



Interview with Kasthuri Soni (Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator)

Skyler Reid

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Skyler Reid: Could you introduce yourself and tell me a bit more about the problem that you're addressing, and how you and Harambee are addressing it?

Kasthuri Soni: I'm Kasthuri Soni. I'm the CEO of Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, which is a not-for-profit social enterprise in South Africa that partners with business, government, civil society, and young people to break down barriers to enable economic inclusion and create and unlock opportunities for young people. The youth unemployment crisis is at significant levels in South Africa. It truly is a crisis, probably one of the highest in the world, currently just over 45%. Just to give you an indication in numbers, of the 1.1 million young people that exit the schooling system every year, roughly two-thirds end up not in education, employment, or training. Our formal sector, which is the growth engine of the economy, is not growing at the level that it should, and certainly not producing enough jobs, and particularly in a post-COVID environment.

In addition to that, we have a demand-supply mismatch in the labor market, and what I mean by that is that the education system is not preparing young people for the world of work. There is quite a lot of investment in post-school skilling and education; however, with very low conversion into economic activity for young people. Our young people who want to be engaged in the economy have to actually navigate a whole lot of broken systems and get through many barriers to gain access into the labor market. Let me give you an example. One of those barriers in South Africa is the high cost of data. The data cost that it takes for young people to search for work is probably one of the highest in the continent, just connectivity and being able to get access to the internet. Another barrier is transport costs. Typically, what we have found is that if a young person has to take more than one taxi to get to their place of employment, and a taxi is a public form of transport, then they're not retained in that job for long. Retention becomes a problem because the cost of transport is disproportionately high in relation to what they're earning. Young women have higher barriers to entry in the world of work than men. They have less time to search for work because of household and childcare responsibilities, less money to apply for jobs, gender stereotypes, and of course, the risk of sexual harassment in the workplace.



Essentially, all of these different dimensions show that the youth unemployment problem in South Africa is complex and layered, and so over the last 11 years, Harambee has partnered with business, government, and civil society to build data-driven solutions to address youth unemployment at scale. At the core and the heart of what we do is unlock opportunities for young people across the full economy, which includes formal sector jobs, entrepreneurial or make-your-own-money type opportunities, as well as public employment programs. Then we focus on reducing the barriers that young people face in trying to access the labor market, such as transport, such as data costs.

Skyler Reid: Is the work you do direct service to the young people, or is it working more on building out the systems to assist them?

Kasthuri Soni: I would say it's a combination of both, because we do take a systems approach to solving this problem. Since our inception in 2011, we have supported a network of over 4 million young people in their search for work. We have enabled 930,000 opportunities or pathways for work seekers, and we have created the [inaudible] of over 2,000 employer partners, young people, to generate income for themselves. If we help a young person gain their first foothold in the economy, they will be more likely to remain in the workforce for a long time. However, what we have seen is that young people's pathways in the economy are not linear. Certainly we've all seen that the nature of work has changed and the idea of permanency is not that common. What we've seen is that young people zigzag in and out of the economy. Harambee, then, decided to build, develop, and implement what we call a pathway management model. The intention of that is, as these young people zigzag in and out of the economy from one opportunity, which might be six months or a volunteer opportunity, to the next opportunity, which might be an internship program, the intention of the pathway management model was to illuminate the next best pathway for a young person and make it as frictionless as possible for them to transition through the labor market. The goal is to keep them productively engaged for as long as possible, which will grow their employability and also grow the resilience and sustainability of their income.

To power this concept, this approach, and this pathway management model, we have built and operate a multi-channel platform called SA Youth. SA Youth gives young people free access to aggregated learning and earning opportunities. Another thing that we found is that there are so many people in our ecosystem who are doing youth programs, and we were asking these young people - who are the ones with limited resources - to go from one program to another, one application to another. And we said, "Actually, we are the ones that should be organizing around them," and so that is why SAU is an aggregator of opportunities from all partners, private sector



and public sector in the economy, so that a young person from their perspective can come to one place.

