Conversation with Noor Jehan Docrat
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, your background, and what brought you into this work?

Noor Jehan Docrat: Thank you so much. I'm just bursting with excitement. I'm so passionate about the work I do, and I think there's such an urgency, so thank you for inviting me.

My name is Noor Jehan. I'm currently living in Stellenbosch in South Africa. I work in coastal community development, but also for development for other organizations to make sure that community voices are actually being included in all kinds of program outputs.

I used to work in the development space, and I used to work with communities in different sectors and in different areas. What I found myself witnessing over and over again was that there was such an incongruence with organizations and what they were saying they wanted to do and what was actually happening on the ground with communities.

In certain instances, there was such a great paradox of how communities were actually being treated. Inadvertently, organizations working in this space were perpetuating systemic oppressions, and they were perpetuating structural oppression where communities found themselves in a worse position, even though technically, according to the monitoring and evaluation report, great strides were made.

I was witnessing these patterns over and over and over again in different organizations, and I realized that something was amiss. Something was wrong. The theme was very alarming for me. I slowly began to take myself out of the not-for-profit sector. But as I left, a fire was burning. There was a great desire for change. And I kept on telling myself, there has to be another way. There has to be an alternative. Surely this is not the way that it's supposed to be.

I'm such a lover of learning. I don't think I'll ever stop. My background and my undergrad is in business and commerce. It's not in community development at all. When I started thinking about solutions to this problem that I'm seeing, I gravitated towards thinking that it might be worth my while to do a master's in something. I found a course from the UCT website: an MPhil in Inclusive Innovation.

I remember reading it and thinking to myself, wow, this is amazing. This is talking about finding innovative solutions to the wicked problems in society.

When I applied, I remember writing to the professor and just writing out my heart story about what I saw was the problem. And I got accepted. I tell everyone that the MPhil changed my life. It wasn't because of the thesis, or the outcome; it was because of the connections that were made within the cohort and the research that was done with the communities. I had the absolute pleasure of working with community members from very young to seniors — the 80-year-old women that were running businesses in informal settlements.

What I learned from that research really inspired me to go back into the space of development, but to create my own narrative for that.

Currently, I do work for an ocean-impact catalyst where we work with communities in different parts of Africa. But I'm also the founder of my own organization that tries to instill some of the research and the ideologies that we've learned from communities to create an incredible organization where we can have communities coming on board — sitting on our board of directors, for example, going past the tick box of getting communities involved — and actually listening to what they have to say and working with them. That's what got me to where I'm today.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does listening mean to you? How do you go about listening to communities? And what do you think makes your listening practice distinctive? What makes it different from the community listening that people might typically think they're doing?

Noor Jehan Docrat: Oh, I love that.

From the research, I recognize that organizations that were doing things differently; they were having courageous conversations. A courageous conversation is where you as an organization and an individual are willing to be critiqued by the community.

You open these platforms for communities to come against you and say to you, "We're not happy with A, B, C, D, E. We're not happy with the way you're doing things." You are welcoming these experiences

to rise to the surface. You are welcoming the frustrations to come to the surface. You're not there for show and tell, a pretty picture. You're there to actually get to the root cause of these problems.

And courageous conversations are not glamorous conversations. To get to the root cause of problems and oppressions that communities are facing, you really need to dig deep. In community development — at the risk of sounding like my favorite Michael Jackson song, "Man in the Mirror" — if you really want to make that change in the community, you need two things:

One thing is you need to ensure that you are learning how to break into the whole self, meaning to understand what are your reasons, what are your intentions, were you paying attention to what is it that you're actually doing in communities? Are you perpetuating the same things that you've actually been against?

And the other thing is to immerse (yourself) into the community. I call it immersion. Immersion is a long process where you literally and physically go to these communities. You sit with them, you have meals with them, you listen to the stories of their soul.

For me, the listening skill is really being able to critique yourself as well. Critique yourself as an organization and immerse yourself within the community so you can really listen to these stories. Listen to what it is that they're actually telling you are the problems, instead of you going there with your symptomatic approach and trying to Band-Aid what you think is the problem.

