



Interview with Celina de Sola (Glasswing International)

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you please introduce yourself and what you do?

Celina de Sola: I'm Celina de Sola. I'm one of the co-founders of Glasswing International. I'm a social entrepreneur and my background is in social work and public health.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is the main problem that you're working to solve and how are you working to address it?

Celina de Sola: I'd say the main problem we're looking to solve is the fact that in Latin America, so many young people are exposed to violence and trauma and stressors which limits the access they can have to so many opportunities. So, I think it's a combination of this context of violence with a lack of opportunity, the implications of the violence, and also just a lack of opportunity generally for young people, for kids, children and adolescents as well. We're trying to address the causes of these issues that are faced in most of the countries we work with.

Ashley Hopkinson: A lot of people that you're working with are exposed to a lot of violence or might even be a part of being impacted by violence. How have you found that?

Celina de Sola: Yeah, I mean, it's a region that has over a third of the homicides taking place in Latin America globally, even though it's like 8% of the population. So, if you think about the exposure to violence, even if it's not homicide, for every homicide, how much other violence is there? Different kinds of violence within families, across gender. There's so many different kinds of violence and then social exclusion and stigma and all these things. So, really that's a huge barrier, which keeps people from not being able to become first, from not being able to have aspirational thinking or futures thinking because you're trying to survive.



Second, it also keeps you from being able to access opportunities because you've faced so much stigma. Again, you're trying to survive day to day, so that violence prevents people from being able to thrive. And that's something that we see in the communities that we work with. So, again, that impacts social cohesion. It impacts so many different things, but at the end of the day, your human rights to feel safe and to access education and health are not being met. They're not.

Ashley Hopkinson: Who specifically are the people or groups of people that you're working with and how do you serve them?

Celina de Sola: The population we focus on the most are young people, school aged. So children and young people that are in schools and public schools located in communities that face high levels of poverty and exposure to crime, violence. We have school age and then we also work with young people that are not in school either because they finished school, but they're still in conditions where they're facing a lot of adversity. Or it's young people that didn't finish school and are probably not working, they're socially excluded and economically excluded.

The population age is pretty broad, but I'd say the focus ages are kindergarten, first grade through our afterschool programs through high school and then again up to 22, 23 year olds. We also work with families and communities in different programs, but I'd say that we're very child and youth centered in the way we think about programming and youth going into the early 20s. The criteria for where we work, what communities we choose to work with is definitely focusing on communities that face a lot of adversity and that are impacted by poverty and violence.

Ashley Hopkinson: So, primarily elementary school all the way up into high school or if we're talking international, then primary school, secondary school, and maybe people who haven't been able to have access to education in that way?

Celina de Sola: Yes, all the way into young adulthood. I'll tell you about the program. Our education programs are one of the main things we do. It's almost like we see the public school as a center of community, a natural convener and infrastructure that is very unique in each community, but everybody knows where the school is. They probably knew someone who went there, or they've gone there themselves. So, we leverage public school infrastructure through a program that we call community schools. But what we do is we work together with the ministries of education with public schools and communities. We mobilize volunteers and we have a school coordinator and we basically run extra, I'd say complimentary programs. So, extracurricular programs that focus on developing the social and emotional skills and building on the existing social and emotional skills and developing new social and emotional skills amongst participants.

And those are run by trained volunteers, predominantly including former students or some of the older students running programs for their younger peers, teachers, other community members,



corporate volunteers. So, that program, and the afterschool and the extracurricular program that we also have includes tutoring programs. The afterschool programs can range from robotics to glee to English to, like I said, tutoring, and sports. And then we also work with parents and communities through community cafes and restorative practices. In this community schools program, there are all these complementary initiatives that are involved, mental health and positive youth development. I'm totally oversimplifying the programs, but I think I said enough so you can picture it. It's transforming a public school into a center of community, so to speak.

Aside from that, we also have youth economic opportunities programs where we work with young people who are neither in school nor working. And we do vocational training, entrepreneurship training, and financial competencies. In the broader sense, it's youth economic opportunities. Within that, that also includes work we're doing with, what is almost like an AmeriCorps model. We have a program where we're providing stipends for some young people to be able to work in their communities for social change. So, they're still part of our youth programming and they receive monthly stipends and they impact their communities by working in the school and the clinic and the municipality. It's like a Central American Service Corps, so to speak.