By its design, it addresses some of those barriers that I mentioned to you. It's got a Mobi site that gives a young person free access so they don't have to pay for data. It has a toll-free telephone support line that young people can call in on to receive support. The system matches young people to opportunities based on geography, where they're located, which addresses the transport barrier. To bring it to life for you in terms of a young person, there is one story of a young person from the Eastern Cape in South Africa. She was placed into a short-term program as a teacher assistant. It was a program that was initiated by governments for a public employment program. After six months her contract ended and she went onto SAU and updated her experience, and she continued to search for work every day. She found the next opportunity as a field worker for an organization called Stats Essay that was also a short-term opportunity. Once again, she completed it, went back, updated her profile, and today she actually has a permanent job with an organization called Home Choice. **The idea of the pathway manager is to guide, enable, and nudge young people to the next best thing for them.** The SA youth platform addresses those two barriers of transport and high data costs through its very design.

The other big area of focus is unlocking jobs and we take two approaches in relation to that. One is looking at existing opportunities in the economy and how we get employers to hire more inclusively. Typically, not using their traditional signals of how they hire like prior work experience, but actually using other proxies which can give our young people who are locked out of the economy an opportunity to work in those jobs. That's one approach. The second approach is to work with businesses, government, and civil society in sunrise or priority growth sectors, and these are sectors where, despite a low growth economy, there are still jobs that can be unlocked. For example, the most obvious one would probably be the digital economy, which globally has seen opportunities.

Let me give you an example of where that model has worked. In the global business services sector, which is also known as the business process outsourcing sector, Harambee played an intermediation role bringing together government business and civil society in that ecosystem and mobilizing them around what are the interventions needed to unlock jobs in that sector. That process resulted in the sector committing to creating 350,000 to 500,000 net new jobs by 2030. To date, they've already created over 80,000 jobs. It's the only sector, believe it or not, in our economy that grew during COVID because we were able to declare it as an essential sector and continue to service international clients.



To give you another data point around where we do indirect or systems change work, Harambee partnered with the sector body, an organization called Business Process Enabling South Africa, as well as the government department responsible for that sector, which is the Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition. We were able to include in the master plan for the sector for any international company that comes into South Africa that wants to qualify for the incentive for bringing new jobs to include a requirement that they've got to hire at least 30% of young people who were excluded from the economy. It's a 30% inclusive hiring requirement.

That's a real example of systems change, where you're working at the systems level whilst you're actually having direct benefit to putting those 80,000 young people into jobs. Similarly, we have just mobilized around the digital sector to bring together two initiatives that are happening concurrently in the country to bring them together as one national initiative. That's a sector where we did some demand diagnostic work and identified that there are over 60,000 entry level jobs, but there's not enough skills to meet those jobs. Currently, that coalition of partners is solving for, how do we create those skilling solutions that can enable the unlocking of those jobs?

An example of a skilling solution that we piloted in the digital sector is we set up a digital simulation academy where we take young people who have come through some kind of digital academy, but we put them into a 12-month work integrated learning intervention. They spend 12 months working with real clients we've secured. For example, software testing work from a client, we enter into a contract with their client, and these young people work on those projects under supervision for a year. What has happened from the first cohort is that all those young people end up getting permanently absorbed by those organizations and it creates a demonstration effect for reshoring the work back to South Africa. **Our approach to unlocking new opportunities is to look at identified priority growth sectors, such as agriculture, such as digital, and apply this kind of sector-based model of working with all the actors in the ecosystem to mobilize around what opportunities are needed.**

Skyler Reid: There are a lot of groups working towards the youth unemployment issue. You mentioned a few of these specific things, the aggregation of work and education opportunities, is there anything else that makes your work and your approach distinctive?

Kasthuri Soni: Different organizations are doing different things in the ecosystem, and we realize that we need to organize ourselves around them. It actually has been quite formalized in an intervention called the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention, which is the country's national coordinated response to the youth unemployment crisis. Harambee has been appointed as an anchor partner in that intervention, and the intervention is led by our own Department of Employment and Labor, and a coalition of partners who, like I said, are looking at how to bring



together all of our work in a way that we can align and coordinate to optimize impact for young people. The intention is to create what we refer to as a network of networks. The official name is the National Pathway Management Network. Our pathway management model has been adopted by the government at a country level. The intention is to bring together those different entities and role-players in the ecosystem in a way that builds this network of networks. The SA Youth Platform is one of the systems that powers that network of networks. Alongside the SAYouth.mobi system is the government's system called ESSA, which is Employment Services of South Africa.