You feel it. You feel the energy, you feel the vibe. You taste the essence of what's going on. And you have to have a blank mindset. You can't go with your preconceived notions and your preconceived solutions, because what you have as a solution is not what the community needs. It's really not what they need.

It's breaking into the home of your heart. It's making sure you're cleared of your own biases and your own preconceived notions so that you can go into this community and start creating with them something that's really meaningful and really sustainable.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there a story or example you could share with me about the impact that your coastal community development work has had on communities?

Noor Jehan Docrat: We need to infuse dignity into everything that we do.

For example, I currently work with women in Tanzania. I always tell them, I am the beneficiary of this project, not you, because I am learning every single day what it means to be courageous, what it

means to be resilient, and what it means to be fearless in the face of adversity. Because the lives that they lead, they have such difficulties. But every single time I speak to them, they are walking with dignity and grace that I've never experienced in my life. I've never experienced that kind of just gracefulness, that they exude every single time that I've been with them.

So I'm always grateful for the relationships that we create with these community members. And the relationships outweigh any kind of outcomes.

When we go back to the communities, I ask them, "What is the biggest impact for you?" It's always something that we have not planned.

One of my very good friends says to me the biggest impact for her was confidence. She learned confidence. Because I'd always encourage her — through the business incubation, when she's buying products — I'd always say, go to your supplier and ask for a discount. Don't be afraid to ask.

Initially, it was very taboo where a woman would be able to say, "Well, I don't think this price is fair," or, "Can you add other services?" And when the program finished, that was the thing she was most proud about. She learned confidence. And the confidence became something that she could share with other women as well.

There's so many examples. I [had a] recent project with a group of women that wanted to go for swimming lessons as part of their hope to plant seaweed in deeper water. But this is something that's not done in the community. Women don't swim. It's seen as a male-dominated activity.

But these women are fearless, as I said, and they decided that they're going to swim. The first thing the woman does is she teaches her kids. She knows how to swim, and then she teaches her kids, and she teaches other people in the community how to do it. I always think to myself, I'm the luckiest person to get to work with these amazing community members that teach me valuable skills, and they teach me more than I ever teach.

The greatest impact — well, this is a personal impact. I do believe that it's not the Big Bang moments that are important, but it's the stories in between the nodes. It's the relationships that you create.

And so, it's a funny story, but my name is Noor Jehan. It's not a common name. It's a very unusual name. And when I was a teenager, I always remember wanting a very simple name, a very unassuming name, something that was plain so I could just blend into the background.

A few months ago, a woman from Tanzania, someone that I had worked with over the last year, sent me a picture of her baby. It was the most beautiful, chubby baby girl. And she said to me, "I just want you to know I named her Fadiya Noor. And it is after you." My name means "the light of the world." And she said, "I hope she'll be a light as you've been to me."

And I promise you, when I got that message, I was crying. I felt so unworthy. What can I say? The impact that you make is something that you won't even understand. I'm very proud to be the godmother now of a baby in Tanzania. Little baby Fadiya Noor. I always say, it's the small things. It's the quality that you're paying for every conversation. It's the dignity that you bring to a situation.

We speak different languages. I don't speak Swahili. They don't speak English. We work through translators and we work through people, but it's still possible to create those meaningful relationships. And online as well.

Ashley Hopkinson: Talk to me a little bit about what you have learned over the years, particularly working with these coastal communities. What do you think is a valuable lesson you can pass along to someone else who might want to do this work?

Noor Jehan Docrat: There's a few things that I can tap on that are equally important.

Working with communities, specifically as an organization, you usually have objectives that you'd like to achieve because you have funders that like these objectives. But I think if you really want to make impactful work, you need to have something which I call an evolving model.

An evolving model is something where you can pivot your project and your outcomes depending on the needs of the community. Having an evolving model that bends and sways and flows with the communities is super necessary and important.

For example, you could say that you want to spend so much money on capacity-building for this community, but instead of having a preconceived idea of what it means, you could go to the community and find out what it is that they actually need.

Another thing is to trust communities. I often see organizations that don't trust communities to make decisions. You don't trust them to be innovators. You don't trust them to be creators or designers. They have no autonomy over how funds are spent. Trusting the community is a big part of this, and being able to say, You really do have the skills. You have the strength. We recognize it, and we trust that you'll be able to do the best thing for your community.

