

Transcript of audio report:

Conversation with Eric Ngondi, board member of the United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK)

[Introductory male voice] Hi, and thanks for tuning in. You're listening to an Inclusive Futures audio report, brought to you direct from our citizen reporter in Kenya.

[Alan] One of my life's dreams has been to tell stories of, and about, people with disabilities. Being a person with a disability myself, I understand the importance of educating and informing societies about disability.

My name is Alan Herbert. I am the Inclusive Futures citizen reporter in Kenya. In this, my first report, I speak to Eric Ngondi about his experiences as a person with a disability, particularly in the areas of jobhunting and employment; and his involvement in the Inclusive Futures initiative, which includes training private companies to be more disability confident.

[Alan] Who is Eric Ngondi?

[Eric] Eric Ngondi is an environmentalist. Well I work in an environment area with the National Environment Management Authority. I'm a social inclusion facilitator and a board member of United Disabled Persons of Kenya, UDPK. And I just love championing issues of persons with disability.

[Alan] How did you lose your sight?

[Eric] Well, in 2009, I was hiking with some friends – I'm passionate also about issues of adventure. So, I was hiking with some friends and we were attacked by thugs, and in the process they attacked me, my left eye, and it was cut. And that one disappeared, the doctors could not fix it. And two years down the line, I was attacked again by robbers, and this time it was along the highway at night, we were driving.

And in this incident, they hit me in the right eye, and that one also went.

[Alan] Could you talk to me about how did you learn to live without your sight?

[Eric] It was quite... what can I say? An adventure from the word go, I didn't know how it's going to be, I keep on saying it was a second season, I don't know how many seasons I have, but yeah. Initially I had lived for 25 years with sight, now moving forward without sight, to me it was quite challenging. However, I thank God that someone was able to direct me to the Kenyan Society for the Blind, where I did mobility orientation and adaptive computers. And that put me back on track. And of course I got to meet many of my fellow visually impaired friends.

Why are you very optimistic about it? Because not many would make jokes about it. There is that first season you talked about, and then the second season.

You know, for me, I take a life as [a] journey. It's something that you have to go through as long as you're on this planet or earth, or taking on life, it's a journey, you have take it on. And if you don't take it on, then of course you'll be miserable, you'll have not so adventurous a life, you'll be stressed and all that. For me the better option is to live, and live fully.

[Alan] And fully optimistic.

[Eric] Yes.

[Alan] Can you describe to me any situation where you found yourself being discriminated or stigmatised because of your disability.

[Eric] Eh, I tend to have a thick skin in some of these things, but several times I've experienced some subtle discrimination or even stigma. So for example, as I started going to look for jobs. Sometimes I'll show up in an environment at an interview, and you'll find this employer was really not ready for me. For example, taking aptitude tests and all that. The other experience I had was... you know even eventually when I got jobs in different parts, it took several years to get these assistive devices.

[Alan] To make the employers adapt to you.

[Eric] Yeah, exactly. So, once I got in the environment, I had to train and keep on pushing the buttons to ensure that eventually I got those assistive devices and all that. Especially going for interviews was one of those areas that I felt was some element of a stigmatisation.

[Alan] You are a board member of the Disabled Persons of Kenya organisation. What does your role entail at the organisation?

[Eric] Okay, so, I'm a board member at the United Disabled Persons of Kenya – UDPK, I represent the youth. UDPK is the umbrella body for disability persons organisations. And the disability persons organisations are the vehicles that carry persons with disability, they are owned and run and performed by persons with disabilities, or at least majority of the people in those organisations are persons with disability. And what area do I represent them in? All areas! All areas, be [it] social, be work environment and all that accessibility. Basically championing and making sure that we are represented at work; the element of employing persons with disability.

In business, there's the element of supporting and championing small and medium enterprises owned by youth with disabilities. And of course, just ensuring that youth with disability in this country cut across in all sectors.

