

## EPISODE 66. IS IT THE END OF THE NGO AS WE KNOW IT?

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**Garry Aslanyan** [00:00:08] Welcome to the Global Health Matters podcast. I'm your host Garry. In this episode, we're asking a question that sits at the heart of the future of global health. Who gets to lead and who gets to decide? For decades, international NGOs have been central to the global health and humanitarian response, but in a shifting world with aid budgets being cut and trust at stake, people are questioning the role of these organisations. At the same time, local civil society organisations and grassroots movements are demonstrating every day that proximity to a problem is one of the most powerful assets they have in solving it. In this episode, we explore what a more equitable, more locally grounded model of NGOs could look like and what it will take to get there. To discuss this further, I'm joined by two guests who bring very different but deeply complementary perspectives to this question. First, you will hear from Deborah Doane, Deborah is a partner at Rights CoLab and the convener of the RINGO Project, an initiative dedicated to reimagining international NGOs, so that civil society everywhere can be more equitable, with over 20 years of experience working across human rights, development, and economic justice, she recently authored a book called "The INGO Problem, Power, Privilege, and Renewal". Later in the episode, you will hear from Angela Oduor Lungati. Angela is the executive director of Ushahidi, a Nairobi-based non-profit technology organisation. She's a technologist, community builder, and open-source advocate with over a decade of experience advancing inclusive technology for historically marginalised communities. Let's start with Deborah. Hi Deborah, welcome to the show.

**Deborah Doane** [00:02:32] Thank you.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:02:33] So let's get started Deborah. On this podcast in the last five seasons, we often return to the idea that history shapes the present. It's interesting it came up in many of the episodes, and maybe to begin with you could walk us through how the international NGO model emerged and what originally motivated its creation or how it came about.

**Deborah Doane** [00:03:01] I mean, I also really like to take the long view because, you know, we think that everything is so important now, but these things have been shaped over time. I mean INGO's really started, and this is disputed by the way, but with the foundation I think of the Red Cross movement, and I started my career in the Red Cross, so I'm quite proud of that, weirdly, in the sort of late 1800s, 1860s. The reason I say it was disputed because I did give a talk and someone said, no, it was the YMCA that founded INGOs, and I haven't delved into the history of the YMCA since, but I think they were roughly around the same time, and it was really just founded on people wanting to help, just saying, there's people over there, we've heard they have need. How do I help them in solidarity? You get into the 1960s in Oxfam and it was wanting to help with the famine, the Biafran famine and helping to support that. I think in post-colonial times, INGOs really grew and flourished after World War II around decolonization, and they moved into the newly independent countries to provide services where governments were unable. They started to receive official standing at the UN, and it kind of largely stayed that way until about the 1990s, when aid budgets ballooned. We had massive growth in the aid sector, the targets trying to get to 0.7, and that's when things really changed and the INGOs became I would say less about solidarity and much more about professionalism.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:05:05] So from your perspective, what have been some of the real successes of these organisations over the years that they've achieved?

**Deborah Doane** [00:05:11] Yeah, I mean, as I said, I did start my career with the Red Cross and you know, I think their history of the fundamental principles around humanitarian action, humanity, volunteerism, independence, universality, those are really important foundations for the whole humanitarian sector and I would say the Red cross kind of carried that flag through, some of those principles like neutrality are being disputed now and under scrutiny and challenged in the sector, but I do think setting that kind of vision about what humanitarian means is a real success of someone like the Red Cross. The success stories for me are really around advocacy and root causes, I think trade justice, international debt relief, tax justice, there have been some amazing movements over the last 30, 40 years, the environmental movement, where INGOs have really had some good global successes. To me, less in humanitarian action, and we can talk about my critique of that as we go along, than in some of more root cause issues around economic and social justice.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:06:36] You've spent a lot of time working with the INGO you started with, but also started examining the challenges, as you said, of the system, and then obviously you also wrote a book about it on this topic. Out of that research and the work and your experience, maybe you can give me a bit more about what are the systemic problems facing the INGO system today, and how they really show up in practise, what is going on at the moment.