And the other thing is, create holistic models of development. When we say holistic, we look at human beings as the entire human being: the physical, the emotional, the spiritual human being. And if you look at that in communities as well, you need to look at a community as a whole.

Having holistic development might mean that you would invest in a certain part of the community. For example, in one of our programs, we build infrastructure, but the communities also needed access to sanitation. They have no toilets, so that becomes part of the need. It's being able to have those pivotal models that can evolve.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there any challenge within funding streams to be able to move with that flexibility?

Noor Jehan Docrat: [Flexibility] is not the norm, generally speaking. We know, generally speaking, that organizations are quite rigid, because they have funders that they need to be answerable to. It just so happens that this specific funder was very trusting of the work that we were doing. And working on the ground, I was able to put forward the need for what the community needed.

So that could be a challenge, that we have very specific funding requirements and very specific budgets. And a lot of the time the budgets are not taking into consideration the actual community needs, which is restoring your dignity. In the future, it's almost a no-brainer for organizations to really immerse into the community, find out what the actual needs are, and get them involved in the project design from the start. This is what you need if you want to see impact.

A lot of the time the other challenge is time. Projects have a timeline, and there's a finite time in which things need to be done. And when you work in development, everything needs to be done yesterday. So I don't blame organizations also for saying we have a certain amount of money to spend in this time and we're not looking at other things. But that also shows that if you want to create long-term sustainable impact that outlasts your project, then you need to be able to have an evolving model.

Also, we should really embrace failure. Sometimes organizations and funders, when you pivot or when you want to change things, they view it as a failure, for example, that you haven't completed the original outcomes, which should be actually seen as something positive where you embrace changes and embrace adaptivity in the project.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there an example of something that happened in your work that might be a failure in someone else's eyes, but it taught you something?

Noor Jehan Docrat: Definitely redesigning the outcomes of what we wanted. I work in the climate space, and unfortunately I've witnessed the real, firsthand impact of climate change on communities. They're the ones that are hurt the most from hurricanes and from flooding.

I've been doing a program for the last two years. In the first cohort that I helped, we were very much focused on increasing seaweed farming production, which was something the communities needed. This was something that was their bread and butter.

And inevitably, climate change, the rising heat levels, the diseases that started coming up in the seaweed began impacting the farmers. They were losing a lot of seaweed—tons of seaweed. And when they lose seaweed, they literally do not have the money to buy more. The communities and their families will face extreme poverty for this.

At that point, there's two things that I did. One was I decided that we needed to look into micro insurance for these seaweed farmers. Luckily there was an organization that could assist the farmers, not just in paying you back if your seaweed has diseases, but also helping farmers understand how to farm seaweed a bit better.

And the other thing is, as an organization we decided that we are going to shift slightly from just seaweed farming to seaweed production. So the communities would take the seaweed, they would dry it, and they'd make a flour — which is an amazing flour by the way.

You can bake with it, you can add it to your milkshakes. It's the most amazing thing ever, completely organic. And from that seaweed flour you can even make soaps and oils and shampoos and lotions. It's literally the most amazing thing to be involved in.

So we shifted primarily from providing funds specifically for seaweed farming to looking at how we can add value and produce other products with the seaweed. So the farmers are still able to farm, and these products are much more valuable in the community.

I wouldn't say it was a failure initially. When I heard about the hurricanes impacting the farmers, they'd tell me that this is what happened. We lost 2000 kilograms of seaweed. But they are so dignified, and they told me — it's fine. We will be fine. We will now do this. We will create this.

It's the most incredible feeling to work with these amazing communities who show me what resilience looks like every single day. And they just never give up. I have such a responsibility to them to make sure that in every single thing that we do, there's dignity, there's honor, there's time, there's research

that's being put into it, because the small failure is something that could end up being really catastrophic.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is missing from the current conversation we're having about climate change, particularly as it relates to coastal communities?

Noor Jehan Docrat: I spoke about these courageous conversations. I think it's so important, to be very honest, where if you look at your community, and if you look at the multiple oppressions they face, there's a pattern.

