

Transcript of audio report

Conversation with FCDO secondees Shikuku Obosi, Susie Rodgers and Tom Palmer

[Introductory male voice] Hi, and thanks for tuning in. You're listening to an Inclusive Futures audio report, brought to you by our global reporter Kimberly Middleton.

[Kimberly Middleton] Welcome to this Inclusive Futures audio report where we have honest conversations about disability inclusive development. Today I'm joined by three really interesting people who've been seconded into the British government to improve disability inclusion. They are Shikuku Obosi, Susie Rodgers and Tom Palmer. Hi everyone and thanks for joining me today.

[Susie Rodgers] Hi.

[Shikuku Obosi] Hello.

[Tom Palmer] Hi, Kimberly.

[Kim] To start, could you explain your passion and motivation for disability inclusion? And Shikuku, let's start with you.

[Shikuku] Inclusion does interest me because of the cumulative exclusion and marginalisation that I faced as a disabled child. Growing up as a disabled child from a humble family in rural Kenya, it did not take me long to connect social inclusion and quality of life. I walked two miles to school and back, with incredible difficulty. I made the journey with two legs buckled and weak from the ravages of polio. There was a teacher with no disability awareness at all who'd hit my back repeatedly as a punishment if I were even a minute late. So I had to forego lunch and stay hungry during my eight year primary school life, as I could not make it home for lunch and back to school on time.

I lacked friends. My school peers, whenever it was raining on our way to or from school, they would run, leaving me all alone to face the wrath of what was always torrential downpour. Even worse, many children in the school would call me not by my name, but by my disability or by the sound my crutches made on the ground. So my real name, Shikuku, slowly faded away.

Later on, my parents enrolled me in a special school, which was a boarding school about 400 miles away. So this school admitted children with disabilities supported by welfare services, and which provided special services in the form of therapies and special educators. These, however, promoted segregation and I felt I could not escape from social stigma. Whereas my school was a special school, I was a special child. Out of all this, I made a decision quite early in life that any work that I do would be about disability inclusive programming.

[Kim] Susie, how about you? What's your motivation and passion for disability inclusion?

[Susie] Well, I think it's possible slightly similar to Shikuku in that I have lived experience. I was born in the 80s missing the lower part of my left leg and left arm. And so I've been a sort of assistive device user all my life. Probably from more of a position of privilege. Living in the UK, I've been lucky to be able to attend schools that were mainstreamed and be able to have access to the devices I needed to live an independent life. And I suppose, really, for many years I didn't work in disability inclusion. It was sort of another aspect of me or my identity as Susie, as a woman with a disability. But it wasn't a clear path until really I faced that identity through sport. I was involved in Paralympic swimming for a number of years. And I think really that brought me closer into the disability community.

I discovered that I wanted to use whatever voice I had to try and support programming and support areas of work that would help people that were perhaps not as privileged as I was, in terms of growing up.

And that's not to say I didn't face discrimination and don't still face discrimination and hardship, but it's relative to my own context. So for me, it's about using this opportunity to change minds, to work in a mainstream context to open up that awareness of disability and what it means, and disability inclusion, as well as impacting on learning and really finding entry points to really make a difference to people's lives.

[Kim] And Tom?

[Tom] Well, I think my entry into this area is a little different as I don't have personal experience or lived experience of disability. The original motivation, I think, to start working on human rights came from my undergraduate studies of history. And I started to get really aware of just how, you know, privileged I was. And starting to understand and be motivated by trying to find a job where I could be involved in the pursuit of justice and fairness. And started working on human rights, and an opportunity came up to work as a policy officer and a project manager on a disability rights project. And I quickly became utterly absorbed in the rights of people with disabilities. And that came from my exposure to young people with disabilities, particularly.

The project I was managing was a project to support young people from developing countries to campaign for their rights, to campaign for the implementation of the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And just being exposed to these amazing, passionate, intelligent people, really hooked me into this work and motivated me to use my privilege to ensure that what they were saying was really being heard by people who have similar levels of privilege to me, and who have power to make changes that are really going to affect the lives of people who absolutely deserve to have the same opportunities as everyone else.

[Kim] Susie, your role at the FCDO focuses on economic empowerment. Has there been a point up until now where you've felt like you're really making a difference, and has there been anything that you didn't anticipate?