**Deborah Doane** [00:07:11] So I mentioned that they grew exponentially in size from the 90s onwards, some of them are in the billion-dollar USD mark now with salaries in some cases over a million USD of the senior leadership in many, several INGOs. I think there's two key underlying problems with the INGO as it is now, and the first is that because of this dominance, they position themselves as the saviour of the world's problems. So, if you look on any INGO website, and I trawled through a lot of them, together we can end poverty, we can end hunger, we can save people, they are the only ones who will save the world, and the second is their positioning to the donor community, and that includes the general public. So, they've positioned themselves to be the prime trusted conduit to accept and filter funding from international sources. And what this does is it results in their dominance, so it's almost like corporate capitalism, the dominance of INGOs perpetuates the dominance of INGOs and it becomes a winner takes all sort of system. So, they have a dominance of money in the system, they have the dominance of voice, you know, influence and voice. I'm more likely to be asked to give evidence to a UK parliamentary committee, even though I'm not experienced in a humanitarian situation in the global majority country. There's the dominance of Western approaches and knowledge to how do we solve the problems. So, someone- who's sitting in Geneva or Washington or London is likely to have more credibility for how to solve a problem than someone who's from Sudan and sitting in Sudan. And I think as a result of this, they've really become a barrier for growing healthy civil societies everywhere. They fail to invest in those healthy civil society because they only invest in their own growth. Those are the main challenges, systemic challenges that I think we see in facing the INGOs today. They become great successes, but they're now a barrier to building a healthy civil society.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:09:54] Interesting, as you were really speaking, I caught myself thinking of something I work on, equitable research partnerships, and some of the intermediaries in between sometimes are, I don't want to say the problem, but sometimes contribute to that inequity, even though the partners themselves are actually going into it with a equal kind of mindset, but then you have something in between that has its own policies and things and kind of takes things in a different direction, I found myself comparing it to that.

**Deborah Doane** [00:10:34] And two things happen with that, right? So, knowledge becomes extractive. So, we extract the knowledge and use it as our own for intermediaries quite often. They have to justify their own existence, and talk about, well this is our role, we're the only ones who can pull that knowledge

together. And it becomes a power, an issue of power, who has power in the wider system, and I think it's highly problematic.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:11:04] So in global health, there are a lot of conversations about decolonization, localization, and on this podcast, we had that come all the time. Do you feel that these agendas have meaningfully shifted the power away from global north and towards the countries and local actors in recent years?

**Deborah Doane** [00:11:30] I wish that were the case. I think there's a lot of lip service being paid to it, although those conversations really differ in Francophone communities. They're not necessarily having those conversations to the same degree. It seems to be a dominance of the Anglo-Saxon discussions of Anglophone models. There's some exceptions where we're seeing a bit of development, so Save the Children withdrew in December from UK, from UN country-based pooled funding models because they said that funding should go directly to local CSOs rather than INGOs, but more often than not, especially since the aid cuts started at the beginning of last year, and it wasn't just the US, it's a number of European countries cut their aid budgets significantly, the UK, where I sit, the aid budgets being slashed. The opposite, I fear, is happening. I'm involved in a number of conversations with boards and senior leadership teams, some of them are saying localization has gone too far. That was a luxury. We can't afford to do that right now. I have conversations postponed while they restructure on their own without thinking about localization. In the RINGO Project where I contribute, which is about reimagining INGOs and shifting power to local and national civil societies, we have a prototype for what we call a reverse call for proposals where local actors centre what they want to need, and then they issue a call for proposals to the international community. We've had on the INGO side, I just actually got an email today about it, we have no budget or time to respond, we have to focus on our own needs right now. I heard from a board member in another INGO something quite similar. So, I think that what's happening is INGOs are retreating, they're putting up their own defences and localization and decolonization become an afterthought.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:13:39] And do you think that the global and the local can work in real complementarity at some point? Or these agents really are going to remain in that kind of a tension, what's your view long term?

