

# Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Moky Makura

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Moky Makura, executive director of [Africa No Filter](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

To return to the website, go to [Social Justice Leaders on What Matters](#), where you can scroll down to access more videos in the series.

## **Transcript begins.**

[Moky Makura, a Black woman with short black hair and dark eyes, wearing a blue top, sits for a video conversation with Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing a blue shirt and sitting on an orange chair.]

**HILARY PENNINGTON:** When did you realize that your calling was to tell, um, really compelling and nuanced stories?

**MOKY MAKURA:** People didn't understand that I wanted to tell the story because I thought it was important to tell the stories—because back then, we as Africans, we were not necessarily telling our own story. I realized that the only way to get people to see things differently is not to tell them the facts and give you the data—that, oh, 30% of Africans are middle class. Nobody cares. But show me somebody who is middle class, show me their life. That's what storytelling to me is—it's show and tell.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Moky Makura]

**HILARY:** I'm thrilled to be with you, my friend and colleague and a visionary storyteller, as well as, of course, the ED of a new organization, African No Filter, which is a donor collaborative that supports the development of nuanced, contemporary stories to shift stereotypical and harmful narratives within and about Africa.

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

We know all too well the dangers of a single story, especially about a continent as rich and diverse as the continent of Africa. Tell me about Africa No Filter. How is it working to shift the too often oversimplified and negative narratives about the continent?

[on-screen text: Moky Makura, Executive Director, Africa No Filter]

**MOKY:** Thank you for that. I think it's an absolute privilege to be able to lead and grow an organization like this. This is a very personal and ... and passion project for me. What's been exciting in what we're doing is that Africa No Filter was set up—and our vision is very clear—it's a world where the stories about Africa are not the sort of stereotypical single story that Hilary talked about. So that's a very clear vision. But the mission—how do we go about doing that? And we thought, well, let's inject some research into it, so that (a) we know what we're talking about and that it becomes something just a little bit more, kind of, I guess, serious. Because the work we are doing is serious. It does have impact.

And one of the first things we actually did—just going on about the research—is that we sort of took a look at, sort of, all the academic writing that researchers had done about the African narrative. And we looked at about 50, 60 different documents and reports just to see what were they saying. Most of the stories people were reading about Africa were through the lens of poverty. The other one was about poor leadership. Then there was conflict, then there was corruption, and then there was disease. And that kind of summed up how most people know and think about the continent. So that's kind of where the starting point was. It was like, whoa, okay, that's what we're dealing with.

So the things that we decided were that, you know what, we can't change the narrative of the continent as an organization. So the big part was, like, how do we build an ecosystem. How do we bring people together so there's a shared vision, there's a shared goal. And that's one of the big, big things we're trying to do.

**HILARY:** You are trying to activate agency, right? The agency and the stories that exist already in the continent—and build a system that links them together.

**MOKY:** There are a lot of people doing this work already. There are a lot of people who care passionately about the African narrative that are trying to tell stories. So the first thing that I was very clear about was that we didn't want to come in and compete. We are blessed with funding. We are one of the few organizations that have got funds to actually do this work. Um, so the idea was how do we use that to empower the network of people who are trying to do it.

We are essentially a grant maker. So we do grant making to media and to storytellers in the arts and culture sector. So we're very specific. And, almost every day, I tell the team that we don't do grant making to storytellers and artists because we like them—we like them, too—but we do that because we want them to tell a particular type of story that's going to ultimately shift the stereotypical narratives. And we do, um, operational grants to organizations that are already doing this. And then the third pillar, which is my personal favorite, is disruption. That is where we see Africa No Filter as a watchdog for narrative change. And we've got two big, sort of special projects under there. One of them is, um, Bird. It's a pilot program, and it's essentially a story agency for Africa. And the reason why we launched it—because it came out of research we did on how African media covers Africa, where we found out that over 80% of the stories that African outlets carried about other African countries was hard news. And hard news, by definition, is the stereotypical news. It's the stories of political conflict. It's the political

violence at elections. It's the, you know, humanitarian disasters. That's what other Africans were reading about.

So what do we do about it? We held a series of focus groups with editors, and they said, "Well, the only places we get stories from are from Reuters, Al Jazeera, AFP. And they are global news outlets. And news is news. We can't change the nature of news." So the idea was that, well, why don't we present African editors, who are cash-strapped at best, with an alternative source of alternative stories about the continent. And that's where Bird came up, under the disruption pillar. And those are sort of big, special projects, which I hope will have some sort of significant impact.

**HILARY:** You are talking about one dimension of Africa No Filter as a disruptor—these disruption campaigns—but everything you're doing is a disruption, and even including the ways in which you are practicing grant making and philanthropy, because you have figured out an astonishing way to connect directly with individual storytellers. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

**MOKY:** So one of the challenges for us was how do we get money out to them quite quickly. And we did a partnership with Western Union, which is obviously a money platform that enables us to get grants—quite small amounts—out, quite quickly, to the storytellers we want to fund. It's called the Kekere Storytellers Fund, and we give out grants of between \$500 and \$2,000. The idea is that—you know what, if we are a Pan-African organization, we need to be more deliberate about spreading our grants. Because out of all of the 54 countries in Africa, we've only made grants to 13—only 13—and the bulk of them have gone to Kenya.

