



News > How to lead change to empower girls in the Congo with Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

# How to lead change to empower girls in the Congo with Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

Christopher Pietroni is joined by Noëlla Coursaris Musunka, an award-winning philanthropist and international model.

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## Transcript

Speakers: Christopher Pietroni and Noëlla Coursaris Musunka

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Christopher Pietroni: Hello everyone, and welcome to this episode of the Leadership Exchanged Podcast. With me, your host, Christopher Pietroni. This podcast is brought to you by the University of Birmingham, where I am Professor of Leadership Practice and Director of the Birmingham Leadership Institute. In today's episode, I'm absolutely thrilled that we're going to be joined by Noëlla Coursaris Musunka. Noëlla has had an extraordinarily successful career as first an international model and then as the founder and CEO of the Malaika Foundation, which works to support the education, empowerment, leadership of girls in the Congo. Noëlla has received numerous industry and humanitarian awards. She was named by the BBC as one of its 100 most inspirational and influential women. She's been named a daughter of greatness by the Muhammad Ali Centre and the Malaika Foundation received a World Literacy Award in recognition of its work in 2021. Quite a record.

Noëlla, thank you for joining us.

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: Thank you for having me. And I'm looking forward for our conversation.

Christopher Pietroni: Wonderful. So Noëlla you were already a success, you had a successful career as a model before you founded The Malaika Foundation. You had won competitions. You had been the face of international brands. You had appeared in glamorous magazines in Vogue and Vanity Fair and so on. And it may seem to some like quite a gap, or distance between that world and the world that you spend much of your time on now with Malaika and I'm curious to hear a little bit more about where your motivation came from to devote so much of your time and energy to working with girls and in the Congo.

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: I have two children, so my first priority in my life is my two kids, my son and my daughter. And they come every summer with me in the Congo and at Malaika for six, seven weeks. My motivation really comes from my childhood. My father died when I was five years old. My mother didn't have any resources to keep me. I was the only child. So, to give me a better chance to be successful in my life, she thought at this moment it was to give me away. So, I grew up in different families in Europe and the crucial time of my life is my 18 years old. When I go back to see my mother after 13 years that I haven't seen her. And when I see her, I saw a beautiful country, Congo. But a lot of challenges, a lot of children out of school, a lot of problems. But I see my mother, too, struggling in her own life. And, and there was a moment where I always say in my

heart, Mum, I will help you, but I want to do something back for my country and I hope it will be education. So, years after I decided to create my foundation, it's setup in America and in the Congo. And I lead Malaika as a volunteer. I mainly manage all the team, the programs with the team and fundraise. Because unfortunately, if you don't have funds, you cannot exist. And this year is a big milestone, it is 15 years of Malaika. It's going to be the first graduation of a student in July 2023. So, there's a lot of things to look forward. Yeah.

Christopher Pietroni: I mean, it's an extraordinary success story. We're going to explore a little more about the work itself. But I just want to keep going with this question of motivation, because I think, I think people readily understand how given your personal experience and your mother's experience that the desire to support her would be strong. But not everybody facing that would have thought it's more than that. It's about giving back on a you know, in a more fundamental way, not just to the individual but to the place. And I'm curious about exploring that.

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: Yes. Because, you know, for 15 years to have the same passion leadership to give, I give nearly 5 hours every day of my life, on Malaika, will take conference calls engagement speaking in front of donors that my time in the Congo, when I'm over there. Being there 100% for them when the phone rings. So, a lot of challenges, lot of challenges to set up Malaika in the Congo, working in a village where it is remotely. There's no water, no electricity. Where there is political destabilisation, where we have the conflicts in the in the east of the side of the Congo, not where the school and where not a program is, but it affects the, the narrative of the Congo because unfortunately, when you go in front of donors, when you want to raise, they read about the Congo and right now we still have the conflict. So, you have to, you have to be very precise of the programs you're doing, what is what you want to achieve with your program with Malaika, and how it's benefiting, how it's impactful, how it's sustainable. So, you have to prove even more. And being an African leader, being an African philanthropist, African CEO and a woman, and a black woman in the philanthropy world, I needed really to put my foot in to say what I'm doing with my team. It's really incredible. And we are not only changing lives, we are empowering them and we're going to be the next leaders of the continent. So yes, we have to invest in them. So, it's a... it's how you work. And secondly, it's staff, because I'm African and I don't want to portray a negative part of Africa. So, in our website, in my speech I rarely talk about the negativity. I want to focus on the positivity and focus on the work that we are doing. But giving back, it's, you have to be strong because it's not only about fundraising, it's not about managing the programs. There's a lot of emotion going on, seeing all these girls growing, seeing your team growing, seeing your team losing their mother or their father or losing one of the girls that come to you that she doesn't have food at the house, that she lost a mom and a dad, or having a girl that had an accident, and what do you do? You bring her to the hospital, and you are there for her 100 percent. So, there's a lot of unexpected things that happen doing, well everything that you're creating. And you have to be strong.

