



## **Conversation with Sarah Baird**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, tell us about your organization and your role?**

**Sarah Baird:** My name is Sarah Baird. I am the founder and executive director of Let There Be Light International, which is trying to address energy poverty and climate change through social safety net programming in remote and off-grid communities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Amazing. As a society we are getting to the point where we're having more conversations about energy access and wellbeing. What would you say is distinctive about the work you're doing currently?**

**Sarah Baird:** There's a lot of discussion lately about leaving no one behind and a just energy transition. But what that really means on the ground for the 860 million people who still lack energy access and the 3 billion people who have unreliable energy access is that if you can't ante up, if you can't pay for a service, you aren't being included in the energy access conversation as well as in the actual application.

What we're doing that's unique is trying to raise awareness across sectors. Not staying in our lane, but looking at how SDG7, which is access to energy and renewables, is intersecting with health and wellbeing and education and women's empowerment and the whole range, to try to shift the conversation more towards inclusion.

We are technology-agnostic. We don't have products that we create. We provide grants to vetted local NGOs that are already working in energy poor communities, and we piggyback onto their existing safety net services e.g. food security. There's a great group that's working in Western Uganda with elders and isolation and mental health, and we've started providing lights for these isolated elders. This is actually a group out of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York and these two gerontologists who are

really interested in mental health among the elderly. What we're doing is really keeping the communities of impact front and center, not trying to sell anything, not trying to promote any one thing, but just trying to provide that bridge before hopefully there's full energy access. But in the absence of energy access, making sure that elders and new moms and people living with disabilities are able to have at least basic energy access in their homes.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I love that you talked about working across sectors and working more collaboratively. What would you say is an insight that you've gleaned from doing work collaboratively that would be valuable to share? What have you learned in the process of reaching out across these sectors?**

**Sarah Baird:** One of the most interesting developments in our programming is that we were providing basic solar electrification systems to frontline health clinics in Uganda. We've solar electrified 86 health clinics. And these are for interior, exterior lighting. One of the changes we made early on with the staff is they asked us to please electrify the staff quarters because if it's after dark, they don't want to come out, they don't feel safe, they're not going to come out. Even if there's lighting and electricity in the clinic, they're not going to leave their quarters. That was a little pivot.

We were also providing individual solar lights to people who were living in these off-grid communities and were really vulnerable. A district health officer in Uganda said to us, "Look, you're doing this with clinics, you've got these individual lights. Is there any way you might combine that project so that we can use an incentive of a solar light to incentivize attended birth? And if a new mom comes to give birth at the electrified clinic where we have trained midwives, she then can go home with the solar light." And we're like, "Brilliant. It's great."

That would be an example of the collaborative quality of all of our projects where that's now called Safe Births + Healthy Homes. We've had about 12,000 mother-baby pairs go through this at nine different sites in Uganda. And we would love to see that happen in any off-grid community. Unfortunately, we're not going to be able to do it, we just have limited resources.

If someone is working on maternal and infant health, we're thinking about how to increase attended birth. We're totally open, we share all our best practices, we're very data-driven. We'll give you anything you want because really, the end result is what we're after. We're looking to make sure we're lighting lives, empowering people.

**Ashley Hopkinson: That's a great segue because I was going to ask you about interdependency and programs that are working collaboratively. But you just described it, the safe births and the health clinic and the connection between the hospital system and solar power and energy.**

**Sarah Baird:** We've called it Safe Births + Healthy Homes because what we're looking at is the plus, is an additive. So after the critical birth event, there's a lot of attention internationally about getting health clinics electrified. Totally, totally important. But then, when a new mother goes home with her vulnerable infant to a thatched roof home and they're using open flame kerosene. It produces this incredible soot. And with pneumonia being one of the leading causes of under five mortality, you're exposing an infant with very vulnerable lungs to incredibly poor indoor air quality. When we're saying Safe Births + Healthy Homes, we're trying to raise awareness about what happens after the critical birth event when she goes home with her baby.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Eliminating an economic stressor is a big aspect of wellbeing. I wonder how you make the economic power argument for energy? How do you help people to see the connection between energy and service or meeting community needs? Are you working through ministries of government?**

**Sarah Baird:** We're quite small and we don't typically work with central governments because it allows us to be more nimble. We work with regional and we work with district governments. Yes, hearing from them, working hand in hand with them. Actually our health clinic electrification that we've done with 86 of these frontline clinics, we work with the district ministries who ask us to go broad, not deep.

These are small systems. These are about 700 watt systems. They do interior, exterior lighting, staff quarters, they charge cell phones, computers, microscopes, maybe a television, if the clinic has it. But these are typically clinics that before COVID didn't even have refrigeration. Now most of them have refrigeration. These are level two and three, which would be like a walk-in clinic in my context, where you'd go, and ones that have maternity clinics.