We also work on programs with gender. We do have a heavy focus on girls when we are talking about gender. We've been doing, over the years, a lot of work with girls and young women, in rural areas predominantly, to build their assets. We learned a lot from the population council. I worked there for a while. So, it's looking at this asset building model of social and financial assets also. And then access to health information. We have gender clubs where we work with all kids, but we have also had a focus on girls and young women in a lot of the communities we work in. It's hard to separate these out because so much of this is crosscutting, but we work a lot with mental health and that mental health programming is basically focused on working within public systems just like we do with our education programming.

All of our work is within public systems, but this initiative called SanaMente [which means healthily and also means healthy mind] is focused on training existing public service frontline workers or teachers and everybody in basically the whole staff in a public school, the whole staff in a hospital, in a clinic. We work with judicial and child protection, we work with law enforcement. What we're working on is to saturate these systems with a better understanding of the impact of stress and trauma on themselves so they can also understand better what the people they're serving are facing. And that helps them be better equipped to provide services to the population. It's really working on the systems piece and integrating a trauma-informed lens, but from a place of self-care and understanding how we are impacted by these things physically, emotionally, behaviorally, everything in terms of the way we think.



We ask “how does that change the way you see yourself? How does that change the way you provide care for the population?” So, really cross-cutting work. We integrate mental health into all of the programs that we're working on. And the other thing that's cross-cutting is the volunteerism, which I mentioned with the schools as well. For us, a lot of our programming is powered by volunteering. We have an amazing staff too. We have a team of over 600, but there are thousands of volunteers that are really powering the programs. A lot of our former students are also volunteers, which is great. 60 of them are staff and then others are volunteers. I think those are the main programs.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you feel is distinctive about the work that you're doing in this specific space of social change? What do you think makes the programming that you guys are carrying out different from what other people are doing?

Celina de Sola: I have to say, and by the way, I forgot to mention one program, which is obviously really important, but I'm thinking internationally. We work in New York City with recently arrived immigrant youth and families as well. So, that's a really important part of our work domestically in the US. For us, it's not domestic because we're based in El Salvador, but for the US it is. We work with immigrant families and immigrant youth through public schools, and also just direct outreach to immigrant families on mental health and also humanitarian support.

And then to your next question. I feel like we learn a lot from so many other NGOs, so I don't know if there's anything totally new about what we do. I think what's unique is that we think across systems what you just said. **When we focus on young people, we think about who they are interacting with, who are the stakeholder entities that young people and kids and families interact with the most? And then what do we need to do to create conditions that enable kids to feel safe and be able to thrive and become the best versions of themselves? Instead of saying, “okay, this is going to be our one intervention and we stick to that,” we are really responsive to more of an ecosystem approach and always have been actually since we started.**

So, really thinking about that and constantly asking the young people we work with, what they think, what their priorities are. Not being focused on one sector, but rather being focused on how these different sectors can impact both negatively and positively, how young people, whether or not young people are able to access the safety and opportunity that they have a right to have. And again, I don't know if anything's totally unique to any organization. I think we all learn from each other, but that is something we try to do in the region that is unique. Most people work only in health or only in education. So, that is something. The other thing is I'd say we've been working on mental health for a long time since we started the organization, so it's something that we've been really committed to because we've been working in a context of violence, thinking about mental health as a way to address the root causes of violence.



Just fundamentally believing that if someone is involved as either a victim or a perpetrator of violence, it's probably because they've been [a victim], it's a cyclical thing. We really believe that this can change if we mitigate the impacts of the exposure to stress and trauma and really believe that these are behaviors that can be changed, that no one's born a violent person and people don't naturally want to commit any sort of act of violence and that this can be interrupted. And that's something that's really important for us as an organization. I'd say that we're really committed to rigor and making sure that our learning, our commitment to learning is really deep. Making sure that we evaluate what we're doing often, particularly with those we work with to make sure, and also just through research and studies, but to make sure that we're achieving what we're setting out to do and not being afraid to really change what we're doing if it's not working.