Christopher Pietroni: When you were growing up in Europe, did you always imagine that you would want to be working in the Congo? Or was that something that came as a surprise to you?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: No, because, you know, the diaspora generally leaving Africa, always helps the family. We are big contributing to our continent, and we genuinely help back a mother or a father with a proximity family. That's something that is very amazing from the diaspora. And for me to help my mum, that was always something number one priority. But when I went to Congo, I saw so many children where the story could have been mine. Where they did not have the chance to go to school. The school in Congo, you have to pay to attend. And it could have been me being not going to school over there and that's something that always, I always say to myself with the family I was growing that I will definitely do, but I can, you know, when you grow up without a mom and a dad, you are... That gives me a lot of strength in everything that I do. I'm very career person. I'm very driven, I'm very resilient and I'm focussed. When I start something, I go till the end and I want to realise it and that's, that's, that's something that, that come with your personality but with your drive.

Christopher Pietroni: Were you also when you, again when you were growing up were you aware of the injustices that were sort of around you in the countries that you were in, in Europe, did you, was that something that struck you as well?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: Yes. You know, Congo it's such an incredible country, it's so beautiful and we have the rainforest, we have the gorillas we have so many wonders. But the other side, we are completely having a curse of being one of the richest countries in the world where you have the coltan and the cobalt, where you have niobium and all these resources that the world depends where 70% of these resources, what you have in your phone, in your green cars, in the aerospace come from Congo. And it's sad that these minerals don't contribute to the country, don't contribute to the people. And for me, the student that we have, understand really what's going on in the Congo and understand the problems. And a lot of them come to talk to me. And we have a long conversation. They call me Mama Noëlla and say Mama Noëlla we don't understand. How come we don't make phones in the Congo? The mineral come from our countries, and I really pray that one of these days that it will be these girls that really push this change because, yes, the minerals should be processed in the Congo. We should be able to do cars, we should be able to bring to make phones and everything. But it's a long, long process of leadership, of infrastructure. Where we work, like I was telling you, there's no water, electricity before even we start to build a school. You needed to build the well to have the water for the toilet facility to make the bricks. I pushed the government to make the road for many years and they make 70% of the roads in the village. And really from 15 years when it was a bush has been really completely developed, since Malaika put all the programs over there.

Christopher Pietroni: So, let's talk a little bit about Malaika and its programs and its development over the years, because as you were describing, it's much more than a school.

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: Of course, is an ecosystem.

Christopher Pietroni: And you describe it as an ecosystem. So maybe just give us a feel for that ecosystem and what are the elements of it that you think are most significant?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: Yes. So Malaika really started from a piece of paper, first of all. And, you know, from a piece of paper really grew into what we have. We started with three classrooms. Now we have 18 classrooms from one building, we have ten buildings. We started with 104 students, now we have 430 students. They all arrive, the girls, Malaika is a school for girls, so the girls arrive at five years old until 18 years old. We provide them uniform, school supplies, breakfast, lunch, a very holistic curriculum, from music, coding, STEM, a lot of tech, tech programs. And we really make them try to think out of the box. So, we upgraded constantly the curriculum. We do a lot of training on the teachers. Myself, I'm a mum, so I wanted to build a school where I could send my own daughter. I saw when I wanted to start before Malaika, so many schools in very poor conditions and I wanted to do not only a beautiful school but having a very strong curriculum that we teach at the school. And because the problem of water in the village, we decided to invest in water and sanitation. So, we built over 15 years more than 28 wells in different villages, that impact 35,000 people. So, you know, you have the... Malaika is really five pillars. You have the school, you have the community centre, you have the technical classes, you have the water sanitation, sport, and we have the agriculture, a farm where we teach about organic farming and where the food that we grow go back to the canteen of the school and all the mothers we teach them to make accessories mask, wallet, bags, etc. And accessories are being sold and the money come back to, to Malaika.

Christopher Pietroni: I think again, I think this is really, really interesting and quite distinctive about the work in Malaika that it does operate across all of those kinds of domains and has come to understand itself as an ecosystem. And I'm just curious about whether that's how it began. I mean, were you when you first had the idea when you first got going, were you thinking systemically, do you think?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: No, no. And I think what's really kept me going is to see all this myself, the girls and the mothers and the father coming to study. But yeah, I'd never envisaged that it would be so big like that. And, you know, during the UN week in September, we launched the Malaika toolkit, the blueprint how organisations, Government, individuals can duplicate the ecosystem as a whole or some parts of the ecosystem in any community in the world. Because I was always asked, how can we build a school in Liberia, or can we build a community centre in Ghana or the technical classes in South Africa? And I was saying with my team it would be