So we're really, really looking at that strategy right now and figuring out, yeah, we have to work harder. And this is what I said to the team. It's not supposed to be easy. Grant making isn't easy, particularly if you want to introduce equity to it. So, because you're in Somalia or in the north of Africa, we don't speak your language, so we're including French translation, so we're translating all our stuff into French. So it's just making sure that we're being as inclusive as possible. So when we say we're an African grant maker, we really mean that.

**HILARY:** You have not only the challenge of an equitable and inclusive way of engaging Africa as a continent, all those 54 countries, but also then the question of the diaspora—you know, the numbers of Afrodescended peoples around the world. You've been really, really thoughtful about what is a very live, um, kind of tension and issue.

**MOKY:** Well, what I believe, and I think what Africa No Filter believes, is that we are supporting and we're encouraging storytellers from Africa, wherever you are. As long as you are African, it doesn't matter where you are. And we are trying to be inclusive. And the thing is that when we go through our grant-making process, sometimes I think, well, look, let's do this one because it's a good idea and it has potential to spread. Because a lot of the diaspora projects are Pan-African, um, whereas a lot of the African projects tend to be either country or regional. I realize that our mandate is—it's global in a way, but it's Africans wherever you are. So the more stuff we can do that's Pan-African, that

hits multiple countries as opposed to one, it just takes us further in our ambition. But we're very careful to kind of prioritize Africa, because the need is there. And when you think about equity, you have to prioritize the continent.

**HILARY:** And it sounds like you're, you're handling that in a very nuanced way, but I think that you are putting the emphasis in the right place. You had always planned to be a bit of a virtual organization because even when you've thought about constructing the team and where to locate yourselves, you've had to, you've had to think that way, but then of course, with COVID you had to be virtual. I'm curious, you know, what you have learned from that.

**MOKY:** You know, I think COVID has made a huge difference to how we start to think about Africa No Filter. And the one thing it has done is it's opened up the continent for us, because we have been able to recruit and retain staff in countries I would not have considered. So we've got somebody in Uganda, in Kenya, in Nigeria, in Ghana, and in South Africa. And we would not have been able to do that. So that's the first thing. The second thing it has meant is that we have been able to, in a way, do more, I think, because the focus groups and the sort of round tables we've done with people from multiple countries, they just—we could have done it before, but before Zoom, before COVID, people just weren't thinking like that. It's just given us so much insight and so much opportunity. But I think the COVID thing has meant that things are hard. There's a lot more sort of mental health issues and just young people just not clear about what's going on and just the economic hardship.

**HILARY:** It's going to be playing out for many, many years, and I think that's a place, in a way, in which Africa No Filter has, you know, has so much to say. But, Moky, I have one last question for you. It's really more personal about, about you. You, of course, yourself are a storyteller. So I'm curious, you know, in your own life, when did you realize that your calling was to tell, um, really compelling and nuanced stories and to empower others to do the same?

**MOKY:** Thirty-six years ago this year was Live Aid. And I don't know if you remember Live Aid, but that was really, like, quite a searing moment for me. And I just remember being really angry. I just remember being really angry about that. That moment has really defined a lot of the things that I did in my career, um, subsequent to that.

You know, one of the things I did, I mean, I wrote a book called *Africa's Greatest Entrepreneurs*, because I was interested in the entrepreneurial story because at that time it was, like, Richard Branson and Donald Trump, they were the entrepreneurs. And it felt like we didn't have entrepreneurs on the continent. So I went out to find them and tell the stories. Everybody used to think I was doing it for money. People didn't understand that I wanted to tell the story because I thought it was important to tell stories—because back then, we as Africans, we were not necessarily telling our own story. I realized that the only way to get people to see things differently is not to tell them the facts and give you the data—that, oh, 30% of Africans are middle class. Nobody cares. But show me somebody who is middle class, show me their life. That's what storytelling to me is—it's show and tell. You know, you're actually showing what

you're trying to convince people of. And, by the way, I, at no stage, am trying to make out that Africa is this amazing, wonderful place and nothing terrible happens here. What we're looking for is nuance and balance.

I have a monthly column in a magazine called New African, and the last one I wrote, it was about the fact that it all of a sudden struck me all of a sudden that, oh my God, there's so much progress on this narrative. You know, like, Burna Boy, you know, actually said it. And I started the article off with that. Burna Boy, when he won the Grammy, he was like, "Africa is in the house. We're in the house." You know, we're not outside the door, we're at the table, we're here. You know, and there's just so many things, little things and big things, that have, um, made me realize that we're further along than we are. We've come a long way, baby. That's the phrase.

**HILARY:** Thank you so much for this conversation. It's so inspiring to get to hear the work you're doing, and it's just such a privilege to get to be part of it. So thank you.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

**End of transcript.**