**Deborah Doane** [00:13:58] Longer term, they have to, I mean I firmly believe in, I believe in civil society, and I believe in the concept of what I refer to in the book as subsidiarity, which is really the idea of as international as necessary and as local as possible. And you can relate it to your own circumstance, you don't need to be a humanitarian working in Africa, a white person working in Africa from Europe or I'm from Canada originally, I can relate it in my own country to I'm much more likely to be able to talk to my neighbour about what's happening locally and to solve a problem about what is happening on my street or in my community as opposed to if someone came in from Save the Children in Bangladesh to solve that problem for me. It's much more resonant to deal with poverty and homelessness in the area of London than I am, with local actors, the local food bank, and others. So, I think we have to transfer that knowledge to the way we work internationally. But there is international knowledge and there is local knowledge, and I think we can work together. And if I go back to that example of the reverse call for proposals, we've done some experiments with it, and so our first one was in Zambia and the Zambian Governance Foundation worked with multiple local communities to say, what is it you actually already have, what are your assets? And what do you want and need from international actors? And they said, well, we could really use some help on training on reproductive rights, on some other humanitarian issues. But in general, they said we can do a lot of that themselves, but we still want support from the international community.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:15:49] What do you think, why do they want to still have that connection to INGOs? Is it money or is it something else?

**Deborah Doane** [00:15:59] It's probably a mix of both and the reality is a Western INGO can raise significant sums of money, from their local population, so it's not just their role in the aid system. I think more and more of that aid money should and will go directly to funding local CSOs. But I think INGOs can raise money much better in their own northern local communities and play that role in funding. But I also think it's solidarity, I think there's a big demand for greater international solidarity between INGOs and local actors. And if we work together on that, we can go a lot further as movement.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:16:49] I liked it when you talked about the local level and the local ecosystem in countries. In your view, what needs to happen now to ensure that civil society, both local NGOs and grassroots movements, can really flourish?

**Deborah Doane** [00:17:06] I suggest that the role of INGOs should actually be to strengthen civil society everywhere. And in this backlash that we're seeing internationally away from caring for others and solidarity and universalism, I think we all have to be building that, and that can only go bottom up. So how do we do that? We have to make sure we get more resources to global majority actors. I think we can grow what I call ecosystem catalyts. You might call it intermediaries. But if we see local actors, local African-based, Latin American-based, Asian-based ecosystem catalyts, I think, we need to grow that space, which also builds their own domestic fundraising resources. So that's locally owned pooled funds, we can be investing in those, I think we need to reverse our systems, that example of the reverse call that I gave, but also our systems of accountability. Why are our accountability systems where local actors are reporting upwards all of the time to the international sector? What's our mutual accountability to each other? The Pledge for Change has created a system that tries to do that, the RINGO Project supported them in that, and it builds a kind of circular two-way form of accountability, and I think we need to change our systems. We need to address our governance models so that they hard wire that mutual accountability and solidarity into it. And I guess finally, I think INGOs, and the funding system need to be open to taking far more risks and innovating and trying new ways to do civil society, if you will. So those are a few things I can talk endlessly about that.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:19:04] This is great. My next guest, Angela Lungati, she's based in Kenya. She works at the intersection of technology and community driven data. So, I'm looking forward to that conversation. I wanted to ask you, how much potential do you see in more locally generated data to really re centre knowledge, strengthen this crop production and this mutual reinforcement of different players, and really at the end, support more locally led evidence and decision-making.

**Deborah Doane** [00:19:42] So much potential. I'm a really big fan of something called Talk to Loop, which is a system designed to share that local knowledge and just get local knowledge about how people are experiencing aid and bringing that to the system. It's open, it's got multiple languages or any language possible, and we don't invest in those common systems enough. So, I think we have to drive locally led knowledge. The way that someone in Kenya, as Angela comes from, delivers a programme with her local community or nationally, it's going to be very different than how someone delivers a programme in Columbia. The ways of working are different. The culture is different. Decision-making models are different and as an external person coming in, I don't understand nearly enough about how they do it and certainly not as many humanitarians do after a three-week or a three-month trip. It has to be local driven, and I think we need to invest in those models of local knowledge. Even in our accountability mechanisms, what does success look like? When you start a project, I shouldn't be deciding what success looks like because it might be something very different for a local actor. So, there was a really lovely

example that I heard quite recently, where it was considered a failure when there was direct giving to local actors in a humanitarian situation and someone basically took it in the local community to move away because she was in a violent situation in her home. That was considered failure because she didn't invest it in some sort of business, which was what the intent of the grant was for. Why isn't that success? So, you know, that's quite an extreme example, but I did some work with an organisation called Transform Trade and they worked with local actors to say, with micro grants for investing in the local community around trade justice and what they wanted was probably completely different for what success looked like for the funding that was provided in terms of building local businesses, just building strength of people's ability to show up, and the health of civil society for them was a strong indicator of success as opposed to some of the types of, not diminutive, but outcomes that we tend to assume, you know, infant mortality or incomes rose by X percent.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:22:35] Impersonal things.