amazing if we can put like a guideline. It took us years to write that, so you can download the guideline or the videos or you can have courses, or you can go on the site, on the site visit, work visit for three days and really learn, be inspired. And how are you going to implement that in your communities? It would be only one Malaika, but I would love to see one of our programs to be duplicated. Of course, what you do in Congo cannot be the same if you work in a community in Brazil. It has to be, any program that you will develop has to be suitable for the problems and the solution of the community, and it has to be led by the community. All our staff is Congolese, and we put a lot of emphasis on their leadership skills, on their training, and we learn from them too. It's very important an exchange of learning. So that seems really, really significant to me because when you describe the different elements among, again, the need to involve the parents and all the consequences of not doing that, you know, when you describe it, it seems so obvious, right?

Christopher Pietroni: The strapline for Malaika is Empower Me, which I just think is wonderful. And I'm curious about why you made that central to the mission and what you think empowerment really means in the context of Kalebuka where Malaika does its work?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: Seeing the history of Africa, the colonisation for so many centuries, I was in Senegal, and I went to the island, Gorée, Île de Gorée and to see where the slaves were living and take the boat and how many millions of them died. It's a sad history of Africa and of our humanity and, and I think we cannot anymore impose, but we need to empower, and you need to trust. And me being a black woman. At once we are equal, and I'm just there to assist but we can we contribute a lot to the leadership skills to the management team and to the students. A lot of the girls and the students at the school, the centre, they have a lot of tasks, a lot of responsibility, and they, and they're great, they're growing. They going to be... Francisca wants to be an engineer. Jolie wants to be an architect, Kiputa wants to become a chemist. So they all have, they all have dreams and we are there to help them to reach their dreams. And I'm looking forward to seeing them, how they will grow in the society, find a space, find the happiness and how they will help their families.

Christopher Pietroni: And I, I know that you've said previously that you see yourself as helping to kind of educate and develop the future leaders of the continent. Right. So, what kind of leadership do you think they're going to need to be able to, you know, enact? What sort of leadership do you hope for from those girls as they become young women?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: An honest leadership, very passionate, a lot of compassion, a lot of patience. But in leadership too, you need to be firm, you have to have goals and you need, we need to try to reach these goals. And to be successful in whatever you do, you need to have a roadmap and Malaika has a roadmap every year. What we want to achieve at every level and it's tough and on the journey all we say to the girls and to the students, there's a lot of bumps. But I want to see a leadership too where there's emotions. In Africa sometimes and in a lot of leaders

sometimes, now I think the times change there's, you need to show your emotions. You need to show, too, that sometimes you have your ups and down and sometimes we need to take a step back. When I'm there for two months, they know when I need to step back. They're not going to see me for two days. Because I need to swallow a lot of things, to rethink and to have a great conversation. And then I reappear, and I come stronger. And you need your moment.

Christopher Pietroni: So, as we've kind of been exploring and Noëlla you, African woman from the Congo, but grew up mostly in Europe because of the circumstances of your parents.

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: And living in America for many years.

Christopher Pietroni: And lived in America for many years and historically, you know, as you've said, these kinds of programs and philanthropy generally in Africa has been kind of controlled by, mostly, by North American and European donors and investors, largely white. How significant do you think it is that you are a woman from Africa in affecting the work of Malaika and its success?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: When I started 15 years ago, I was... the philanthropy it was a very male dominated world and very white. And it's only since a few years that I see a big increase of women and more diversity, more inclusion. But we still have far to come. I do a lot of advocacy for peace, for girls' education, for education in general, but I do a lot of advocacy that programs in Africa need to be led by Africans, and we need to give them the skills and the power to do it. And in collaboration, of course, with international support and donors and knowledge and exchange, I think everything that we have to do, it has to be exchange and he has to be multi-generation learning too.

Christopher Pietroni: How do you think that people from North America and Europe, particularly white people, how can they be good allies rather than white saviours in this context? What are you looking for from them?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: I have amazing donors that really like this philosophy and is the reason they are coming into Malaika. They like the fact that the team on the ground is from Congo. Is from locally and I think the ecosystem, the Malaika blueprint is a good way to encourage these, these next steps and to encourage like the leaders, the next leaders of the continent, and leaders we want to see. I work in the fashion industry, and I was, I was tired to see it was, it was frustrating to see only maybe the diversity at the level of the catwalk, but not at the leadership level and covers. It's since few years we're seeing more diversity in covers, not only diversity of skin, but of bodies of shapes of culture etc. And it's beautiful to see this growth. But we want to see today, to see the diversity from the supply chains. We want to see the diversity that the designer is someone diverse, the decision maker, the marketer or the CFO etc. At every level we want to see this inclusivity and diversity. And that's very important, we just don't want to look the people