Ashley Hopkinson: I think the multidisciplinary approach is really wonderful and it's distinctive that you guys are doing things in different sectors and then also looking for people that might fall outside of those systems. Especially given what you mentioned in New York where you might get families in school, but through direct outreach you might get other people that are not necessarily so centered in the school system.

Celina de Sola: Sometimes it's not easy to work with government systems, but at the end of the day, they're composed of individuals. You can't really change your system if you're not working at the individual level when it comes to human interaction. So, it's like you have this huge kind of beast, this huge ministry or secretary of something and it's like thousands of employees and it seems like something that's so slow to be able to move or to change. At the end of the day, each person in there, they're their own universe and each person's trying to do their best with what information they have given their context. We're trying to focus on that, how do you think about that, think about each individual within these systems, and then how do we equip as many of us as possible with the knowledge, understanding, and skills to better manage situations that can otherwise turn really adverse for ourselves and for other people?

It's trying to break down this big system into that kind of understanding that we always want to impact the system, but it's bite by bite, step by step. If we're thinking of the context of violence to change that, we can't do that without really thinking about interactions between people and how they can go from being interactions that can be violent, interactions that can be conducive to healing. If we don't address that, we can't really have any other outcomes. If you don't address mental health, you can't really have good education outcomes or other kinds of health outcomes like chronic disease and others. So, for us it's really foundational to think about that both through the social and emotional learning in the schools, but also just through more explicit mental health training.



Ashley Hopkinson: If someone was looking to do something similar to what you've done, let's say it's perhaps a different area or a different region, what would be some key things that you would say they need to do or they need to understand to have better chances? For example, what's one thing that maybe you all have implemented that has worked well or something that you've imagined would work well and it turns out it didn't work as well as you thought. What insights might you be able to share or lessons learned?

Celina de Sola: If I start at 20,000 feet, I think sometimes we wanted to scale, and one thing we've learned is certain things that scale deep don't scale wide well. If you like doing deep community work, then it's almost implicitly not very scalable because it's so unique. Everything's so unique to that community. And I think initially with the community schools, we were like, "oh, we want to scale this everywhere." And then you realize, "but it's so unique to each context." And so what's been interesting is understanding that you can't just copy and paste a program per se. You can look at methodologies and adapt them, which we do all the time. We learn from other organizations and we ask a lot of questions. But understanding that the scaling deep and wide are very different, that scaling deep takes time and a lot of questions and a lot of just making sure it's centered around what people want and that they're driving it in those communities. With that I think you can learn a lot.

Even though we're like, "okay, we're going to work in a 100 schools, not like tens of thousands directly", what we realized is if you can scale deep and really learn, then the learnings can inform policy. So, your learnings can become something that is scaled by informing policy, but it doesn't have to have you as an organization in the center. Something that I think is important to remember also is, when we work at a deep and wide scale, we strive for that, is that sometimes you're like, okay, maybe scale you might want to cook stove and you might want kind of a uptake across the whole country or some sort of water purification, which is great. But if it's a methodology that you're trying to scale or an approach or a buy-in with social emotional learning or buy-in for mental health, you almost as an organization, it's almost better if you're not front and center.

If a system is going to integrate that it's better for that to be something they want that they consider to be their idea than for it to be like what one organization said. It's almost counterintuitive as an organization, which I think is a really big learning, if you're pushing to try to scale something, and we're seeing that with our mental health now. It's better for them to consider us almost like a contractor that they don't have to pay right now, but it's for something that they want, a service they want as opposed to, oh, it's Glasswing who's going to come train us. Instead, it's like, "this is something we need and this is an organization that's providing it for us." And it is something they are going to integrate into teachers colleges or police academies or medical



schools or nursing schools. That's something that we've been learning over the years that I think is systems change.