**Deborah Doane** [00:22:37] Impersonal things, data driven. I think we have to work with a local community to say, what does success look like for you?

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:22:45] Right, and context will have to play into it as well, where you are and where it has to be happening.

**Deborah Doane** [00:22:51] It has to, especially now in our political climate.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:22:55] Finally, as we close with one last reflection from you, whether or not we're witnessing this kind of end of an era for NGOs as we've known it to be. Do you see that there will be a renewal, and we'll go through this stage, and we will arrive at that place that these kinds of approaches will be the norm?

**Deborah Doane** [00:23:20] I think it's probably variable. I think we are witnessing the end of INGOs as we know it. The cuts in the aid budgets themselves alone will drive that because you can get someone like Save the Children, I think 90% of their humanitarian budget came from bilateral donors. So, they have to evolve. They have to renew in some way, and for many of the larger funders, they may no longer be the intermediary of choice. Governments are also looking at so-called value for money, which in itself is problematic and we don't want to instrumentalize that. But the reality is if you send money directly to local actors, you do get better value for money and there's a lot of research that underpins that. So, there's the DAC OECD commitments that are looking about how we strengthen and empower local actors as well. So INGOs will have no choice, but to at least adapt. I think if they're smart, they'll renew and they can only do this in partnership, in co-production models with local actors. I think they'll be smaller, they should be more agile, and they should rather than dominate the system, work in collaboration with others, and going back to my comment, if they saw themselves as their role is strength in civil society everywhere, and the hypothesis being that if we have stronger local, regional, and international societies, civil societies, we're more likely to fight for and achieve our aims. And I think INGOs that renew will bring a positive value add to that purpose.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:25:02] Well, this was great, Deborah, I really enjoyed this conversation. Thanks for all your insights. Again, thank you for coming to the show.

**Deborah Doane** [00:25:10] Thank you so much for having me.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:25:13] Deborah gives us a clear-eyed account of how the INGO model evolved and why, at its current scale and structure, it is facing challenges. The principle she advocates for is as international as necessary and as local as possible. Achieving this will require a shift in where decisions are made, how resources flow, and whose knowledge is treated as credible. That shift is exactly what Angela Oduor Lungati has been working to build. Angela shows us what a different architecture can look like in practise. Platforms that lower barriers to voice tools that work in local languages and accountability systems that run in both directions. Let's hear from her now. Hi Angela, where do I find you today?

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:26:12] Hi Garry, you are finding me in Nairobi, Kenya.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:26:15] So I get to know you better, Angela, maybe we can begin with your story. What drew you first to working at the intersection of technology, community building, and social impact?

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:26:30] So I will take you back to the very beginning because that's where it all starts from me. I am the daughter of two engineers. So, I knew from a very young age that I wanted to do something that would emulate what my parents do. I really wanted to be like mom and dad. So, you know, that'll give you that I want you to do engineering. But at the same time, I think while in school, I noticed a knack for math. I really, really just love playing around with numbers and math and so that alignment just drew me into technology. My dad brought home a laptop from work one day; I think it was back in the day when you're allowed to do that. And I started tinkering with it, playing games mostly with him. But essentially that did open up the window into, you know, technology as something interesting. And so, when I got to university, I did take on a computer science course, and then kind of branched into the tech industry. But I think the defining factor was also something that I think is a part of who I am. I'm a very social person. So, I love my black screen as much as I love interacting with people. And I think that's where the community building element comes in. And the more I have continued to do this work, the more it's become clear to me that whatever it is that I build and whatever it is that is being built using technology has to serve a particular purpose. It has to be something that is driving towards justice and the greater good for everyone, not just for me. So that would be why I'm still in this work.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:28:13] Interesting, and so interesting to see how much our parents play a role in how we kind of pick interest in a few things. And our listeners are new to your organisation, Ushahidi, which means to really bear testimony, and you can tell us a bit more about the name. And also, maybe you can explain what the platform is, how it gives space to community voices, how data gets used to inform action.