[Susie] Yeah, probably a couple of moments. I think the work that I've done around impact investments, pioneering new work in private equity investment spaces on disability inclusion... it's been a journey to go on, but really, I hope, impactful and powerful and will positively impact that impact investment space. But also I really enjoy doing the kind of stock take review. I looked at 42 programmes across both departments. I just found it a really interesting learning journey for me as well, to understand the different sectors – like I say, the complexity, but also to find those key entry points where I could make a real difference around disability inclusion.

I think probably I didn't anticipate that I would be doing quite a bit of awareness-raising and training on disability inclusion. And actually, I've really enjoyed that. I've enjoyed those sessions where I've been able to have really open and honest conversations about disability and have that transparency and allow people to feel comfortable to open up. Because it often led to conversations about broader inclusion matters.

[Kim] And Tom, you're based with the humanitarian team. I know you've only been there a few months, but I can I ask you what your highlight has been since you started?

[Tom] Yeah. So the humanitarian sector, the humanitarian system has been a little slower than the development actors to really understand the importance of inclusion. To understand the impact of structural discrimination on people's experiences of crises, whether that's a disaster related to a weather event, or whether that's conflict. And the humanitarian system is, in recent years, started to understand and own this topic and realise that they need to take deliberate action to ensure that the assistance that they're providing does reach everybody and that there are barriers that many different people face, whether that's based on barriers relating to disability or relating to gender or relating to other forms of discrimination. That these are addressed deliberately and not just assuming that we are reaching the people who are most at risk, just because we are sort of humanitarians and that's our *raison d'être*, but actually taking deliberate action.

So the context in which humanitarian assistance happens is often very, very difficult. Very fragile, very dynamic, very insecure, and so making the time and the space to learn new things is a challenge.

So I think in the short time that I've had with the Central Humanitarian Team here at the Foreign, Commonwealth Development Office, I'm hearing other people champion this topic in meetings, and not just myself. And that's when I know that I'm starting to make a difference and starting to see a pathway towards the impact being sustainable. Because these secondments are time-bound, and we won't be there in the longer term, so it's very important that these topics get owned from within our various teams and championed from other people.

[Kim] And Shikuku, how about you? You're the person who's been in the post the longest out of everyone here today. Your work focuses on working with the FCDO in East Africa. What's the moment been that stood out to you where you felt like you're really making a difference?

[Shikuku] Yeah. There have been a couple of moments, but I'll talk about one. The government of Kenya is a key partner of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. And so the work I'm talking about is with the government of Kenya's Ministry of Labour and Social Protection on the development of inclusive data action plan, where I'm helping the government to implement its commitments on inclusive data for persons with disabilities that it made at the 2018 Global Disability Summit.

What that means here, is that for the government to be able to make real its commitment to develop the action plan for data, I have scoped current official data sources. I'm completing the development of an analysis framework that will strengthen the understanding, generation, and utilisation of disability data in Kenya. And so hopefully, with that assistance, the government is going to be able to respond more effectively to the demand for disability desegregated data in order to better address inclusion and achieve faster the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the sustainable development goals.

[Kim] Has there been anything so far that's been unexpected, or you hadn't really anticipated when you entered the role?

[Shikuku] Yes, definitely. So recently, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in Kenya appointed me as their Disability Inclusion representative on its Corporate Services Department, Health and Safety Committee. What is surprising in that is that I've been given the mandate to conduct a disability accessibility audit. Not just of the main FCDO premises, but also in other facilities in two other FCDO locations in Nairobi.

So what that means is that I'm going to help to make FCDO Kenya accessible for all. Which will hopefully provide an example for other FCDO country offices in the region to follow. Now, let me add, FCDO Kenya's readiness to promote disability inclusion within the mission, championed by the head of the Corporate Service Department himself, and he himself a senior manager demonstrates just how critical high level leadership commitment and support is for inclusion agenda.

[Susie] I would say that I've definitely seen, as with Tom, a championing that's coming at senior levels in meetings after firstly spending months trying to get that awareness raising to the necessary level. And then coming to the point where you hear people actually discussing it. And then I've seen some submissions come through where there's been specific points on people with disabilities, rather than just more generic inclusion points. And I think that, for me, when it's coming from the top down, is a sign that the message is getting across, for sure.