There's a reason why certain communities are being more impacted by climate change than others. And we're not having these hard conversations with people that are responsible for climate change. We're not having these hard conversations with the massive fishing trawlers or the governments or the organizations that are deep sea mining. And we're not having these conversations with people that matter.

I wrote down this quote because I love it. It's one of my favorite quotes of all time. It's by Frederick Douglass. And in terms of courageous conversations, he says, "It's not the light we need but the fire. It's not the gentle shower but the thunder. We need the storm. The world whirlwind, the earthquake, the feeling of the nation must be quickened. The consciousness of the nation must be roused. The propriety of the nation must be startled, and the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed."

I really firmly believe that in terms of the consciousness of our nation and the oppressiveness that we consistently feel and experience every single day, whether it's in an organization, whether it's in a community, whether it's in the general global community, we need to create these spaces for these to rise at the surface. And from there, everything will flow. We will be able to get solutions. We'll be able to get bold trust within communities and governments and each other.

In community development, you want to create spaces where humans can embrace the humanness, where you can come with all your brokenness and all your vulnerability and all of your frustrations, and we embrace that. And we're not shy of saying that this is what we're experiencing, this is what we are going through. And from there we can start creating this long-term change.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do we need to amplify climate conversations around coastal communities? How can we build this work up? How can we get the word out?

Noor Jehan Docrat: I'm going to go back to reflexivity, because I really do believe it's critical. I really do believe it's something that needs to happen in organizations, specifically in organizations that are

working in this space, to constantly be reflective over your policies in your organization. The procedures, the processes that you have in your own organization that are causing multiple systemic and structural micro and macro aggressions. A lot of the time those things don't want to be looked at because it's not glossy and not marketable. But internal reflexivity needs to happen in the organization.

I had a wonderful conversation with an organization here in Cape Town. They do community development work. They work with senior members of the society, and senior members of the society are often an overlooked and undervalued resource in communities. Sometimes when you reach a golden retirement age, you are considered to be non-valuable. But this organization broke social molds and included these community members.

And I had a conversation with an 80-year-old and an 85-year-old woman that started a beading business in Cape Town and were successfully running a wonderful community organization. They created the rules. They created the discipline. They created the finance mechanisms. They have their own board members.

If you want to amplify community development, it makes sense for communities to be involved in the organization. In the same way that organizations are puncturing into communities, you need to let communities puncture into the organization. I think that's the message. If you want to amplify community development, there can be no separation between you and the community.

So the hope that I have for my organization is that on my board of directors, it's going to be community members. It's going to be the 85-year-old that's going to be critiquing me. It's going to be people that are actually from the community that I'm working with that actually tell me what's going on.

So how do we get them in the organization? How do we get their views and their opinions and their ideas and their innovativeness into the organization? How do we capture the essence of that and actually really mean it?

This organization that I research has ninety members of the community in a hundred person organization. Who better to know the community than the community themselves? Who better to know the root cause of problems? Who better to know the joy and the laughter and the strength and the weaknesses and the challenges and the criminal activities? Who better to know it than the community? Who better to advise you than the community?

So in order to amplify this, we need to start being more intentional about communities coming into the organization, instead of us just puncturing into the communities. Allowing them to come in and bring their voices and their wealth and the amazing knowledge that they have into the organization.

Ashley Hopkinson: So we have to go beyond these quick surveys of communities where we ask them ten questions, but that's the end of it.

Noor Jehan Docrat: Yeah. I absolutely hate that. Information is valuable, right? So how are communities having ownership of that information?

Another organization that I worked with, they were so intent on the communities being able to collect the data for themselves and understand what that data meant. So the communities could take the data and go to the local municipality and fight and say, "No."

And it was a startling statistic. It was an informal settlement in South Africa where they have about 50,000 people living there. And the communities did the survey to show that the statistic for toilets and sanitation was 80 people to one toilet. 80 people to one toilet. The communities took that data and went to the municipality to say, we have conducted the survey. We have found out that these are the issues.

So even in conducting your surveys, you need to understand how we can bring the community so that they are actually benefiting, they understand what the data collection is, they collect the data, they analyze it, and they're using that data.