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:28:50] Ushahidi is a Swahili word that means testimony or bearing witness. We were born out of the post-election violence that broke out in Kenya back in 2007, 2008. And the challenge was really that there was a lot that was going on on the ground that was either being under-reported or not even reported at all. The founders basically set up this web platform, which is what we call the Ushahidi platform that made it easy for people to share their lived experiences around the crisis at that time, using tools already had access to the mobile phone, so SMS, using Twitter, email and the likes, and use that to really show the world what was going on. And that's been the core promise or premise of what the platform stands for. It's really an open-source tool that makes it easy for people everywhere to quickly gather data and specifically people's lived experiences from the ground and then use that data from that lived experience to tackle issues that matter the most to them. So, it's really how

we use technology to enable people to raise their voices and then used those raised voices to respond in a way that will actually be grounded in what people need.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:30:13] Interesting. And you said that Ushahidi has been deployed in countless crises, obviously. Maybe you can give us an example where it's been used in health-related situations or in public health responses, Angela.

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:30:28] This is an interesting one because I think the most recent one that I can bring up is during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was between 2020, and I think 2022 when things started to kind of die out. We saw civil society organisations, even some governments make use of the platform in various ways. I think one of my favourite examples came from Spain. There's a collection of technologists and civil society organisations that wanted to use the platform to guide what government intervention would be. And they initially started out by trying to map out where resources could be found, and it eventually evolved into a mutual aid platform. So how Angie could help Gary, who was based in, say, Madrid or somewhere else, maybe you weren't able to go out to get groceries or get medicine. And here I am saying that I am actually available, and I can do that. So, it was a really good way to connect people who needed help with people who could provide that help. And I remember them mentioning that the kind of impact they were able to create was they managed to distribute more than 28,000 masks in Spain in a span of maybe about a month or so and actually helped to guide what government efforts to respond in that time, in that timeline. And the beautiful thing is not just that they were able to do that in Spain, but they documented the model, they replicated it in 22 other Spanish speaking countries in just a couple of months. So, there are many Frena la Curva maps that did what you would always imagine an open-source platform would do, empower local people to jump in and become a part of the solution and support governments in responding to what was a public health crisis.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:32:25] Let's dive a little bit deeper at specifically in Kenya and see the role that civil society organisations or local NGOs play in strengthening communities. And are they filling the gaps that governments or international actors are missing? Is that what's happening?

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:32:44] I think so, because in Kenya, and I think it probably is the same in many other parts of the African continent, civil society, and local NGOs act like the connective tissue between people and power, right? Because they are close enough to the communities to notice what's shifting and what's happening before it becomes a crisis, whether that's drought, whether that service gaps or public trust breaking down, right? It really is, because of that trust that's also been established between the civil society and the groups that everyone is seeking to serve, they do act like that connective tissue. I think the other thing that civil society does is helping to translate what that lived experience is into actionable insights. So, you'll find that the government and international actors will have the resources, right? But you might not always have that granularity, the language, the context, the relationships, and the trust, and that is what these NGOs will carry. You know, you have the ability to convene because you're trusted, you're able to listen, you're able to validate, you are able to help these communities organise so that the people you're seeking to serve aren't just beneficiaries, but people who can actually be a part in shaping what support would look like. And lastly, I think we also help in filling gaps in accountability. So, sometimes civil society's role is service delivery, but it's also often making sure that decisions that are being made are informed by the reality on the ground and that these communities can also speak up when these systems fail them.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:34:29] We're seeing a lot of reductions, Angela, in funding from Global North, particularly in health. I mean, in the last year, it's been really monumental changes in all of that. So, from your perspective and your sort of experience, is this decline a threat to, let's say, civil society

organisations in Kenya, to their sustainability? Or is it really going to open opportunities for more locally led approaches?

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:35:02] I mean, I think in the short time, it is definitely a threat, just because it has completely shaken the, the status quo. It's a year in, we're seeing programmes having been shrunk, outreach has stopped. There are so many organisations that have had to lay off staff. Right now, I think there's many NGOs and civil society organisations that are operating from project to project just because of that sudden funding drop. So, it's important to recognise that it has already caused quite a bit of damage, but at the same time I see that disruption as an opportunity. It is, in many ways, an inflexion point because it is putting us in a space of rethinking what this dependency is. For a long time, a lot of the priorities have probably been shaped by where the funding is coming from, rather than what the communities might need. And so, this moment might also be forcing us to really think about what does domestic philanthropy look like? What does it look like to also diversify revenue streams as non-profits so that we are not constantly dependent? What does it look like for us to collaborate locally? What does it look like to design models that really reward work that is focused on building trust and building resilience within these communities? so I am holding space for how painful it is right now, but also looking at the opportunity being presented to us to really have this be a turning point and really think about what systems it is that we need to thrive, in ways that also ground us in what our lived realities are, while also channelling more energy around how we sustain these activities ourselves.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:36:58] As you're leading really the Kenyan based original sort of NGO, you interact with global systems and what has been your experience in partnering or engaging with international NGOs and what dynamics have you observed in terms of positive, challenging, how was or is your relationship with those kinds of organisations?

