of health or global health or aspects or diseases or conditions. So that's another one. Of course, social media has created another universe where the debate is happening, so that's a whole other world. So we have a suspicion that, we can't prove it, of course, we only base it on the comments that people have, or they send us emails or mention the podcast in different ways. We think that the podcast was able to kind of erase those silos or be another medium that is neither one of those things, but of course it discusses things that are discussed in all of those things. But it's not to compete with them because there's no way a podcast is competing with the World Health Assembly. But how discussions go is important for people who are not part of it to understand. So podcasts would help with breaking that barrier.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:19:33] To get to some practicalities. You're the Executive Producer. What does that role entail and how did you put together a team? And then maybe what are the messages or the guidance you would have for people who want to get into doing a podcast.

Garry Aslanyan [00:19:51] This Executive Producer title is only that at the end of the day, and this is what I said, actually, in the beginning when I said, okay, if this goes wrong, at least we know who to blame, and if it doesn't go wrong, at least we know who will be able to say, okay, we've done it. So this is really for the purposes of making sure that there's accountability both ways for success and/or failure. One important aspect of this is that there are people who produce podcasts, and they're very good in producing podcasts, and they come from media or the world of journalism, but they may or may not know global health. We were quite lucky because our producer, you, has the ability to understand global health. And again, with the humility that we can't know every single global health issue, but we can treat the information in a way that we are able to then find the right person to speak to it and ask the right

questions and inspire our listeners. But then there is a whole aspect of audio quality, making sure that the listener is tuned in and is listening through different ways of how we then record and ask the questions or insert some alerts or jingles or other things. So that's another important aspect, our audio engineer's role. Then we have communication, dissemination, reaching the right places. We are of course using social media. We're working with a team of people who are producing visual appetizers for people to see and say, "I want to listen to that because that looks very interesting."

Lindi van Niekerk [00:21:50] That's a good way of framing it. Visual appetizers. I like that!

Garry Aslanyan [00:21:53] Because really... We also have a newsletter. For example, we send it to those who subscribe. But the purpose is not for people to read the newsletter from A to Z. It is to read to get a sense, "Oh, I'm interested in that thing, I'm going to go and listen to it." Because we're not communicating in writing, this is a conversation audio podcast. We purposefully brought people that were able to advise us or give us advice, who had experience in media or were able to challenge us. And one needs to be open to that.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:22:32] Garry, as we near the end of this conversation, I want to ask you, what do you think the contribution is that podcasts such as Global Health Matters can make to global health?

Garry Aslanyan [00:22:43] Oh, I think there's so much. In recent years it's actually increased, like disruption of knowledge hierarchies. Everyone can start a podcast, that's really amazing. And also access to the podcasts. People can listen to it anywhere in the world. They don't need to sign up or get a Zoom link or attend a conference. Really trying to connect the dots and look at the bigger perspective on global health, you led this commentary that we shared in Nature Medicine about how podcasts contribute to that. So I really encourage our listeners to read the commentary and also reflect on how the information flow around global health has changed, is changing and will change even more.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:23:38] Yeah, I know. Our goal with that commentary was really to bring to light the role that podcasts can play in global health, and I think what I really enjoyed was that we could collaborate with our guests on that, and that is such a key thing within the Global Health Matters podcast that we're trying to amplify diverse voices, and we do so hopefully through the episodes, but also through written pieces like the commentary and even some convenings that we've hosted. And I'm excited about the fact that we get to do that, working with guests, collaborating with them, and I think that's one of the first steps maybe to contributing to this decolonizing global health agenda that we're focusing on.

Garry Aslanyan [00:24:14] Yeah, I agree, I totally agree. And about the community and hosting events that you mentioned, I go to some events nowadays, and there is definitely a number of people who would greet me or would connect with me and others around the podcast, or around the topic of the podcast, or make a comment about a guest. You mentioned some of the events we had at universities, coalition in the United States and the Planetary Health Summit in Malaysia recently. These situations really allow for people to come together. I really am happy with what we've done with the podcast beyond the actual episodes.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:25:04] And I think that's just the start. We are ready to launch season four, in June, and Garry, what can listeners look forward to?

Garry Aslanyan [00:25:11] So June 2024, next month, we are already working on several episodes, so we've talked, you and I, many times, exploring different topics like AI and health, mental health, clearly climate change and many more. And we also want to hear from our listeners, so there'll be a chance for our listeners to nominate ideas and topics before season four starts, before the end of this month, May of 2024.

Lindi van Niekerk [00:25:47] Okay, well thank you for this conversation and sharing your experiences. I think it's always important not to forget where we started in this journey, and I hope that this conversation really gives people that behind the scenes insight of what it takes to produce a podcast and maybe even kind of inspire them to think of doing the same. After producing more than 35 episodes, I can truly say that I continue to learn something new about global health in each of them, and that is really exciting.

Garry Aslanyan [00:26:15] Great. And that was less painful than I thought! So to our listeners, we hope that this conversation encourages and supports you in your podcast journey. Like Lindi said, I also continue to learn something new from every conversation I have with our guests. I'm confident that so will you if you tune in to season four of Global Health Matters, that we kick off with our first episode this June.

Garry Aslanyan [00:26:46] To learn more about the topic discussed in this episode, visit the episode web page where you will find additional readings, show notes and translations. Don't forget to get in touch with us via social media, email, or by sharing a voice message, and be sure to subscribe or follow us wherever you get your podcasts. Global Health Matters is produced by TDR, a United Nations cosponsored research programme based at the World Health Organization. Thank you for listening.