It's not your ten questions, where we go in, we get it, we leave. It's really changing the way that you organize things. It's almost like organizations go to communities with a pre-made puzzle, and they expect communities to fit into that puzzle.

But my vision as an organization is to go in with a blank slate, and you're creating with them a new puzzle with the community. You're not trying to stuff communities into your diagram, but you're actually essentially fitting into theirs.

Ashley Hopkinson: For the work that you're doing, how do you measure progress? How do you measure that you're getting closer to these goals of inclusive innovation and courageous conversations and making sure community voices are heard?

Noor Jehan Docrat: I can think of two off the top of my head, because I was smiling about it. When communities fight back, when they critique, I love it. I love it. I work in a way where I'm essentially a

business specialist who's giving communities advice on how to spend funding. And a lot of the time I give advice, but when they fight back and say, no, I don't think you're right—I love it. Because when we started the course, it was very quiet and women would not want to challenge. And they're not just challenging me, they're challenging men as well, which is something I love. For me to see that is incredible.

And it's when I see communities are completely independent from me and my project. When they have the beautiful audacity to leave. I love it. I love it. I don't want to perpetuate this dependence that the community needs us.

When you don't need us, that's when I know we are doing a great job. When you say to me, adios, goodbye, farewell. I don't need you. I got this. And then they flourish and they thrive and they're doing a much better job. That for me is the goal, to see that happening, where these women are confident and they don't need you, and also they don't want you anymore. You're done.

It's embracing the idea that I'm not going to be needed at some point. That is beautiful for me. I'm not going to be here forever. I'm not going to be needed.

I have children, and for me as a mother, one of my favorite quotes is from Reverend John. Oh, I love him. Reverend John says, "You grow your children so the world can have them."

I'll be growing and nurturing these communities so that they can go out into the world and create this impact and have the tools and have the support system that they need to be able to create impact. For me, that's amazing.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's beautiful. When I was growing up, my mom used to say, "My job is to make your wings strong."

Noor Jehan Docrat: Oh, I love that. I'm going to write that down.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are the partnerships and interdependencies that your work depends on? How have you seen them work together? What do we need for more interconnection?

Noor Jehan Docrat: It goes back to holistic development, where we understand that in communities, it's not only about fixing one particular area.

What I see working with communities is that it's never only about the environmental impact. It's about the economic impact as well. When communities are able to provide for their families, they're able to save the environment.

For example, if they're doing restoration programs for mangroves, or beekeeping, there's also the socio-economic impact, where women are getting capacity building and confidence, et cetera. But once you start connecting all the different dots and start looking at this entire community's needs, you start seeing the impact of other areas.

One of the women in last year's cohort, on the island of Pemba, said to me that for the first time on this island, in her village, girl children were able to go to school because of the money that they'd made in this business. I had to sit there and hold back my tears because I don't want to be flimsy there.

These powerfully strong women are saying that for the first time my daughter [went to school], because before they only had money to send one child to school, and that would be the male child.

We are all interconnected. And I think sometimes society's mainstream media would like us to believe we're so different, but we are very much the same. And when we start looking at the similarities, when we start looking at how we have the same hurt and the same pain, the same desires as a mother to send your child to school, and when we start seeing these different impacts and how it's coming along in the communities, it makes sense for us to be holistic.

It makes sense for us to start thinking as a whole person, nurturing the whole earth. So we're not just talking about nurturing the environment. The environment is linked to us. The ocean is linked to us. The earth is linked to us. We are linked to the earth and the ocean. We are linked to each other.

I'll give you my other favorite quote. I have a lot of favorite quotes, but this is from Desmond Tutu. Desmond Tutu says, "Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world." It's understanding that we can make this difference. We need to start looking at things in a holistic lens.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Noor Jehan Docrat: I just want to say thank you so much. I rarely get to talk about the work that I do, and I'm very passionate about it. So when I get an opportunity like this, I feel like, wow. I'm also getting to be the voice, I think, for communities in these spaces. So thank you for inviting me. It was such an absolute pleasure to meet you today and to be connected with you.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you so much for your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

* This conversation has been edited and condensed.