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:37:29] There's a lot of positives and there's also some spaces where there's room for improvement. International NGOs come with the credibility and the name in certain global spaces. And so, it's quite easy or it's much easier for them to mobilise resources quickly, especially during times of crisis. And so, the collaboration with them in times where there's definitely a lot of trust, it helps to scale impact far beyond what a small local organisation can do, so that's something that's extremely positive, being able to kind of be the giants on whose shoulders you can stand on. But at the same time, I think there's been a big challenge around power and the dynamics that power also brings. More often than not, you will find that local actors and local organisations are left to be more implementers rather than co-creators of solutions, so who's controlling the budget, where are the decisions getting made and the narratives and you know, and so all of this is sitting elsewhere while risk and reporting burdens are sitting locally. So, you have to make sure that you know you're the one who's building trust with the local beneficiaries, but you have no control or say around what can be said, what can be done and how much resources can be put out. So instead of it being a partnership, it becomes subcontracting. Some of the spaces where I've seen healthy collaboration is where I see shared ownership and a recognition of what everyone brings to the table. So, there's transparent budgeting, there's flexible funding, there's joint strategic conversations. There's a deep respect for local expertise and having that be the thing that kind of guides what interventions are being run rather than making assumptions from a global perspective. So, yes, I think it really is a call to model what real partnership actually looks like so that you can accept lived, you know, context and lived experience, closest communities, not those that are farthest to them.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:39:58] Interesting, and really what you said in terms of many of the international NGOs still hold significant power over funding and agenda setting, do you think the technology platforms like Ushahidi help shift power towards communities themselves?

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:40:19] I think they can, but making this big disclaimer, somebody who's a technology builder, that technology is an enabler, it is something that will help to amplify existing solutions rather than being the whole one. So as long as the intention to make use of whatever data is being gathered is clear and being used in the right way, then you can. And what we've seen from use of the platform over the last couple of years is, when people are able to share what they're experiencing in real time with tools they already have access to, when you lower those barriers, make it easy for them to engage in their own languages, then you also see a behavioural shift, it's almost like you're giving people ownership over what the solution is going to be. It's really about giving these communities agency to determine what stories are being told and what solutions are being given. So yes, it can be a really good way of shifting the way information is flowing so that you have a deeper understanding of what the ground actually needs and then using that to influence. But again, like I was saying, the intention has to be there because you'll find, I mean, even today when you see a lot of what's happening with young people, young people are being very clear about what it is that they want from the world today. But if nobody is going to listen and then do something, something with it, then it's moot. So, the technology has to be paired up with intention, willingness, and buy-in from the decision makers.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:42:02] You're a strong advocate for responsible use of AI in Africa, you mentioned that. How do you see AI playing a role in ensuring that local data, local languages, and local voices are properly represented in decision-making and innovation?

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:42:21] I think we are sitting in a time where, especially on the African continent, AI can either deepen exclusion or help to correct it. I think the difference really is in who is getting to shape it. Responsible AI can definitely ensure that communities are being heard at scale. If we're able to translate across languages, analyse large volumes of feedback, be able to detect patterns early and support better decisions. And I think this matters, especially within the African continent, where we have an abundance of local languages. I think we have more than 2,000 indigenous languages on the African Continent. And if we were able to ensure that there's some sort of representation in AI tools, think about what that would mean for many of the projects that are being run by whether it's small or large NGOs and what that will mean for scale of reach. But it's also worth noting that that representation isn't just, you know, technical, it's not just in ensuring that the language is there. It's also in terms of governance, because what we don't want to do is facilitate extraction, or what we call data extractivism, where you do all this work to try and make these languages representative, but there's no value going back to the communities. How do we give agency to people around what data can be used to represent them in these AI systems and what value comes back to them? So, you end up seeing how, you know, if you can help people decide how this data is collected, shared, and used, then AI can also be a tool for dignity and participation. So, I think for me, the goal isn't just African data in AI for representation, but it's really African agency within AI systems. So, continue to build channels where we can continue to try and verify information where we can continue to strengthen digital literacy and support communities to organise safely, continue to advocate for the right governance structures and rights respecting policies, so thinking around data protection, transparency, and limits on surveillance. So, if anything, it feels like we have more work to do. The scope of work for civil society just feels like it is increasing.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:44:46] And maybe that brings me to my last question from, with all of that in mind, and from your vantage point of working in this space, what forms of support, like what is it financial, structural, technological, political, that NGOs like in your words, local NGOs, grassroots movements, need really in order to fully and truly flourish.