The best way to achieve that is to be responding to something that systems need and want and to be part of that solution and to be responsive to that. And responsive in the way that may mean that you're not even at the front or front and center or driving it publicly. I feel like a lot of policy changes are not what we may think they are. Maybe it's not that you have a partnership with the ministry, but really the work for systems changes is with all the different levels within a system, like the HR team within a hospital or the security guard in school. **We shouldn't be at the center, we should be contributing to that. Even if it's your approach or your model or your curriculum, the ideal is for perhaps no one in those systems to even eventually know where that came from, but rather to really feel like they needed that and they asked for that.**

That's something that we've been learning too, and it's also a great way to maintain your independence when there's so much political change in our countries when you're trying to push for something so important to you and your belief. We believe that these things impact or we've measured it and maybe you do something with the government at the central level. But what would happen when that government changes? How does that continue? All these things come into play when we think about systems change and scale.

As much as we can really be responsive to the needs of the population and systems as best as we can, we can then also be really operational about it in terms of who we're engaging with at the operational level and systems. I feel like that can outlive government changes and political cycles. But I think that's something that we've been learning that helps drive some of the changes that we believe in. And also just bringing in other experts from other organizations all the time. What are we learning from? How can we as a community of practice drive this stuff as opposed to just as an organization? I feel like that's been something that, like school for example, as a community, that for me is probably one of the most important communities that I feel involved with because of that. It's a community of practice and because you learn from your peers and collaborate to drive these things across totally different regions, which is amazing.

Ashley Hopkinson: I know you mentioned systems change and you are working to advance systems level change in your field. Do you have a specific example of how you're doing that?

Celina de Sola: We've been trying to do [systems change] work for years. I'll give you a couple examples. One is with the community schools. We've done a lot of studies in randomized controlled trials. [In 2016 we did], I think it was the first randomized controlled trial involving afterschool programming in Latin America. We were trying to figure out what impact this was actually having. And even though RCTs are really hard and really expensive, we worked with the



University of Chile at the time. And so being able to generate evidence of the impact of afterschool programs, not just on social emotional skills, but also on resilience building, also on reducing aggressive behaviors and also on grades. We weren't even looking at grades. All of a sudden we realized that through the work, the afterschool programs, which really focused on social emotional skills' development, we actually ended up seeing that the evidence showed that kids were improving in their grades, particularly math, science, and reading.

I think generating evidence like that, and then over the years, other research, for example, we've done studies on mindfulness and CBT. So, you get great results and then also not so great results. Whenever you do research or you're able to partner with universities, every study we've done is in partnership with someone. That helps because you're sharing that with a broader community of practice. You're presenting the findings. I remember when we presented the findings of the study, we had people from the Ministry of Education, we had people from other public institutions there, like youth ministry. So, that's the kind of thing that helps. And it's not to say that it's because of one study or one organization that something changes, but it feeds into the narrative that collectively we can shift if that's where the evidence is pointing globally.

Having evidence in your own context combined with evidence from around the world is great. And then also the approach is we want to help. Starting from a place of "what are your goals as a ministry of education, what are your goals as a ministry of health?" And then saying, "okay, how can we help achieve those goals?" So, I think the alignment also, and then the understanding from stakeholders that that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to help you reach your goals. I'm assuming they're the goals that we are aligned with, obviously if there's other goals, but I'm talking about social emotional learning and student outcomes. I think that's an example where over the years we've been sharing evidence and learnings within public systems, within public schools, the importance of social emotional learning.

That being said, our model is labor-intensive. The going deep is labor-intensive. It's not like, "oh, this is the model that works because it's too expensive", it's too labor-intensive. Managing volunteers is labor-intensive. It's amazing. It's more like "what are we learning?" Over the years we've been talking to ministries in different countries about social and emotional learning as have other people. So, being part of that voice, promoting that kind of thing. [Another example of systems], with mental health right now, is that we're working with ministries of education and health, like I said, security, public security and others like child protection and justice. And that's more linear in terms of a very explicit, we're talking, for example, to police academies about eventually integrating this curriculum as part of the training. We're talking to other universities, teachers, colleges, medical schools, nursing schools.



We're really trying to figure out where there's demand for it. But the hospitals, for example, when we've been working with public hospitals, the demand just is constant. If we have a target of 50 public hospitals in one country and someone else in a hospital is asking for it, then you're seeing that there's an uptake and a need. Right now we're really focused on systems with this mental health project because that's the target. Number one, is this something that interests you? Number two, once they start receiving the training, does it work for them? How does it work for them? And then making sure that the training of trainers and the kind of, we say in Spanish [unable to transcribe] which is the formal integration of that knowledge, understanding, and ideally curriculum is formalized. With mental health, it's been much more explicit and direct in the different countries.