[Kim] And obviously, for everyone this year, COVID-19 has disrupted everything. But also, what started at the beginning of the year as two departments, the Department for International Development, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, they've now combined to create what we know as the FCDO. There's been quite a lot happening this year. How do you think that might impact on disability inclusion in the future? I wonder if you feel worried about the impact it might have?

[Tom] Yes. I mean, I think you touched on the two key issues there. One is there is a risk around prioritisation with the difficult decisions that are going to be made about how overseas development assistance will be spent. And it's encouraging from my perspective, working with the Central Humanitarian Team that humanitarian assistance is amongst the areas listed by the Foreign Secretary as a priority for the department. But it is essential that the leadership continues on issues around disability inclusion. And that leadership has been there for a long time now, whether that's from Ministers of State or from senior management within the department. And the head of the humanitarian team is certainly committed to this. And I think that what we saw with COVID is that it has put the topic of inequalities on the agenda. For those of us who work on disability inclusion, it's not news for us. But the statistics and the data is startling about the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on certain groups, and people with disabilities amongst them. And that is impossible to ignore. And so it should provide the significant drivers to ensure that whatever we're doing as a department is inclusive of people with disabilities. And that drive was seen with the funding that was provided to international NGOs to respond to the pandemic. Inclusion was specifically named as a priority within that response. It's an opportunity for people like Shikuku, Susie, and myself, to have an impact at this time when a lot of key decisions are being made about how funding is going to be distributed and prioritised. So it's an important time for us to be in these positions.

[Kim] Shikuku or Susie, have you felt that there's been any increased demand on your knowledge and expertise in the time of COVID-19, when people are considering inclusion?

[Shikuku] Yeah. So obviously we all know that persons with disabilities have been particularly disadvantaged by the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic and measures to control it. We have seen, and we are aware that COVID-19 has both short-term and far-reaching implications for people with disabilities in many areas of life. Indeed, to humanitarian proportions, really.

The training and advice that I have been providing and continue to provide to FCDO teams and partners have been important in ensuring that disability inclusion is mainstreamed in interventions, not only in COVID-19 response priorities, but also in FCDO's programming. Yeah, so indeed, yes. The pandemic has exacerbated the disproportionate inequalities and inequities that we know existed long before it came. But I think that has opened our eyes to the vulnerability of people with disabilities and the need to ensure that disability inclusive programming happens and that it works.

[Susie] COVID has definitely, on an economic angle, had a huge impact on people losing jobs, kind of moving towards financial insecurity. So I would say I'm hopeful and also fearful about the recovery, in a proportioned response because people with disabilities are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. And therefore less likely to have labour protections in place. And I think also my concern is around this move towards more flexible working. Whilst there are a lot of advantages to that, I think the social benefits and interaction that you get from being with colleagues and being in a community and integrated, I just don't want us to move towards further isolation of people, further segregation. So whilst a lot of the movement is saying that this is a great, positive step forward, I, as a disabled person, would also argue that I would not like to see that collaborative, in-person working completely go.

[Kim] So we've touched a little bit about the future and some of the concerns about disability inclusion or what might happen or what we hope might happen. If you had to make a recommendation about one thing that you think needs to be a focus of disability inclusion work, what might that one thing be?

[Susie] I probably think the kind of barrier of attitudes is a big place to focus on. I think there's a lot of work going on to change that. I think there needs to be possibly more coordination and better collaboration across the disability inclusion sector space, with everybody working together rather than disparately. And I think there needs to be a real effort to move towards mainstreaming approach to inclusion more generally so that we don't need to specifically have to have lobbying. That it's almost automatically ingrained into thinking, and that we're moving towards a generally more inclusive global society.

[Shikuku] For me, the priority is, and I think Susie has made a reference to it, is on attitudes. Disablism, which basically means the notion that people with disabilities are inferior, is the mother of all catastrophic human rights violations that people with disabilities face on a daily basis. Disablism's the major reason why people with disabilities, especially those who live in some of the most isolated places in Africa and elsewhere in the world, continue to be chronically poor, neglected, and socially isolated. Always on the bottom of the pile, even within the disability movement itself.

It is the reason, you know, disablism, it is the reason for lack of prioritisation of just common planning and programming of development and humanitarian actions. I think if we tackle that, then it'll be a lot easier to have other things in place.

[Tom] Everything we do is linked to the issues that Susie and Shikuku have mentioned around fundamental respect and regard for people with disabilities as having the same rights and should have the same opportunities as everyone else.