The vision is to build an interoperable network, so that any organization that's working with young people and has opportunities for young people can then interface with each other so that, from a young person's perspective, it is seamless for them. Whether they register on our government's Department of Employment and Labor Services platform or whether they register on SAU, they're able to see visibility of opportunities across both, as well as then transition seamlessly between the two. We are at the early stages of doing that, but that will absolutely be a game changer and be totally transformative for young people in the country. It is a journey, and our National Youth Development Agency has already gone live with that application programming interface, which will allow young people to have visibility of opportunities across both. Certainly, that differentiates us in terms of our approach, and again, to your point about working at a systemic level, it's a data point of that. We are an organization from day one that's been very demand led, meaning we focus on where the opportunities are in the labor market. We were never set up as a training organization, but rather, what is the quickest way to get a young person into income earning?

Of course, young people can continue to grow their employability skills and study while they're earning income, but really what's the speed to competence? How do we transition them as quickly as possible? The other thing I would say is that, at Harambee, our mantra is that we must stay in love with the problem, not our solutions, because the youth unemployment challenge is complex, it's layered, and it's not static. Our solutions must be agile and responsive, and we must iterate our solutions based on what the problem demands of us. We are very focused on keeping the voices of young people at the heart of everything that we do. We have a 125 seat contact center and the toll-free line that young people who are searching for work on a daily basis are calling into that contact center.

We have quite close proximity to the problem we are trying to solve. That is number one. Two, that approach and model enables us to operate at scale, and three, the young people that are calling us are being helped and supported by young people who are on the very same journey as them. It's all young people who are work seekers themselves, and they are called guides. The reason they're called guides is that they drive a meaningful conversation with the young person on the



other end of the line. It's not a scripted kind of conversation, but really trying to understand where they're at in their search for work, what are the barriers, how can we support and enable them, how can we get them from standing still to actually starting to earn some money for themselves? That is a key asset and capability that we deploy across the country in terms of enabling this work that we do. All of our learnings, because we operate in sort of a lean impact, agile approach, come straight into our operations on a regular basis. We then iterate our solutions based on what we are learning.

The other thing that I think is at the heart of our model is that we believe that the scale, depth, and complexity of the problem that we are trying to solve is too significant to be solved by a single actor in the ecosystem. We work with the government, businesses, civil society, and young people themselves. For us, it's all about partnerships, partnerships, partnerships. It's fundamental to achieving what we're trying to do, social compacting and combining our efforts. The need for focused and intentional intersected collaboration has never been greater and more urgent than it is now. Even as the National Pathway Manager, Harambee plays a critical role in aligning and enabling that entire ecosystem, working alongside the presidency.

Skyler Reid: Are there key insights from the work that you think could be applied more generally towards someone else who wants to work on similar issues, like youth unemployment, but maybe in different places?

Kasthuri Soni: Staying in love with the problem and keeping young people at the heart of everything that you are solving for, keeping their voices and, again, partnerships. Working with other organizations, not trying to go at it alone. Definitely, grounding your work in a data-driven approach. We use data-driven innovative solutions because we have, as you can imagine for a network of over 4 million young people, lots of data points. So we are consistently analyzing that data, questioning what we are doing, learning, improving, adapting, iterating. In fact, one of the things that we will elevate in our work is what we are referring to as pathway intelligence. What is the data telling us about how young people are transitioning in the labor market, and how can that then influence policy changes that are relevant? How can that influence programming that's relevant? That's also critical. From an organizational strengthening perspective, which is a slightly different perspective, not just around the actual technicality of the work, is don't only focus on the what of your work, but also the how. What I mean by that is, if you're going to do this type of work at scale, it is of course difficult because you're trying to change systems that are pretty embedded, so I would say that you must build a values-driven culture, where your values come to life in the behaviors of your team and how they show up every day.