that's going to sell the clothes. Or going to be on the catwalk. We want to see from at every level. And, you know, even when I was doing modelling, it was modelling agency were having only one black girl, two black girl and one Asian and one Indian even on the catwalk. It was, they could have one black girl, in the magazine the same and even the philanthropy world, they were not interested to write about me or Malaika. They were more interested to write a big celebrity going to Africa and going to save Africa. You know, they will have four pages. But now the world change. They need authentic leader; they need authentic programs. They need authentic influencer. And it's beautiful to see because you know what, we sometimes talk about negativity, but I think it's good to see and to acknowledge positivity and to push., When people sometimes invite me and they want to introduce me, I'm as an influencer. I'm not an influencer, for me, I see myself, I'm an action maker, I'm an action builder, I build things I put teams together, I raise money, I go sit on advisory boards where I challenge the directors on how they run the programs, what they have and what we can do to improve. I just don't sit and shut up. I just want to, to always think how we can do better and how we can adapt to serve in the world we live in.

Christopher Pietroni: Have there ever been times when you thought it might not succeed, when you really questioned whether it could, it could succeed or not. Yes, there is a lot of moment of doubt when we didn't raise enough money, where it was tough to build a team where your staff, myself too to run it because I'm the mother of two kids and cooking every day, I'm doing homework. I still have to work. I do consultancy for companies, I do modelling, I have so many things that I'm doing and but now I have an amazing team and but yes, you have a lot of moment of doubt, you have a lot of moment where you want to quit everything, where you want to stop. But it's hard. You cannot stop, you know, you see all these kids, all the staff depending on you, on Malaika and luckily, I don't want to stop because I love everything I do. And I love all the girls that I'm seeing growing and I'm excited for their future and excited what they will bring to the continent.

Christopher Pietroni: Noëlla, I'm sure there are a lot of people who will find your leadership inspiring. But on this podcast, it's a question we ask all of our guests whose leadership inspires you?

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka: Well, I have a lot of amazing, amazing leaders that inspire me, but my leaders are definitely the people who are working in the Congo and the mothers and fathers. When I go to Congo and I see, or when I travel in Africa, when I see these mothers walking one hour with things on their head and going to sell the goods for hardly no money, to feed the family and they're walking back and they have the biggest smile, for me they are real leaders. Never complain. Rainy season, it rains so much, it is so tough, and you see them walking and even is one of the reasons we did the wells, because we were seeing people walking one hour 45 minute to fetch water. And it was something that really was just stuck on me. I'm like, how they can do that? And they are the leaders for me. They are humble, they have passion, they never complain, and

they trust what we do and, yeah, for me, this is the leader. How a father that go to sell bricks. Or going to go work...most of them don't have cars. So, the village where we are working, I see a lot of them walking to go to places or to sell their things. And it's always like so fascinating to see that. And they don't know what leadership is probably. But for me, they are leaders.

Christopher Pietroni: Noëlla, thank you so much. It's been an absolute pleasure to explore the work of Malaika with you, but also your story and your journey into leadership and the various ways in which you exercise your leadership. One thing that really strikes me about your approach is that it has this extraordinary passion at its core, this real drive that clearly motivates you to keep going and to bring others into the work with you. But you seem to combine that with a with a real determination around delivery. Noëlla thank you. Thank you. And congratulations on 15 years of Malaika. You know that moment when those girls graduate, is going to be very special, I'm sure. And to our listeners, thank you for joining us for this episode of the Leadership Exchanged Podcast. If you've enjoyed the episode, do please help to support us by giving us a rating and a review and of course, subscribe and you can keep up to date with everything about the podcast by visiting [birmingham.ac.uk/leadership-exchanged](http://birmingham.ac.uk/leadership-exchanged).

Joining Christopher Pietroni for the third episode of 'Leadership Exchanged' is Noëlla Coursaris Musunka. Noëlla is the founder and CEO of Malaika Foundation, based in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which began as a school and has now grown into a community-driven ecosystem working to transform the lives of young girls and their families.

In this episode, Noëlla discusses how she uses her leadership in philanthropy to empower young girls into becoming the next leaders of Africa, and the challenges she has faced both in her own life and whilst setting up a charity. As well as discussing her experience in the third sector, Noëlla also delves into the contrasts between her modelling career and her philanthropy career.

The Leadership Exchanged podcast asks if the world's biggest and most complex problems could be solved if the right leadership approach was applied? Do we need to exchange current approaches to leadership for something new? In each episode Leadership expert Professor Christopher Pietroni discusses with guests what kind of leadership is needed if you want to make real, lasting change. Find out more about the Leadership Exchanged podcast: [birmingham.ac.uk/leadership-exchanged](http://birmingham.ac.uk/leadership-exchanged)

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