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:45:15] The first one, we need long-term, flexible funding. You know, funding that really is, it acknowledges the expertise that we have and that exists and allows us to actually focus on doing the work. So, you're not just chasing grant cycles and you're not just constantly worrying about where the, you know, when the next round of funding is going to be coming in or focusing too much on reporting. On the organisational infrastructure side, I think there's learning systems, a bit of capacity building. So looking at what are some of the gaps internally, it could be security, it could finance, it could digital literacy, really looking at exactly what that would look like, and especially in this day and age, I think one of the biggest realisations as we continue to navigate this AI era is the realisation that Civil society is only coming into the conversation right now. The conversation has largely been focused on builders of technology and specifically a select few, and more within the context of what geopolitical dramas might be going on, as opposed to really think about how we can ground it in amplifying some of the impact that these civil society organisations are building. So also access to technology be good. Helping us to work with secure data systems, privacy preserving, artificial intelligence, a lot of capacity building around that. But most importantly, I think protection of the civic space is also important. I think we've been seeing a bit of backtracking in many parts of the world where it feels like speaking up is no longer kosher or that you are persecuted for speaking up against certain ills. So, you know, looking at what legal protection looks like, looking at what political respect looks like and just recognising that a strong civil society actually strengthens democracy rather than threatens it. Those would be my key calls for support.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:47:38] This was great to hear all of this, Angela, thanks so much, particularly bringing those really interesting transformational changes that are happening and how local groups like yours are working.

**Angela Oduor Lungati** [00:47:51] Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed this conversation.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:47:56] I found today's conversation with Deborah and Angela both clarifying and genuinely hopeful. Three reflections stay with me. First, the INGO model is at crossroads. The question is not whether INGOs will change, but whether they will do so in genuine partnership with local communities. Second, proximity is form or expertise. The people closest to a problem carry knowledge, and context that cannot be ignored, and our global health structures need to reflect that. And third, technology can be equalised but only when it is designed around agency and not just access. Let's hear from one of our listeners.

**Sam Oti** [00:48:55] My name is Sam Oti, listening to the Global Health Matters podcast from Nairobi, Kenya. What I really appreciate about the podcast is that it brings depth back into global health conversations. This is really important in a field that, in my opinion, can be characterised by buzzwords and sometimes a little too much rhetoric. As far as I'm concerned, the podcast has created a much-needed space for critical reflexion in global health. Many of the episodes move beyond the expected narratives. They address tough questions about power, about equity, and about whose knowledge counts in global health. I also appreciate the intellectual honesty from the diversity of guests on the show. Garry's guests don't pretend that solutions are simple, whether they are talking about pandemic preparedness, health systems reform, or even decolonizing global health, guests tend to acknowledge the trade-offs and uncertainties facing our field, which is exactly what serious global health leadership requires. For anyone committed to strengthening health systems and advancing health equity, the Global Health Matters podcast isn't just another podcast to me. It's a space for critical thinking and meaningful dialogue, which I think is exactly what we need in these very uncertain times for global health and the wider development sector.

**Garry Aslanyan** [00:50:43] Thank you Sam, for that message. I really appreciate your reflections about the podcast and the role it plays in really this important time of evolution of global health. If you haven't already, subscribe to the Global Health Matters newsletter so you don't miss the rest of our season five conversations on the future of global health. To learn more about the topic discussed in this episode, visit the episode's webpage 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 co-sponsored research programme based at the World Health Organization. Thank you for listening.