# Mildred Ominio Change Maker Interview Transcript

Lisa – Welcome to the Just Cities and Community Seminar series that showcases fantastic disabled changemakers. I am speaking today with the Just Cities changemaker, a woman with disability, Mildred Omino, who does fantastic work across the space of Just Cities in relation to health equity, gender justice and disability justice and has a fantastic blog, called 'Equity Voice'.

So, Mildred, thanks so much for joining us today. Looking at across the globe you know

people doing fantastic work like yourself. And so, I'd like to start by getting you to provide an overview of what you have been doing and the change that you've been helping to make in your cities and communities in Nairobi, in Kenya.

Mildred - Thank you very much, Lisa, for having me. I will go straight to the piece of work that I do with regards to Just Cities in Kenya. So, as you rightly put my work is in the intersection of disability justice, gender justice and health equity in the lenses of Just Cities.

So clearly there is interrelationship in these concepts. And depending on how a city is just - how health outcomes of persons with disability would be heavily impacted. And also, the disability in itself, when it intersects with the gender, it provides completely different attributes to how individuals with disability enjoy living in different cities.

So, for the past couple of years, we've been working with a working group called 'Just Cities Working Group', which brings together professionals in different sectors. It brings together planners, architects, civil society, organizations, academia, human rights activists, all for one agenda of pushing for just cities and Kenyan contexts.

So, I am a member of this working group, and my interest in the working group is to just shape up the narrative around just cities with respect to persons with disabilities and the first test that we did was to actually coin a narrative of what a just city would look like in Kenyan context. And after deliberation, writing background papers, white papers, and a series of meetings to conceptualize the Just Cities agenda, in Kenya, we came up with the four principles, and these principles are equity, democracy, participation, accessibility. Just to mention that that's what we consider as just cities.

And then we've been able to develop a publication which is available online to just showcase what just cities mean to us and a documentary on just cities, because we realized that that individuals who are invisible in this city and those among others, persons with disabilities,

children, women, the elderly and the sick.

So, to us, if a city is just no one should be invisible in the city.

So that's in a nutshell the piece of work that we're doing on just cities.

Lisa - Yeah, and I just love what you've been doing, Mildred, and I suppose the multiple different connections you're making that it's not just about, you know, creating building but it's about supporting people to live and live well and the importance that you highlighted around health. But also, I love that fact that just enjoying life -

Mildred - Yes.

Lisa - Aren't they that just taken for granted, you know, and I suppose we connected last year, wasn't it? And and just it just these common issues we're finding, but also very contextual as well.

And one of the things I'd love for you to share a bit more on, some of that narrative work you talked about, you know, injecting the narrative and making disability visible in this part. What has been some of the challenges or, I don't know, things that you've had to sort of really speak up and you know, change around that narrative? If you wouldn't mind?

Mildred - Yes. Thanks, Lisa. That's a very good question. Actually, when we coined the term 'invisibles', it's because of the concern that in the city of Nairobi, persons with disabilities are rarely seen whether it's in the social spaces like the parks, whether it's even in the central business district conducting business, or whether it's in their workspaces, doing whatever kind of work that people do in the city. Because like we all know, majority of people who move from rural to urban areas move for one sole reason, which is getting a livelihood.

But apparently persons with disability are largely invisible, very silent community within the urban spaces. And so, what we were asking ourselves really, why is it that cities are increasing in numbers, but this is disproportionate with the participation of persons with disability in almost every sphere, whether it's workspaces, whether it's recreation, whether it's even decision making, like the communities that sits together to decide on urban development or the boards that we have for urban development, you rarely see persons with disability.

So, on closer scrutiny some issues came up.

One is accessibility of the city. Nairobi is one very fast city in Africa. The like right now we are speaking at 8 a.m. and the streets are already full. Busy, busy, busy. And for people with disability, even simple tasks like crossing the road from one side to the other are crazy.

So, the infrastructure for roads is quite inaccessible, and that literally pushes people out of the city. The social amenities, public goods and services like water, housing, for example. It's very difficult for a person with disability to get a house that is accessible where they can comfortably live independently.

So so again, even though a census say that persons with disability live in rural areas, but the question would be why? Why are they not partaking into the development that is available in the cities?

So, accessibility is one of them. The other thing is participation. So, we have all these big projects that happen in the cities. Recently we had the expressway that was just concluded

sometime last year. Again, how rarely do you get persons with disability being part of the stakeholders who are consulted to give views in terms of what would that look like for them?

The market structures, for example, open markets are a mess, and that's why I talk about the intersection of gender, disability. I mean, women make clearly almost all consumer decisions in family. But again, for a woman with disability, Nairobi, Kenya, just going to the markets to get a basic commodities and foodstuff for a family is almost impossible.

Yeah, and even education institutions, workplaces quite inaccessible. And that's why many people are unable to secure jobs, not because they do not have the specific academic competencies or professional competencies, but then they're just pushed out of the city. So, it's that's that's in a nutshell the invisibility aspect.

