

IN CONVERSATION

When data saves lives

A piece of software born of a crisis — and what it shows about what technology cannot do without people

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Juliana Rotich, named Social Entrepreneur of the Year by the World Economic Forum in 2011, developed a tool that uses large volumes of data to save lives in crises.

I am forever grateful for the internet. It is probably the most powerful thing that has happened in recent decades.

When she experienced the political, economic and humanitarian crisis after Kenya's 2007 presidential election, she and others developed the software Ushahidi. It allowed users to report outbreaks of violence on a map in real time. The software is open source: anyone who uses it can inspect the code, adapt it and improve it for their own needs.

"That makes Ushahidi far more than a piece of software. It is a global movement, a global community."

From Nairobi to everywhere

Even Rotich was surprised by how quickly her nonprofit technology spread. Mapping crises in Kenya turned into mapping elections, corruption and environmental problems around the world. After the 2011 earthquake in Japan it was used to record danger zones and relief supplies. In the 2012 US presidential election, cases of voter suppression were reported with it; in 2010, the effects of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico were mapped.

Today, twenty million people in 150 countries use the software.

For Rotich, Ushahidi embodies her idea of progress: communities solving their own problems. Open-source technology allows everyone to build on existing solutions and adapt them to their own needs.

"I hope we will see more open platforms where users get exactly the value they need, when they need it. A community of problem solvers is something very empowering."

Technology is only a tool

Rotich stresses that technology alone achieves nothing. Progress comes from the people who use these tools for the better. It takes a force to set the tool in motion: its users.

But how can progress be improved in general? For Rotich it comes down to creating economic opportunity. Basic needs must of course be met first — water, sanitation, education, electricity, health. But people, especially in Africa, also need “the opportunity to work and earn their own living.”

What if Africans were not merely the consumers but the inventors of the solutions?

People should be able to take matters into their own hands. What makes this possible are certain ecosystems — such as the iHub in Nairobi, a large technology hub that Rotich helped to build: a shared workspace, two incubators, a workshop for prototypes. A building full of entrepreneurial minds meant to run into one another.

One of the initiatives that found a home there is Akirachix — an organization that develops coding training specifically for women. Such programs are especially interesting because they can be multiplied widely: instructions can be made available worldwide, and anyone can learn to code.

In six years, the iHub has produced more than 170 start-ups and created more than 1,300 jobs.

Why this conversation is here

Ushahidi is the clearest case we know for a thesis that usually remains too abstract in leadership debates: a tool only takes effect when the people who are supposed to use it are allowed to help shape it.

Open-source code is not a technical preference here but a leadership decision. It gives up control and gains participation in return. This is exactly the exchange most organizations shy away from — and then they wonder why tools that were designed and rolled out centrally are used by no one a year later.

The second point concerns how it came about. Ushahidi was built in days, under pressure, without a requirements catalog. That is not an argument against diligence. It is an argument that proximity to the problem is worth more than the completeness of the analysis. Anyone who wants to change an organization should therefore start where someone has a concrete problem — not where the target picture looks most attractive.

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