I think there's those two ways that we've seen, and we've tried to work on systems change ourselves. But always staying rooted in the community. You have our theory of change and then you go back and you're like, "wait, something's not working". And you haven't asked again. Ask the people that we're working with, ask the students, ask, ask, ask. Constantly go back. I remember we were doing life skills, by doing a character strengths research, and we were looking at a list of traits. And we had picked based on the evidence, based on the research, having worked at the universities, we picked a list, and then we asked a group of students, former students, to tell us what they thought were the most important. And we picked pretty much the same ones, but there [were also ones] that we didn't have.

And these were traits, character traits we were looking to build. There's a pathway to build these. And the one that we didn't have that they brought up was hope. This was almost four years ago and it was interesting because if you ask someone four years ago about character strengths or communication, creativity, collaboration - determination, leadership, empathy [they would've listed those]. But hope didn't come up as a trait that we were seeking to develop in the kind of mainstream. I just think things like that. And that stuck with me because I'm like, "of course". But then you're like, "okay, so how do you develop hope?" And how do you develop hope? We had aspirational thinking. But hope. I think that's just important to ask, not just students and everybody, but also the other stakeholders within systems. It's important to ask and not just come with an idea that is evidence-based and has worked in other places. [One should ask], is this a priority for you?

Ashley Hopkinson: I like that. Ask and keep asking. You mentioned a great word, which was alignment. What would you say is most needed from other actors or partners in this space to actually advance social change? When you go in and you're working with the ministries or public institutions. What do you think is most needed from them in order to advance this work and advance this systems level change that we're looking for?



Celina de Sola: I think one thing that's really important and challenging goes back to the alignment. How do we really keep our eye on the ball in terms of social impact and reaching as many people as possible? And I'm saying this from a place of, we're not an advocacy organization per se, we're really direct implementation. But I feel like sometimes we get stuck in partisan conversations that prevent us from advancing. Obviously there's the integrity piece, there's the ethics, and then there are all the things that are non-negotiables. But when you get past the non-negotiables, these systems, even for example if the president or the ministers change, the employees are almost always the same people.

And they're public servants [who] most of the time [are committed]. At least, they got into this job because they are committed and they have a vision of impacting. Finally when we come together, we kind of put aside personal views on other issues. So, maybe we don't agree on reproductive rights, but here we're talking about this. But sometimes because [we don't share beliefs,] for example if someone doesn't believe what I believe about reproductive rights, then we can't sit at the table. We're not going to agree on everything, but what do we agree on? And then, how do we align to get things done? It doesn't mean we have to have dinner together or hang out together all the time. I think that's one of the biggest challenges when we're so focused on that difference. Practically speaking, we're talking about a public education system, the government or public health system, and we have to work with the government.

I don't see how we can't, if we're trying to reach more people. So, there may be things we don't agree on, but what do we agree on? And then how do we contribute to that? Now if they're totally opposed to what we do, then it's a non-starter. But if there are things we agree on, for example, if we bring up whatever it is, if the issue is something we don't agree on, we don't work on that issue, but we can work on other issues. So, I think that's something that is really important [and it's important] to be in the head space where you can do that.

It's building that rapport. It's remembering that we're each kind of an individual aside from the role we have within our institutions. I may be working in my NGO, but I'm also a separate individual from where I work. So, remembering that I think at least helps me. Remembering that that person is a sister, mother, a daughter. So, we must connect as people, connect as people before anything else. I think that is something that's helpful. And it's not always easy, frankly. I know I go to so many meetings [where] if you just can't get out of your head, stuff that you totally at your core disagree on, [it's difficult]. So, how do you get past that? And that's rapport building and alignment, again, without selling yourself out, [without selling out] your integrity and your values.

Ashley Hopkinson: Do you have a specific example or something that comes to mind that stays with you or has stayed with you through the years that you think represents impact? Do you have a story you can share with me or an example that illustrates the impact of your work?