[Alan] What are some of the experiences persons with disabilities have shared with you in regards to COVID-19?

[Eric] Now, the pandemic has been terrible to all of us globally. However the youth with disabilities have been tremendously impacted from the aspect of education, whereby I'll mention that, some of the safe areas that persons with disabilities are, are in schools. However, the pandemic has made us be at home, and some of our homes are not quite as supportive as the school environment. So for example, some of the schools provide breakfast, lunch, dinner for persons with disabilities, they have the care and caregivers at the site, but now when you come at home, the parents have to of course, look for livelihood,

even in the space of the pandemic, and therefore the youth with disabilities or persons with disabilities at home are impacted.

So what's the other thing? Of course there's even resources, simple basic needs, like even housing, shelter, food, all that has been impacted. Because most of them, you understand, they live in areas that are quite marginalised and the poverty is one of our twin brothers, as persons with disability, you know.

[Alan] What is your role in the Inclusive Futures initiative?

[Eric] I first interacted with them, I think, about one or one-and-a-half years ago when at least I was in a workshop and they were launching some of this thing. And later I've come to interact with them more on the issues of first training, whereby they've trained us as persons with disabilities, or DPOs on accessibility auditing. So I happened to be one of the persons who was trained in that line, and we did actually go to a real life situation and did accessibility for a firm, and this was the EABL [East Africa Breweries Limited]. So this is a game changer to both the DPOs and also to the employers. Now that was one engagement I was in, and profoundly changed my view. And of course, I think the employers are also experiencing the same.

I've also been trained in the issues of just basically delivering some of the trainings that Inclusion Works is doing. For example, we were able to do unconscious bias, we were able to do disability etiquette training, and also delivering this to some of the biggest organisations in this country. And to me, I think it's a game-changer to these employers and also the persons with disability.

[Alan] Since you are engaging employers under the Inclusive Futures initiative, which are some of the views that employers have towards job seekers with disabilities?

[Eric] Yeah. Their perspective has been quite changed. I remember the other day, one of the employers told us, you know, you guys, if we knew this earlier, then we could have made some changes a long time ago; including hiring persons with disability, including changing the environment, and having persons with disability. Because what we articulate is that, you know, having persons with disability in employment is not a liability, it's a requirement legally. Yes. But it's not a liability. Because some of the things they've been fearing will be like, how do we interact with this person? What sort of reasonable accommodations do we put in place for this person? Will they be able to deliver just like any other person? Or is this something we're just doing, favouring them, and therefore the other colleagues may not take them as equal colleagues, or team players in the environment.

[Alan] Are the employers themselves willing to build the spaces to include the persons with disabilities?

[Eric] Progressively, they are sort of accepting. However, some of them are really doing extremely well. So for example, we see Safaricom having now attained about 2.4 per cent of persons with disability in their work environment, and with a target of about five per cent by 2025. I remember my namesake Nick also at EABL mentioned them having a target of at least three per cent. And therefore I see some organisations have really taken this on and even put strategies in place.

[Alan] What are some of the genuine concerns and challenges that they are facing as they make this paradigm shift?

[Eric] Interestingly, the employers tend to have some interesting and curious statements about persons with disabilities. So we want to hire them, we are really willing, but we don't know where they are, we don't know where we can find them. Where are they? And then the other thing is, we need people in these capacities. Can we really find a person with such capacity? So for example, we want people in software engineering, we want people basically in STEM areas. Can we really find persons with disability in this area? That's sort of a thing they are mentioning. Well, they may feel that these persons are not there, but they are there.

And of course there is a concern of reasonable accommodation. Now, if we bring these people really, how much is it going to cost me to change this place for them? And we tell them, sometimes you really don't even need to change. And for example, you see what COVID has done, it's telling us that you can naturally work from home. And if you can work from home, these persons with disability, some of them are comfortable in their –

[Alan] Home spaces.

[Eric] ... Home spaces, and they are able to deliver a hundred percent from their environment. That's like a paradigm shift.

