



Pioneers of the Planet

Episode 8: Lucy Mulenkei

Armando Canchanya - Hello I'm Armando Canchanya. The Maasai are one of the better known African indigenous communities. In recent years, they have faced lots of different challenges to preserve their way of living, to protect the land they inherited from their parents. Lucy Mulenkei is a strong woman, perhaps because much strength is needed to lead one of the most indigenous movements in Africa and in the world. Journalist, activist and proud representative of the Maasai; Lucy spends much of her time travelling, representing the Indigenous Information Network and other organisations she's enrolled in. Including coming to meetings such as the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. She started as a journalist publishing a paper and working in radio and she is still publishing this paper, Nomadic News, and she launched an NGO with two people and almost no money. How did you start this NGO?

Lucy Mulenkei – Actually starting as a journalist I was working mainly as you have put it, coming from a Maasai community, Maasai's are part of the nomadic pastoral communities and when I joined journalism, it was because I really wanted to meet the people and be with the people and know exactly what the problems are and how much I can help them and how I can work with them. And as a journalist I started out quite a long time ago in 1983! And as soon as I was employed by the national broadcast corporation in my country, Kenya; immediately I was just given environment programmes. Actually I did the environment, agriculture and health programmes but I took environment as key because I was brought up in a semi-arid area and environment was always part of us. The wildlife, if you sleep one night and you don't hear the lion roar or some animal's movement, then you'd feel like something was wrong. So we were used to this kind of environment and it's something that I've valued all my life and I think the environment being fragile in those semi-arid lands was really key. And when I was working as a journalist I still found that there were gaps; and these gaps were that the voices of these nomadic

pastoralists, who had identified themselves as indigenous peoples, because of their way of life and also from the hunter gatherers.

Armando Canchanya – And you felt that journalists work is not enough? Maybe because most of the media are not interested in those issues?

Lucy Mulenkei – Yes, not actually that it was not enough but working with a national organisation is a bit difficult, to be able to express some of the issues that you'd really want and also looking at the mainstream media, that information from marginalised areas was not coming out and this is where I got the urge to start something, that I could feel I could bring out the information that I felt was supposed to be known by many people. And when we went out to start this organisation, Indigenous Information Network, I discussed with my colleagues from pastoral areas, from nomadic areas, and we said 'okay what do you want to do? You take the risk yourself and if you want to leave your job, you won't have money and what are you going to do?' So that's how I just took a risk, you have to take a risk in life and we went with nothing but at least we managed to fundraise and started work. And I think I moved on and I can't believe where we are. Today we are an organisation that is strong and that has come a long way but we've managed to produce the Nomadic News and some other publications such as Environmental News and so on and other documentations that we have and even radio. We have continued having listening groups – and taking this information that we discuss even from the international, translated into different languages and given as cassettes to other communities to listen to. We have come a long way but I think we are there; we are almost there, not really!!

Armando Canchanya – You maintain a very strong relationship with the communities, for example, once this meeting is over, you're going to back to Nairobi and you will have a meeting with them.

Lucy Mulenkei – Yes I am, I just believe so much in the community that I know even what we are discussing here is originating from the community. We are talking about drought; we are talking about land issues. Who actually gets the most impact? It's those communities and that's the only place you can go to know what are the problems and how do they tackle them themselves. Talk of adaptation, of mitigation measures and look at their way of life. How have they been managing all this time?

So the communities have a solution and they have ideas on how to integrate this traditional knowledge and the modern life that we are in.

Armando Canchanya – The modern life...and do you think there are many things that have changed since your childhood for example for Maasai communities?

Lucy Mulenkei – Definitely a lot has changed because when you look at the land, it's not the same land anymore...

Armando Canchanya – The same land you saw as a child?

Lucy Mulenkei – Yes, it's different now because for example the areas where we grew up in, there was nothing like big large farms, these corporate farms of wheat. There was no question of individuals owning land; it was communal but now you find that the land belongs to the most powerful people who have bought most of the land, so the land is smaller and smaller and that means that it is more degraded than it used to be. Of course there is population pressure, there are more children, more people, and it's really a bit hectic to try to keep up with the whole society and look at the way the life is. You cannot keep on the same life that we used to have when we were young children, we cannot collect anymore the fruits that we use or the medicinal plants because of the pressure that we have in all directions.

Armando Canchanya – You may easily think that things were very difficult for you in all these years to get the world's attention on those issues, how many times have you felt frustrated or very close to quitting this effort?

Lucy Mulenkei – Well it sometimes is really frustrating and I can give some examples of when the discussions have been really frustrating. I've been able to attend the Convention on Biological Diversity for a long, long time and I think I can't complain much about this convention. But there are some areas where the discussions like Climate Change, where at one point I said enough is enough because you try to discuss some of the issues and nobody is listening to what indigenous people are saying, but at the same time you don't give up, you have to keep on going. Even here at the Commission on Sustainable Development, there are times where some of the discussions in the past are discussions that have really been tough on indigenous people and slowly, we are seeing some gradual changes, where people

at least are a bit more positive in listening to what indigenous people are saying and trying to take some of the issues.