Celina de Sola: This example I think represents well what we try to do in the organization. We had a student who started in our afterschool program, around 8 or 9 years old, really young, in a community that has always faced a lot of stigma. The way people talk about the community is that it's a violent place and you can't even go there. And there is a lot of stigma about the people who come out of there. It's a place where you were just told by the rest of society that you're nothing, you weren't going to be able to achieve anything or do anything, which a lot of kids face globally, I think. Over the years she was involved in a lot of different programs and she's just naturally, these just kids are so, there's so much human potential that we just don't manage to unlock because we're messing it up. It's all there and we just mess it up by not creating the context for young people to develop themselves fully.

She's seen these programs and later, she was in the programs over many years. When she got older, she started volunteering with her younger peers when she was still in school. She graduated. She was one of the first in her family to finish high school, go to college, do all this. And all of a sudden she's in college. I think she's studying communications, but she was also in a debate club. She was really interested in issues of social justice. And now we actually have hired her. She works for us a bunch and also continues to work with her school. So, for me, a story of success is when a young child or young person enrolls in a program that they feel was valuable enough in their life where they want to be a part of replicating that with their younger peers.

As teenagers, you don't only realize and understand your own potential and see what other people are seeing in you, but you believe it and then you also realize that you can have an impact on someone else's life. I think that's huge. And then obviously we're super lucky that she continues to work for us. For me, it's seeing that full circle where now you can change other kids' lives because your life was changed and you are the one driving that. And what I think is important is the organization. You can create the conditions, but at the end of the day, it's the person, it's the individual that is driving their own change. We're just trying to create the conditions for that to happen. [We're trying to create] supports and caring adult figures to compliment the adult figures in their lives. So, I love that, and I have so many examples of that because it's making sure that that's clear to all of us - that they're driving their own change and we're just trying to create the context. It's like scaffolding.

You're building it as you go up. So, I think that's a great example. And in the health side also, with the mental health side, it's seen once we've had officers, for example, that have gone through the training and participated in the training. And I'm thinking of one in particular that was like, "now I feel like I know, I don't feel like my behaviors define me as a person. It's a behavior. And I understand now that my behaviors are a consequence of a lot of stressors". And so understanding that there are behaviors that are probably responses to stimuli, means we can change those behaviors.



Seeing the damaging behavior as that, a damaging behavior that I can now change because I understand that I'm not destined to be a bad person. We've seen that in the health context too with teachers. It's like all of us, we understand that the things we do, and this is something we hear repeatedly, the things we do, the behavior can be changed. I really love hearing that kind of story because it's empowering to feel like you can stop doing things that are harmful to yourself or to others because you understand how to do that.

Ashley Hopkinson: How does the organization measure success? How do you measure success and what is the evidence that you have that you're making progress towards the types of changes that you want to see?

Celina de Sola: We have different measures. We have a pretty robust monitoring and evaluation system. We have dashboards. We'll have indicators, for example, that look at the performance of the trainers and what they know, what they have learned. So, it's kind of processed indicators, but then we'll also look at the impact indicators from the perspective of, "okay, have we changed the way? Do we know more now about stress and trauma?" It's psychoeducation. The program we're doing is psychoeducation. So, do we understand it better? How are we putting that into practice? Is the way we're interacting with those we serve and with our peers different? Am I able to support my peers when they're really stressed out at work? Do I understand better why they're stressed? So, we actually ask, we do surveys and we ask these questions.

We have systems that collect that data in terms of impact. And in the schools we've been measuring for years, we have surveys. And a lot of them [had existing surveys], we didn't develop them. There are all kinds of surveys for young people like the development assets profile, I think the DAP is one of them. They're different, they're a self-advocacy scale. We've used a lot of different instruments and sometimes we do have to develop our own, but we do measure the interpersonal impact of our afterschool programs. How does that impact the person? And then we also look at how that impacts their interaction with others in their environment, with teachers, with family, with peers. And that's all great data and it's quantitative. But then I think a lot of the depth and richness comes from interviews, focus groups and going back and asking, like I said earlier. The more nuanced impact we measure by asking people about mental health, about their wellbeing, questions that you can have more conversations about.