[Alan] Now, every year on the third of December, the world celebrates the international Day of Persons with Disabilities. And I would like us to look back at last year's theme.

This was promoting the participation of persons with disabilities and their leadership, taking action, on the 2030 global development goals.

Can you say that disability organisations have had the opportunity and reasons to participate and enough resources to participate in these crucial activities?

[Eric] The resources, of course, I'll say, no [laughs]. The resources are never there, are not enough for disability persons organisations. However, regarding that theme, I can say several things. One is that, there is something thematic we go by, that nothing for us -

[Alan] Without us.

[Eric] ... without us. And the reason why we quite loved that particular theme for last year was because even in the spaces where persons with disability have been employed, and you know there are not many, because statistically saying in this country, the rate of hiring a person with disability is one per cent compared to 73 per cent of the general public. And therefore those who are hired in private and public spaces are not many. And what has been happening [for a] long time is that there have been opportunities where persons with disabilities have been able to be employed at the entry level, or mid cadre, but they've not now been participating in the events and even events that involve them. Their own events.

For example, the International Day for Persons with Disability, they've not been performing there. And this particular day was to highlight that you need to be at the forefront to celebrate your own achievement in these spaces. However, for disability persons organisations, we continue championing and hoping and working and lobbying and creating awareness and

building capacity as much with the little resource that we have, or we get to ensure that persons with disability, especially in the employment sector, they are there.

And this is, I think for me, Inclusion Works is a game changer.

[Alan] And now shifting attention to this year's disability day theme, which says that, "Building back better towards a disability-inclusive, accessible and sustainable post COVID-19 world." In your view, how is the Inclusive Futures as an initiative aligned in this theme?

[Eric] To me, [the] Inclusive Futures initiative, and the Inclusion Works programme is at a critical point. I think this programme for me has bridged the gap between persons with disabilities and employers. So what has been the challenge? The persons with disabilities with their DPO [Disabled Persons Organisation] and their umbrella bodies, such as UDPK, we keep on shouting that the employers are not giving us a chance, are not giving us an opportunity. And on the other hand, the employer keeps on saying, we can't find these people. We don't know where they are. We don't know their numbers. And we don't know if they have the skills.

So what has the programme done in my own opinion, is bridge the gap. The employer on this side has tools, and the person with disability on this side is gaining some skills through training, through awareness, through lobbying. For example, just the other day, the Inclusion Works launched the disability confidence toolkit. And this for me, is a manual or a guide that all organisations should have and read and implement, and thereby not fearing to have persons with disability.

[Alan] What would be your closing remarks to the employers who are working to be inclusive in their working spaces?

[Eric] For me, I'll say kudos. Kudos because, you're trailblazers, you are leading. You're demystifying this and saying that persons with disability are humanly just like any other person. And therefore you're doing something which has been considered for a long time as if it cannot be done.

[Alan] What are your last words of encouragement and motivations to persons with disabilities out there?

[Eric] My hugest encouragement is show up, get out there. You'll hit barriers, that to me is expected, however, not only meeting the barriers, but have the tools to meet the barriers. So for example, take advantage of opportunities that are there, be they training such that Inclusion Works may be providing or the whole programme, the whole-

[Alan] Inclusive Futures initiative.

[Eric] ... Inclusive Futures initiative is providing, take advantage of such kind of things.

[Alan] In your own view, don't you think that the Inclusion Works dreams are very ambitious?

[Eric] Dreams are important [laughs]. It's good to dream, and importantly, it's great to dream big. And for me, Inclusion Works' dream is great. As a person who champions issues of

persons with disability, I think for me the Inclusion Works is doing something that has a greater impact in the long term, than even being seen now.

[Alan] So thus far, the dream is attainable?

[Eric] The dream is valid, and very attainable.

[Introductory male voice] If you'd like to hear more from our citizen reporters, why not visit www.inclusivefutures.org