I would specify one issue that comes from that, and that is for the humanitarian sector especially, to have sufficient respect, and I'll come back to that word respect, not only for people with disabilities, not only seeing them as people who require assistance, but people with disabilities as people with capacities and agencies and value to the response to crises. And that extends further for the humanitarian sector in having respect for local actors in general and ensuring that the resources that they need to lead the response to crises, and to prepare their communities to be resilient to crises, is essential.

That move towards supporting a more local-led response must include organisations of persons with disabilities and must include support to people with disabilities to have access to decision-making fora, to be at the table, whether that's in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, or whether that's access to funding streams, or through partnerships and consortia with other types of actors, whether they're international, or national, or local. This whole question about who is best placed to respond. The unmet need of crisis-affected populations is outstripping the capacity of the international humanitarian system. So we must support local responses, national capacities and local capacities. And that must include organisations of persons with disabilities. They are often best placed to understand how risks relating to crises can be mitigated, and responses can be most appropriate and relevant for people with disabilities. So that's the one thing I would really encourage colleagues within the humanitarian team within FCDO and humanitarian actors across the system to think about how we can more effectively support organisations of persons with disabilities.

[Kim] Shikuku, what would you want to say to people working in mainstream development and humanitarian organisations?

[Shikuku] I would say to them that we must never stop believing that it's possible to change the world. Unrelenting optimism is key. Yes, there's a long way to go to ensure no one is being left behind. Yes, significant parts of the system still propagate the old, traditional and outdated mindsets about disability, as just a medical or a welfare issue. Yes, even with good laws, and even the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, implementation continues to be a challenge, such that even after years of success of getting legislation in place, it still takes time to put into practice. Yes, there persists a significant backlog concerning the inclusion of disability in national and regional policy frameworks, as well as in the inclusion in projects' implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

However, and that's something I want to underline, however, unlike the old days when you'd knock on doors and would be told, "Sorry, we don't do disability"; nowadays we are told, "Well, we would like to do disability, and we want to get it right. Please show us how to do it." So we can see, and we are increasingly seeing, that the discussion has shifted from why to how. From legislation to action. From policy to practice. From talking to doing. And from awareness to implementation. The world is changing, so we must never stop believing that it can only get better for people with disabilities and their families.

[Susie] Both Tom and Shikuku have touched on the kind of voice and agency of people with disabilities, and that's hugely important. Especially in the country-based context. So I would absolutely echo those points.

Very often the lack of data or evidence is used as an argument for why an intervention may not happen. People will often say, "Well, what does good look like? You can't show us, so where do we begin?" And I would say, always, even if you don't have that data or information

to start out with, there are always things that you can do from the outset to address disability inclusion or to at least bring an aspect of that into programme work in the development space.

There are always opportunities to even establish a baseline of data within programmes. So I would say think of it as an important aspect of any programme to whatever degree.

[Kim] If you had to summarise how you feel about the future of disability inclusion in one word or a short phrase, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

[Susie] I would say it's growing. I'd say it's building. There's a lot of momentum that I can see. There's still a long way to go, but I would say that we're definitely a long way on from where we were a decade ago.

[Shikuku] For me, it's hard to put in one word, but yeah, the word is walking the talk. I think the future presents even more opportunities for developing a more inclusive and authentic concept of diversity. The diversity which recognises that diversity has a meaning only if it includes disability inclusion, and that must come with measurable and verifiable targets and actions. And which, among other outcomes, addresses the economic exclusion of those who remain trapped in chronic poverty, even where poverty reduction targets have been achieved.

I think the future presents opportunities, or more opportunities, for leadership by example. So that's the recognition that if you're a leader at the forefront championing disability inclusion, then your board must include people with disabilities. Your workforce must include a proportionate number of people with disabilities at all levels. Only then, you will be clamouring rightly for the ethical credibility that comes with doing that.

[Tom] From my side, I guess the words that spring to mind for me are non-negotiable. This is essential. It can no longer be seen as a luxury or "When we have time, we can think about people with disabilities." And it's a win-win. There are no losers in this change that we're striving for. The inclusion of people with disabilities will benefit society more generally. The ability of society to enable everyone to reach their potential and contribute is going to benefit everybody. So this is not a niche topic for a minority group. This is something that is non-negotiable, and is a win-win for everyone.

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