And I think also with the schools and with young people, just combining those, being able to get a sense of the impact through surveys, [and also] through conversations. And then there's even the impact, for example, when young people do projects like social impact projects, where we ask what's the secondary impact? Who else is being impacted by the fact that a group of young women decided to overhaul the community center and developed a project, got it funded, what that means. And that's a huge part of the impact, what happens afterwards as they drive change



in their own contexts. I'd say we try to capture it as broadly as we can. It's a huge challenge. Again, it's making sure that what we're considering as an organization impact is what the individuals consider impact on themselves, and what communities consider impact.

A lot of our team is from the communities that we work in, so that's helpful. But most of our team is from the countries where we work. That combination is important for us. We actually have 60 former students that work for us, and they help us with a lot of this too. They help us with gathering data and with understanding the impact. And they obviously know their community and their former peers better than we do.

Ashley Hopkinson: This is a similar question, a little bit of a tangent, but I think almost every social entrepreneur faces the challenge of raising funding for their causes. Aside from raising funds, what would you say might be a challenge that you've either faced in the past or you're currently facing that you haven't yet been able to solve for?

Celina de Sola: We're always working on trying to improve a lot of our work. I feel like that's just the nature of this job. The work in the sector is constantly changing. As social entrepreneurs, when you start, you have this really strong organizational culture and you all know each other, so there's this real easy and common understanding of the organizational culture. As we grow, and we now have over 600 colleagues, it can be hard to make sure that the organizational culture permeates across the whole organization.

We're in 12 different countries so maintaining that many people in 12 different countries, maintaining that organizational culture and the essence, and just communicating across so many people, has always been a challenge for us as we grow. This wasn't a challenge when we were smaller. I think that's something that we're working on and that we're going to continue to work on. Just having a big organization that still feels small in that way, we're identifying different ways to do that. And I'm sure I'll learn from a lot of my school colleagues how else to do that. But I feel like that's something that's really important to us, if not the most important thing. And we're trying to figure that out. It's like HR and comms and management. It has so many different elements, but that's really important for us.

Ashley Hopkinson: Yeah. You want to scale and then once you scale, you have to figure out how to keep yourself in that nucleus of all that energy.

Celina de Sola: Yeah, and also I think we've done a pretty decent job of this over the years, but always maintaining independence from not being politicized in the sense that partisan politicized, not being pulled in another direction and just really staying independent and for stakeholders to know that you are focused on, in our case, kids in young people and communities, period. And we



are game players, but we're going to maintain our independence and organizational integrity, and that's really important.

Ashley Hopkinson: Where do you see the organization in the next five years?

Celina de Sola: In the next five years, I'd love for the organization to eventually, I don't think it'll be five, but little by little, to eventually be run by people that we met when we were working in the schools. I think it'd be great to have the organization, whether it's run by or mostly staffed by, I'd love to see more of our former students join our team. I think that'd be really cool because I think having that direct experience with the programs and being able to improve them over time would be great. I also think that in five years, I'd like to work in more schools in the deep scale, the deep work. I think that's something that's really important for us. And grow that maybe 50% more or a 100% more in the next five years.

And then the work that we are doing more with systems, I'd like to think that in the next five years we'd be able to integrate mental health in whatever way it makes sense to these institutions. [Integrating] mental health is a core part of training for public servants across as many sectors as possible. And then we really love the idea of the National Service Corps. So, in five years, it would be amazing if we could generate enough evidence and feasibility data to support at least a couple of the countries that we're in in Central America, to see if we can help the government think about National Service Corps as a way to integrate young people as a force for change. The US has done this with City Air and with others - YouthBuild and AmeriCorps. So, I think in five years, integrating mental health, not in all the countries we're in, in the smaller countries. In Central America, Northern Central America particularly. I think that and the Service Corps are potentially two things that could be feasible to try to achieve in at least one or two of the countries. I think that'd be amazing. And then just kind of grow our community-based programming, which is really the heart of what we do. The policy and systems changes are super important to us, but our work with communities is the most important.

Ashley Hopkinson: I love that. I have one last question for you. As a social innovator and entrepreneur in this space, you learned as much from what worked as what didn't work. So if you could close with giving me the best lesson you've learned from what worked and the best lesson you learned from something you implemented that just didn't work?