I always say, "Bring your head, your hands, and your heart to your work. Lead with authenticity, humanity, and humility." Consistently having a change in depth culture is not easy. We also have another mantra which says, "Change is the only constant," and that is because we are staying in love with our problem, we always have to change and do what the problem demands of us. We are all human, so as you can imagine, embracing change all the time and building a change-adept organization is not easy. I'll say two other things. The one is to absolutely be demand focused. The fundamental principle on which Harambee was founded, understanding where the opportunities are and what is it going to take to get young people into those opportunities.

That is also a significant capability of Harambee understanding the market, being able to do that diagnostic, and then understand, based on what the market needs, how do you ready, prepare, and close the gaps in terms of competence and behaviors to transition a young person into that opportunity? The last thing I would say is that, in our daily work, we see that our job is to be the creators of hope. Young people, despite the situation, demonstrate absolutely extraordinary resilience and optimism. They're tenacious. They are determined. They have a strong desire to be productively engaged in the economy. We must see them as the solution, not the problem, and we need to back them with intentional investment and support. Let me give you a data point, again, of where we see this kind of optimism and a strong desire to be engaged in the economy. We partnered with the Department of Basic Education in South Africa to place about 255,000 young people into teacher assistant and admin assistant posts for a six-month period. In three weeks, we received 13.5 million applications from 1.5 million applicants, for those 255,000 opportunities in 22,000 schools. That just tells you that our young people are hungry. They want opportunity. From that experience, we were able to test our platform's ability to function at scale, because in those three weeks we had less than 1% downtime. We were able to match young people to schools in close proximity to where they live, again, addressing the transport barrier. That gives you a sense that the young people absolutely want to work, and we need to back them, we need to support them, we need to listen to them.

Skyler Reid: Have you learned any lessons from things that didn't work?

Kasthuri Soni: I think our biggest challenge has been, and remains, that there's not enough economic opportunities for young people. Even with the formal sector, like I mentioned, we focus on a full economy approach, so jobs, micro-enterprise type of opportunities, as well as public employment programs. Employer advocacy and working with employees is not easy because you are getting employers to challenge their inherent assumptions about what is required for the world of work and what is actually needed for a job. It's been one of the hardest things we've had to overcome, and it's actually more change management.



We've had to drive a lot of change management around the private sector using more exclusionary, traditional ways of hiring young people, like CVs, prior work experience, and educational qualifications, as opposed to them considering alternative signals of a young person's capability. Young people may not have formal, traditional work experience, but many of them are volunteering. Many of them are doing things that give them skills that would be valuable to an employer. We have to do a lot of work, consistently, to get employers to understand that in terms of entry level roles, you actually don't need only traditional formal sector experience. That continues to always be something that we will have to work on.

We consistently create demonstration effects and have been successful in crowding in a coalition of partners, which helps us work with people who are committed to changing the status quo. In that way, you are able to get other people to join the journey with you. The other thing that we are learning right now, as I speak, is that this shift to being more of a systems change agent with this new role requires us to not only focus on our own operational execution capability, which is one of our strengths, but actually if you're going to work with this ecosystem and leverage each other's assets and capabilities, you need to work through others, and working through others and enabling others is not easy. It's hard to influence where you do not control and it takes time to execute. As I said, we are an agile business. Speed of execution was one of our strengths, but now, if we want to bring the entire ecosystem along, we actually have to slow down, which is counterintuitive, right? Working in a context of the youth unemployment crisis, which actually requires acceleration of solutions at scale, we have to strengthen our partnership muscles. From day one, Harambee was set up as a public private partnership, so we always knew we were not going to do this alone; however, working in this ecosystem as a system change agent certainly requires different capabilities, and we are still growing and building those capabilities.

The way we've shifted our thinking is that we are not starting off by saying, "Okay. What does Harambee need to do?" We actually look at the problem and say, "Okay. What needs to happen in the system? Who is best placed to do that, and what is Harambee's role in that?" That's what I mean when I say that sometimes you have to influence somebody else to do something that the system needs, and that is harder and more difficult, and it takes time, it takes patience, it takes shared objectives. Obviously things are going to go wrong, so values alignment becomes critical. Like I mentioned, the problem we're trying to solve is complex and layered and there isn't a silver bullet. We have to be very change-adept, which is not easy.