Armando Canchanya – Do all of these organisations who campaign for indigenous people really understand what you are pursuing?

Lucy Mulenkei – Some don't, some do and some actually try to understand but they've still got a long way to go. But I think as indigenous people with a global family that we've had because we've worked quite closely together for a long time, from different regions. The Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues, that is based here in New York, that was given by the general assembly, I think in 2004, really bought some strong boosts for indigenous people worldwide because at least now indigenous people will be able to discuss different issues and be heard. The World Summit on Sustainable Development was a big step for us, it was held in South Africa, because as indigenous people we met together a week before the World Summit in Johannesburg, and we met in Kimberly and we were able to bring our issues together globally. The seven regions of the world, because we divide ourselves up into seven regions, Africa, Asia, Latin America, Arctic and so on. And so we were able to be specific and so we were able to bring our issues together to the table and I think we were very lucky to start a process at the World Summit on Sustainable Development that still keeps us going up until now. And in their declaration at the World Summit, we have quite a strong phrase there, reaffirming the role played by indigenous people in sustainable development. So I think we are on the track and we are really moving on as a family together.

Armando Canchanya – You told me that you are also interested in education, to educate communities.

Lucy Mulenkei – Education is important because if you are really uninformed then you are lost; you don't know what to do in the current and present world where we are. We know that the communities have their own traditional knowledge and they have their own education which is given by the elders back at home. But if you look at the current trends and the current development in so called sustainable development; if you really don't have anybody who is educated from your community or from your own area, to be able to speak up there at the policy level and even at these movements of different development activities, then you are lost as a

community. You are not represented and that is why for us, our own organisation and I particularly, do insist that education is key, especially to the culture, so that they can wake up from poverty and be able to move steps by having a representation somewhere, even at an education, at a health, different parts of development in our own countries so that they can be able to speak for the community. So that's why education is key and very important to us all.

Armando Canchanya – Although they may feel that some young people may leave traditional thoughts behind?

Lucy Mullenkei – Yes, they may leave them but it also depends on how you take that education and what you actually instil it in those children. And let me tell you what we do on the community level, we encourage the early childhood education from the word go, where the small children are brought together and we have older women looking after them, first is also to teach them the tradition as they grow up. And as they grow up, they actually still remember and they know about the traditions and move on. And when they go to certain level, they still value that tradition back home. And what we do, for example, our organisation has this programme where we are promoting education for girls and they actually are at a university level, we decide with them to choose careers that will take them back home. Like for example to be a teacher, to be a doctor or to be an administrator within those jobs. And we encourage them during holidays to go and volunteer in different organisations back home. And I think it's really because we know it's a problem, young people don't want to stay in the village, they want to go where they can see life, where they can see TV and you know all of this peer pressure that they get from schools, where they meet other communities. But if we start from the beginning to try and teach them the importance of getting back home and what is their objective and their goals, to be where you were and to get back to the family, and instilling that tradition of loving your own people then they will always go back and it is actually bearing fruit.

Armando Canchanya – I was asking you earlier, what happened with your daughter for example, your daughter is in university and how does she understand all of these things?

Lucy Mullenkei – She's lucky because she works with somebody who goes to the community every other time and she sees the community members coming to our

home in Nairobi and she's with them and talks with them and lives with them. So it's a bit more different from just another child who is probably staying just in Nairobi and not having that opportunity to see that way of life. It was difficult for her in the beginning because she was born, grew up and went to school in a capital city where life is different, but I think now she understands because she sees and she is taking law at university and I think she really wants to come and work for the community and see how she can try to fight for the rights that her mother always talks about.

Armando Canchanya – Now she doesn't travel along with her mum anymore?

Lucy Mullenkei – No she doesn't and she doesn't like it because since I was a journalist, when she was a baby, she was travelling with me to almost every corner of the country and it's rough terrain and its hardship sometimes. And one time she said no and I don't think I'd like to take her anymore to those terrains because life has become more and more difficult instead of improving.

Armando Canchanya – How long do you think you'll be working on these issues for?

Lucy Mullenkei – I think if God gives me life up until 80, I'll still be working on it; I'll still be working in the community.

Armando Canchanya – Do you have a major dream; is there something that you dream about?

Lucy Mullenkei – What I dream is to see change in the community, to see that one time we can be able to come out of the poverty without depending on anybody else, without depending on donors, depending on relief food and if that can happen then it can be a really good dream to come true. But still I know it's a long way to go, we give ourselves some years, 20 years for that to happen in our communities.

Armando Canchanya – Maybe some people who are listening to us are thinking what may be the most important attributes you think someone needs to lead a movements like yours?

Lucy Mullenkei – You have to be dedicated, you have to know the tradition of the people and you really have to be with them; you have to recognise them, you have to know their own problems and their way of life. You have to be in the community, you have to be part of them, otherwise you can't make it.

Armando Canchanya – Thank you very much for being with us, we've been listening to a very strong woman, Lucy Mullenkei, thank you very much.