When we talk about democracy, we talk about accessibility, equity, responsibility, which are core principles that we look at as what constitutes a just city. Almost all of them push a lot of injustices to persons with disability that there is a limit to which they can participate, however much they could be having this brilliant ideas, even their technology itself that we are having that we want to connect digitally, probably getting an UBER to just order your taxi from your comforts to the other place. How is this accessible to people who are visually impaired, for example. How would people get to know that the streets have enough tactile so that it's a blind person would gladly know that this is their terrain, and they can muster their route in the city.

So, it's, it's, it's, it's quite a big challenge and that is the invisibility that we are talking about. And we have that documentary on Invisibles, the Urban Invisibles in Kenya, which is available online.

Lisa - Yeah. I think we will definitely link and link that in because I think you know, watching that and you have been around a while as well and you know, I think it really sort of I loved how you captured exactly what you just told, but told that through the documentary. To get people to stop and think what the reality is for people with disabilities when you know there isn't accessibility across whether, as you said, information, whether it's technology, roads, as a woman being able to go and just engage in just day to day activities, and that important connection between access and participation, it's so critical, isn't it?

Like and when that link is not there, everything just the invisibility just gets reinforced, and people just keep getting pushed out. And, you know, I think that's yeah, how do we address this?

And I think, you know, the documentary and that, you know, the big report you've produced is, you know, a really good starting point.

What do you think the next bit is for you in terms of making this day-to-day practice? Like this is about not just talk anymore, but having disabled people at the table making decisions or,

you know, getting traction. Like what do you think's needed going forward now with your work?

Mildred - Yeah. Yeah. Thanks, Lisa. Actually, this work is progressive, just like you rightly put it.

The first step, which you have done is to just coin a narrative of what just city means to persons with disability in Kenya. And this also to has been documented in a documentary and also in the publication that's also available for people to use and access.

The next step is also to talk about the engagement that you've been having with the stakeholders in urban discourse. And these include the planners, architects, civil society organization, the urban development boards, which is provided for in the Constitution of Kenya.

So, we engage with them. The property developers, critical people in this space, the people who decide how the property landscape would look like.

So, we have continuous advocacy and already we are having a catalytic project in one of the cities in Kenya, which is Nakuru. Nakuru just became a city recently. So, our idea is to just conceptualize the city before people forget about the Just Cities component. So, we are working closely with the Nakuru City to come to popularize the Just City agenda, not only for our advocacy but also for policy that when they're designing the policies and programs that they will - don't see in Nakuru City, they already have in mind the Just City agenda, which is well received.

So, for us, when it comes to persons with disability, we are advocating for meaningful participation, like who sits in this space to make decisions. We continuously remind the urban development boards that the voice of a person with disability is critical.

And in Kenya, one problem that we have is that at what we call public participation, it's provided for in the Constitution and like any other bill, has to go through public participation before it's it's dispersed.

However, one thing that we cannot run away from speaking if we are intentional in promoting social justice and disability justice, is that the nuances around public participation, 'how do public participation spaces look like?'

What I usually make this point every time I talk about public participation in Kenya, that it's kind of a rubberstamping approach, that a newspaper announcement goes out and people are told, ‘hey, Kenyans, we will be having a public participation forum in a certain hall, in a certain ward, in a particular county'. But what happens is that even the information around public participation is not accessible. So, then who goes to these forums? And then the timelines of making the announcement on the dates for public participation - It usually happens like - I was to at the time for public participation. So, then what that means, according to records, it will be said that there was public participation because an announcement went out. But in reality, many voices are left out. So, so we continuously challenge the methodologies and approaches of public participation which are truly exclusionary.

And I would say that that would be the reason why we are where we are in terms of participation of persons with disability in urban development discourse. And then it goes on and on.

Even with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability, the CRPD. Which we signed and ratified as a country many years ago. Again, we are brought down by the public participation issue, which is something that we keep on agitating about. I continuously write articles, whether it's my blog or our newspaper or any joint publication that we are able to put forward to the public to just talk about meaningful participation as a solution to some of these long-term urban injustices measured against persons and disability.

Lisa - Yeah, a hundred percent, absolutely. This it starts at core, if people aren't even being asked if people... we're not even allowing people to talk about what their needs are or to even, you know, as you know, it's just core, isn't it?

The fundamental ability to have that democracy, that voice, and having some say over what happens in the communities that affect your life and livelihood as you've just pointed. And we are so far from providing anything inclusive in terms of how our public planning engagement processes, you know, the ticker book surveys, the 'oh, but we've we, you know, put it on Facebook'. Well, you know, these, these ongoing I suppose, frustrations I suppose we are having this this these yeah. That we just aren't getting it right. And but also importantly

they're not listening. That's what I feel like,

 I don't know about you, sometimes it feels like the same things we keep saying. You know, I had just a meeting today, the same thing. It's like and then they'll say, 'oh, well, we spoke to one person' or, you know, but one person said it was okay. It's like almost their using that as the... I don't know, the oh, but we've, we've engaged or we've we tried, but no one came about, you know, and the reality is, well, it wasn't accessible in the first place, the communication, your messaging, your time, you're actually not meeting people where they need to be met. You're expecting them to come in like, you know, there's this whole whole lot of barriers, isn't it?