We can make the economic argument pretty easily when we can talk to people. If it's a donor audience and we talk about, "Imagine if you are a family of five and had an income of 100,000 say, living in a big city and you spent \$30,000 on one light. Imagine what that would do for your household." So then we can make that argument, because it's freeing up money for other basic needs, which include medicine, school fees, food. There is about 10% of the program participants who are using it for businesses and these are usually very small, whether it's weaving at night or maybe a little kiosk. We've also had many

moms say to us, "The light is mine and now I have a pig, and that pig is mine." And these seem really simple, but it's really not. It's a shift.

...Then there is the importance of having some technology transfers, not just for dignity and for improving health and wellbeing, but also for allowing people to start saving money, start being able to have economic stability, is really what we're looking at. Once you can have people with greater economic stability, then they can participate more in the economies. And the sharing economy I think is really critical as we move forward.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Have you found any tension in the area of delivering energy and powering homes. You mentioned working regionally because you're trying to reach these off grid places, but have any tensions come up in terms of why this community and not this one or the speed in which you're able to do things? I wonder if you can speak to some of the challenges that come up in doing energy access work.**

**Sarah Baird:** Definitely. With the health clinics, because it's a valued community resource, really there's just been requests for us to do more. But there are lots of people working in that sector now, and it's fabulous. And we, again, as a small NGO, we can't electrify full hospitals. We can do frontline clinics. There hasn't been that (tension). But when we go and we are in a community and we're doing a project, we're very careful to first do needs assessments. And we work with local leadership, which includes school teachers, nurses, to first identify the people that are in need.

..So let's say we're going to be distributing 250 lights to people living with disabilities in their communities and the surrounding communities, we try to be very, very clear about who is eligible for our programming. That is because in the beginning we were like, "Oh, there's so much need...but it can engender some discomfort between neighbors. And we really want to be careful about that. We try to be as focused as we can on the projects, whether it's people living with disabilities for a certain group, or we do lights for learning. We work with an organization that runs the Ugandan Spelling Bee called [Enjuba](#). They provide age appropriate books, and we provide the lights. We do a Lights 4 Learning project in specific communities with specific age groups. We really try to make sure that we're not raising the expectations that would engender the aggravation and the discomfort.

Some of the lights were being stolen. And so we had to be really careful about that...Now when we're doing a distribution, we use permanent markers and we write on them. It's so easy. But that was just being open to listening to the participant communities as well as the partners on the ground. We can't anticipate everything, but making sure that we're really doing this in respectful ways.

We also do a lot of work with different languages. We do a lot of data collection, and we use an app called the CommCare app, (where) we use local languages to explain everything. That's important because in Kenya, we're working in the Sambora region with Indigenous land rights groups. And working with some of the elders, making sure people who are landless and are typically pastoral will have access to lights. So we try to be as responsive as we can. We have 12 NGO partners in four countries right now. But I think in many ways the most impactful thing that I can do besides raising the funds and helping co-create the programming is doing things like this, raising awareness about the very real need and the amazing partners on the ground who can implement these things.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Is there another way you look at impact?**

**Sarah Baird:** So we talk about social return on investment, SROI. On a very basic level, one of these lights to purchase, distribute, do intake surveys and follow up is about \$15 per unit. I mean, at scale, it would definitely come down. But if a typical family is saving over three years, about \$150, the basic calculus is a 10 times social return on investment. We had a team from University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School do an on the ground assessment, and they came back with a 42 times return. Because they were looking at how people were reducing the frequency of going to the health clinics because their respiratory infections were decreased. They were looking at how long you could keep your kiosk open to sell things. I'm sure it's somewhere in between that 10 and 42.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it will take to demonstrate the value of this work and create some groundswell around it? Is there something you've seen work to convince other people that this is a critical part of the wellbeing piece? I think people understand it from the perspective of food security. I don't know that it's always easy to understand it from the perspective of energy security.**

**Sarah Baird:** I agree. We take for granted that I have light, that I have a computer, that I have electricity. We take for granted because we don't see the electrons the way that we see food or see water. And so, some of our messaging is around, this is a slightly cheeky campaign that we do on college campuses and schools, but what can you do in the dark? We've actually made up these sleep masks that are branded, and we ask people, "Maybe, could you put one of these on and do this math problem?" Just trying to get people to take that step back to really reckon with what it would mean to not have access to energy is a way that we're trying to message here. That's a really complicated question because again, we don't see the electrons. And yet, I know I used to live in coastal Connecticut. And when Hurricane Sandy hit, that's when I actually founded this organization. I had just been in Uganda doing some work, and I got back and all of a sudden my neighbors and I were without power for two weeks. And you would've thought it was the end of days. People were so

freaked out that they had no electricity for two weeks. And at that point I was able to discuss it more. But it's hard to get that messaging across sometimes. Not within the communities, of course.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Yes not the communities impacted but at large.**

**Sarah Baird:** One thing that I struggle with is that access to energy has always been monetized. And so shifting the conversation to have people understand that inclusion and access really should be considered part of a basic social safety net. We would never expect an elderly handicapped woman to go without power unless she could pay for it. But we do somehow expect people in un-electrified communities to always ante up. And I think it's a mistake. I hope that we can somehow create the argument to have it included, especially in healthcare, health packages of care and maternal healthcare are just so important.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, whether that's political or financial or just the resources in terms of people, what would you like to see just grow? Would it be the Lights 4 Learning project that you mentioned? Would it be the Healthy Homes program? What would you like to expand?**