Now, playing this role within the country means that from a financing perspective we are getting more funding from the government and we have to retain that balance between our agility whilst having to navigate the bureaucracy of government and the public accountability from a funding perspective. Doing this work requires significant investment because the scale is huge. How do



we secure and build sustainability of our business? How we secure long-term institutional public financing is going to be key for us. Particularly, in our case, we operate in a very volatile political environment. It's working across political parties, across governments, across regions. As you can imagine, that is ongoing work and it's not quick work. Given that the SA Youth Platform drives our scalability in the example that I gave you around how we serviced the department of basic education, optimizing our tech becomes critical. Like every other organization around the globe, attracting tech talent is something that's not easy. It's something that we are having to think innovatively and creatively around how to do.

Skyler Reid: You were talking about having to convert employers, to get them to understand that there are skills other than traditional work experience that should be considered. I'm wondering if you would be able to give me a more specific example of how you convert someone to that mentality? What do you say to them? How do you get them to change their mind about that?

Kasthuri Soni: When Harambee was founded, the founding company was an investor in many businesses. What they did was they went through a whole change management process with their own businesses to say that, "If we actually backed you, would you be prepared to join this coalition saying, 'Let's take a whole pool of unemployed youth, match them to your opportunities, prepare them for the world of work, and then transition them?'" Now, 11 years later, there were five founding businesses and once we had created that demonstration effect, going on to add others was easier. I think being able to create a demonstration effect and having serviced many of those employers with huge success helps. Being able to say to them, "There are these young people. They do have the skills. They are alternative proxies," it cannot be a transactional approach. You've got to find an employer that's really vested and buys into what you're doing, and can see that profit and purpose are not mutually exclusive, you can bring the two together. And they are prepared to partner with you, because obviously things are going to go wrong along the line. We have a digital bank, we started off with them as a partner when we piloted a whole lot of interventions because they were committed to what we were trying to achieve as well. Now, they are one of the partners that actually services themselves off our platform, completely self-service, we don't have to intervene. A lot of it is actually doing diagnostics in the labor market and identifying the different job families.

For example, in our financial services sector, identifying the different employers, and literally, you have to pound the pavements, as we say, approaching those employers and going to present this value proposition to them as an alternative. I will say, though, in South Africa, with this crisis, there is definitely a greater willingness to come together and understand that we actually need to solve this, that businesses do need to start backing young people in the country so that we can have a



longevity of a thriving business. I think there is a willingness to do that, but it absolutely is hard work because you have to go and present the value proposition to them, present that to have somebody who's in the back-of-house grilling chicken, they don't need to have metric mats, there are other ways to test suitability for a job.

It's about giving them alternatives and then measuring the impact and consistently using case studies of employers who have seen the impact on their business and as part of your advocacy. It's solving for what the employer needs from a business perspective, giving them an alternative solution to consider but, at the same time, also making it such that it'll make sense from a young person's perspective. What I mean by that, as an example of where we had to do advocacy work, was that we placed young people into these jobs after training them, readying them in much effort, and then found that they were dropping out. When we did some research, we realized the reason for that was the high transport cost in the first month.

We had to go back to employers, do some advocacy work in the first month, saying give them an advance so that they can actually pay for transport. In that way, you are able to retain them in your businesses a lot longer. In summary, it is doing a diagnosis, understanding what the employer's pain points are, and then trying to solve for that by saying, "Okay. These are the skilling solutions that can get these young people ready for you." At the moment, SA Youth gives opportunity holders and employers access to four million young people. We don't charge them a financial fee. All we ask is that they give us information in return to what's working. Has the young person succeeded in the job? Essentially, they're leveraging our assets, in terms of sourcing and recruiting, in that first part of the value chain.

Skyler Reid: You mentioned public, private partnership, working with government agencies, various bureaucracies, but that you have to be able to stay agile. Do you have any strategies you would recommend for being able to stay agile in such a situation?