And I think that's a lot of work we still have got to get over. Yeah, it's... Something, like - I mean, we're going to be probably talking about this for a long time still, aren't we Mildred, about you know, it's not like we don't have the skills, it's how do we make... How do we make that... People take that responsibility and make sure it happens? And I, I think one of the ways and I'm not sure, you know, obviously you're been doing this a bit is by allowing us to help co-produce the work. I don't know is that one way of you know, making the change. I know it does work when they allow us to, but I don't know. I just I feel like you know, we need to be given that that responsibility or or enable them to just yep - I don't know. I'm saying it really poorly, I suppose, but it's just like, you know, the methodology side of things, it's, it's not that hard. It's just how do we get people to just take responsibility and value it. I don't know.

Mildred - Yeah. Yeah, I totally agree. And I think it's, it's also in the mindset.

Lisa - It’s like, yes, that's it.

Mildred - How do you see inclusion in whatever capacity you're in? Is it an afterthought that it's the way it's been for quite a long time? Is it intentional? Yeah. Is it secondary? Is it a compliance issue?

So so really for me that is why I'm pro-disability justice because we've had all these things, we are calling rights. But if we do not have this anchored in the principles of disability justice, where we value every single voice in this space and we are intentional and we appreciate that intersectionalities. And if this intersectionality plays out, some people are further marginalized.

So, so we really have to, to work on the mindset and be very intentional. On promoting just cities.

For a very long time, we've been talking about social justice but then we just sneaked in disability justice in social justice agenda. And that's why we you- I don't know how you found it, how you've experienced it, but for a very long time, accessibility has been so limiting, even in the thought process of many people. People just think that 'OK, if we give this people a ramp, they're good to go'. Yeah. So, so, so so every time even the design of the accessibility icon is all about just giving people a wheelchair to move. But nobody gets to thinks about the mindset. Nobody gets to think about the social discourse, like how do we participate socially? I mean, yes, we got the ramp, we got the wheelchair, but what about the social aspect? What about the mindset, the intellectual capacities of people? Do we just throw that in trash?

So, so, so. Well, it's quite a lot of work, but to me it is simple. If we work on our mindset, if we become intentional, even in policy spaces, we will get it right because we will not be pushed to tick boxes or to just do a quick quick rejoinder when we are just about to sign multi - multi dollar projects for development.

That's OK. This aftermath as just reminded us that they're not going to fund us because we do not have access to disability on board. And which is what happens most of the time so even these mixed projects evaluation completely difficult because people with disability are never on board at the onset so they jump the ship when people are just about to sign great memoranda and because probably a certain partner, a development partner in most cases has just refused to sign a memorandum because inclusion agenda is not well articulated.

So, if we become intentional, we do not have to tick boxes but make it a daily practice. And I think that's where we need to go to next.

Lisa - Excellent. And I suppose in that that sort of summarizes that last that last message. You know, the last question was about, you know, that one message you would give to non-disabled would person involved in the planning and designing of cities and communities. What would that one message be? Would that be be intentional or...?

Mildred - Ahh, thanks Lisa. That that message from my perspective, is that we need to marry professionalism and participation. Yes, we may have this brilliant persons who have got the expertise. They are well-educated, they have well experienced but there is always the unconscious bias. And that person who has lived experience might just remind you of something that you may have not even thought about.

So, let's innovate. My message would be let's innovate together with persons with disability. Let's marry professionalism, experiences and participation, and innovate together with disabilities, persons with disability, that will make universal design a reality. We will make spatial justice a reality. We will make this life exciting. I can't imagine how boring it is for a person with disability who never gets to experience entertainment in their city or even just appreciate the development and interact with technology without a lot of frustration.

So, if professionals who do not necessarily have disability innovate together with persons with disability, of course, just taking them through random sessions of brainstorming of what a just city would look like and then they bring on board their professionalism. I believe our cities would be habitable and excellent places to thrive, not only to live because at the moment persons with disability live in these cities, but the opportunity to thrive is curtailed completely.

Lisa - Absolutely. I think you just nailed it. And and it's not just about, you know, the minimum. That's what I love what you were just saying. It's the innovation that can happen when we work together and we authentically work together and intentionally, then everything else will happen. Yeah, that's. Yeah. Hundred percent. You know, that's just yeah. Really fantastic, Mildred. Thank you so much for sharing, you know, today and on these just Cities and Communities series. Just really look forward to further work with you and further discussion.