**Sarah Baird:** I would love for every mother to go home with the means to take care of her child. And really the lighting... Safe Births + Healthy Homes, would be the most impactful, especially because of the amount of money people are spending on, whether it's kerosene or disposable flashlights. Again, it's about 10 to 30%, depending on the community, of the total household income. And these are families living below the poverty line. It's a little bit different from food. It's a little bit different from clothing because there's a real tangible savings immediately. Immediately... Nobody, none of our program participants have said, "Oh, no, I prefer kerosene." There are no cultural barriers to how you get light. There certainly are with cooking. But if somehow lighting can be a gateway toward other clean energy inputs, that would be a beautiful, beautiful thing.

But back to the little flashlight some people use, these are much more available. They're similar to things we might get at a conference, those little disposal type things. And they'll last about a week. But in all of these, the context where we're working, there's no garbage collection. These lead-based batteries are put in burn pits, which is incredibly damaging to the air quality. Or they're often thrown down pit latrines..All I do know is it's getting into groundwater. These are lead-based batteries that are either being burned or going into the water. And so, we started out trying to reduce kerosene use and switch those out because it's so dirty and dangerous, but the fact is that even those seemingly innocuous little flashlights are a huge pollution and frankly, health hazard. That 's a complicated issue.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Complicated, yes and goes back to when we were talking about interdependency and the importance of collaboration and interconnectedness.**

**Sarah Baird:** We call them inter-linkages in the SBG world.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is needed at a higher policy level for these inter-linkages to be connected to larger social change? Are people seeing that? Do you get the sense that we're moving toward understanding how these issues are intersecting?**

**Sarah Baird:** It certainly depends on the audience. I do a lot of work with the UN NGO major groups, the women's major groups. And so, within the UN ecosystem where we talk a lot about sustainable development goals, there's a lot of understanding of inter-linkages and the need for systems change. In other audiences, we're so locked into the silos that we find ourselves in. Whether it's with funders, people like to fund water or energy. I think it takes a lot of conversation and training. I try to see things through a gender lens. How is this affecting women and girls in the developing world as well as around the world?

This is not a zero sum game. It's not that just some people can have access to energy and other people will just be using polluting biofuels. But actually, as we share an ecosystem, we also need to share a systems thinking lens and understand how these things intersect. There's a lot of knock-on benefits when you're dealing with power. You are dealing with wellbeing, you're dealing with social isolation, you're dealing with food insecurity ...you're also looking at education and at women's empowerment. When women typically in these off-grid communities, there aren't bathrooms in the homes. There's latrines. And there's a lot of gender-based violence. But having a portable light is, it's not going to completely make you safe, but it does impact the safety and the wellbeing.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I love that you illuminated that there are all these positive ripple effects as well. That's something to think about in terms of social change.**

**Sarah Baird:** It has been an overlooked issue. And the way that this all started was years ago, I was really interested in FINCA International. They do micro loans. And they were doing micro solar loans in probably 2012. That was cool. And I was doing some impact interviews while I was in Uganda for another reason. And so many people were saying, "Yeah, this is great if you can be in a lending circle or if you have the means." But the people who are living in extreme poverty are all being left behind. And so it's great for FINCA. I think all hands on deck totally are necessary. But I really think that we need to, when we're saying, "Let's leave no one behind," (examine) what do we mean by that?

**Ashley Hopkinson: The short definition of wellbeing we've been using is : social justice on a healthy planet. How would you define wellbeing based on the work that you do with energy?**

**Sarah Baird:** I love that definition. In my direct experience, well-being has meant being safe and healthy in your home and in your community...As we say in the solar world, when there's a solar spill, it just means it's a sunny day as opposed to an oil spill. There's so much solar power out there, and there's so much power to be harnessed. The issue is the technology transfer. The wellbeing is when I see an elder who's crippled and living in a really, really rudimentary hut with leaks. And she's been all by herself and she has a light. And all of a sudden the community members are coming to then be there in the evening because their kids can study. It's amazing and beautiful. So I think illuminating lives and illuminating their dignity, the inherent dignity in all of us is a core part of the wellbeing conversation.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you. Is there anything I didn't ask you that you would like to add?**

**Sarah Baird:** One other quick thing that's just coming to mind is today, I got a check in the mail for \$150 from a school in Tennessee. Never heard of them. There was no note. Kids are getting it. We had a school in Michigan send us \$600 last spring because they did a tomato plant sale. I didn't know any of these schools. And so, I think the kids are getting it. That it is a question of just getting the issue out there. But yes, we have had the most wonderful people. I have this young woman, who's an intern. And she keeps saying to me, "How do these people find us?" And I'm like, "I think that people are really interested in renewable energy." And knowing that for such a low threshold you can actually brighten a life. And I mean, that's pretty cool, right?

**Ashley Hopkinson: Very cool, thank you Sarah.**

**Sarah Baird:** So great talking to you.

*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 conversation has been edited and condensed.*