Kasthuri Soni: What we do is we negotiate on targets and outcomes so that, hopefully, gives us the flexibility to solve as we need to solve, based on what we are seeing the problem is telling us. It's important to try to get to a point where you're not negotiating based on inputs, but rather on outcomes. Rather than saying, "You've got to have five research meetings in a year," you actually want to focus on the outcome. In that way, it'll give you some flexibility.

But that being said, you also do have to understand that, because you're accountable for public money, you have to build systems and build teams that can report against that, because financial management and accountability is going to be critical in building trust of the government in you to continue to fund you. They'll never completely get away from those bureaucratic systems and



compliance requirements, so setting yourself up with the right people, the right systems, the right reporting mechanisms to be able to meet that compliance, definitely is key.

Then, it is about building relationships with your government partners, understanding what their needs are, understanding what you're trying to do, and trying to find the sweet spot between the two. What we also do is try to immerse people into the work so that they can actually see it and experience it, and not just read about it on spreadsheets or in documents. In that way, it comes to life for them, and you find that you have somebody who's more of an ally that can problem solve with you.

I think taking this approach of problem solving together, co-creating together, understanding each of your specific needs, and as I say, trying to find the intersection between those two which, of course, is not always easy. This work, I always say, requires low ego, high EQ, because you are working with systems which are difficult to shift, and it's consistently time to also put forward those data points, the evidence base for what you're trying to do.

Skyler Reid: How do you see your work in this project evolving in the next five years?

Kasthuri Soni: We set a goal within the next five years, and we are sort of into the five years already, that by 2026 we will have a network of 3 million young people that we are supporting and are having a transformed work experience. In addition to those numeric goals, because again, they're just proxies for what needs to be replicated across the system, we also have systems change goals. We have things like wanting to solve this issue around access, connectivity, data, to solve the challenge around transport, as well as unlocking all these economic opportunities.

We have targets around unlocking economic opportunities, transitioning young people into work, removing some of these barriers that young people face. Of course, like I said, the most transformative one is going to be making all of our systems interoperable so that young people can transition seamlessly amongst and between those systems. In that process, building and strengthening the ecosystem, because we do not believe that we want to replicate. So for example, we work with community-based organizations who have their own network of youth, their own programs, and it's about understanding how do we then give them content and support that enables them to give young people what they need in their community? Building and strengthening this coalition of partners that are working together, to really get young people working.

The last thing I'll say is we do have a gender lens to our work. I mentioned the barriers that women face are much higher, so we are trying to get more women into economic inclusion. As an



example of that, we work with the plumbing industry and a range of training partners who are providing skilling and job opportunities for women who would typically be marginalized in the male-dominated sector. They're enabling gender inclusion, and that then gives young women more opportunities.

There's all these sorts of parallel things that we do to your earlier question, which is both operating, providing direct services, like through SAYouth.mobi and those multiple channels. We will continue to support young people. But alongside that, we will also be driving systems change so that we can shift the levers that are going to accelerate economic inclusion across the entire ecosystem, so it's consistently working on both. The one sort of creates demonstration and proof points of the other. The other big thing is solving for the skilling solutions, essentially solving for what it is going to take to get that young person ready for the world of work. We've identified specific job families where we need to create skilling solutions so that we can get young people into those opportunities.

Skyler Reid: Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you think is important to consider?

Kasthuri Soni: I think I've covered pretty much most of it. The takeaways are absolutely focus on demand, creating opportunities for young people, and focus on breaking down those barriers that young people face in the labor market. Listen to their voices, keep them at the center of everything that you're doing, stay in love with the problem, and it's all about social compacting and partnership, multi-sector partnerships, just to sum it all up.

Skyler Reid is a multimedia producer and journalist living in New York City. He's worked on award-winning projects both nationally and internationally, and has produced photo, video and text features for publications including The Washington Post, The Guardian, VICE, NBC News and others. He's covered breaking news and features for wire services including Reuters, the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse. Much of his work focuses on urban development and communities, but occasionally delves into Satanic crime, pot churches, and pro wrestling. He takes too many photos of his dog, Bowie, and is obsessed with karaoke.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*