Celina de Sola: Yes. Oh my gosh, there are so many. This is a really tough one. And they're very specific things too. I'll tell you one that didn't work. It's not that it didn't work, but for our context for a while, looking at violence prevention, we were looking a lot at cognitive behavioral therapy because that was something that globally had been really effective. And we wanted to integrate that into the work we were doing because we know that science has shown us in different



contexts how important it is. And at the time we tried to do it and what we found was that, and we were doing that in mindfulness, what impact they had on the participants of that study in the program. And what we actually found is that the person delivering the CBT programming had to have a very specific skill set.

It became almost cost prohibitive because we weren't able to hire the number of people we needed with the level of skill set that they needed to have to be able to do the CBT. So, we didn't have the results we needed. We worked [on that with a US University]. And also, I don't know if our CBT curriculum at the time was as strong as it could have been. So, for us, that was an interesting lesson. And it was like, if we think about something that we want to reach as many kids as possible, how do we identify a way to do it? And now our mental health curriculum is very CBT informed. We realized that we were looking at becoming a model from Chicago and other cities, and we realized that trying to copy paste something like that and not being able to find the teams locally that would have that skill set. I think we realized that, even though it was a relatively small study, it just didn't play out the way we wanted it to, or we were hoping it would.

That was a big lesson learned for us, how to just make sure you're really contextualizing what you're doing and not just saying, "oh, that worked over there". It worked in Chicago. This was a while ago when CBT was really coming to the forefront. In our region it took longer than in the US. And then in terms of what's working, we're seeing that right now, this approach, it's nonclinical and it's easier to understand, it's more accessible. We have this curriculum now that we're working on that was developed by a colleague and with our team.

I think that's what didn't work, and now what's working is really being more human-centered about the design, in our case, more human-centered and contextual about the content of the curriculum and understanding the different audiences. We ask how do you create something that can be accessed and understood across different populations and different educational levels, and also delivered by different people? That was important. If we're trying to get to a lot of people, you need to have content that is accessible to a lot of people and safely accessible to a lot of people.

Ashley Hopkinson: It sounds like you received a lesson that can be a teachable lesson for others, and it sounds like it also taught you and the organization something that you're able to take and improve and do something different that's working better.

Celina de Sola: Yeah, and I'll say one more thing. Another thing that we've learned is when we team up with researchers or researchers approach us, we have to make sure as an organization that the research has to be relevant to what you're doing. Another mistake we've made is sometimes we're like, "yes, we're so excited to do research", but then rolling out the research is hard and it drains your team. It's not really what you do. So I think several times that's been a



lesson learned. We want to do research, we do want to do evaluations, but to make sure that they make sense with what you're already doing, and then that whatever your findings are, they're actually something that you know you can act on. Not just like, these are the findings, but we can't do anything about it. So, that's another lesson learned for us repeatedly.

Ashley Hopkinson: This has been a great conversation. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you might want to add before we go?

Celina de Sola: Something that's been important is to be super well-informed as an organization. There are people who have to be super well-informed about local laws on protection for women, for children, child protection. Because a lot of times we'll be exposed to situations that are really complex and delicate and understanding what systems exist around protection. And a lot of times they're not ideal. But understanding what those systems are and what the pathways and the roots are, if there's situations of violence, what happens? Who needs to know? How do they need to know? What you can do to protect children, what you cannot do? What can get you in legal trouble?

All of those things I think are important for organizations because we're natural problem solvers and we want to protect and fix and empower, and we want people to live their full lives. But especially with children, we have to be really careful to stay within the legal parameters in the countries where we work, of what we're permitted to do, and then make sure we have the mapping of other organizations that can oftentimes do what we can't do. In terms of advocacy, representation, legal support. I'd say that that's another huge learning. Map out, because if there's an issue of gender-based violence for example, how do we support each other as organizations? Because if we're not super well-versed in something, who is and ask them for help. I think asking other organizations for help when we don't really know how to handle something, is super valuable. I know we do it all the time when we're in situations like that. So, that's the only thing I would add right now.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's really valuable. You do what you do excellently, and then there are other people who are champions in another area that can support you in getting it done. Thank you for sharing your insights and experiences with me today.



Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*