Innovation and collaboration, Africa-style

Juliana Rotich

Juliana Rotich is Executive Director, Ushahidi Inc. a Technologist and TED Senior Fellow.

To be innovative, you need a healthy modicum of humility. Many a conference has the theme of innovation as part of discussion in almost anything. Innovation in technological context, in development and most recently, innovation in philanthropy. Innovation is something many technologists, futurists and business leaders are in search of. It is like the modern day holy grail in the face of disruptive tech trends that usurp business models.

As part of the Co-Founding team of Ushahidi, I have the privilege of working with an incredible team that is globally dispersed, with our team call every week encompassing 7 time zones. As we have built platforms and tools over the past 3 years, I am continually learning about what it means to innovate. I say continually, because it is a process that is ongoing and does not stop at having a cloud based service (Crowdmap), mobile applications, and semantic data collection curation tools in the pipeline (SwiftRiver).

One of the key things I have learned about innovation is that it takes humility to get on the ground; sometimes quite literally, to appreciate the view of an issue or a problem or simply someone else's story. This became quite clear to me when I was in Zambia last September for the elections, the Ushahidi platform was used to crowd source information about the electoral process. Problem: being surrounded by rowdy youth, as we approached a polling station; this after checking with the police station and being told that all was well. I did not sign up for alerts from Bantuwatch.org. If I had done so, I would have realized that the reality on the ground was quite different. The view from the ground or from the crowd is one you need when assessing any situation.

As part of the Ushahidi strategy we started an innovation hub in Nairobi, Kenya. With generous support of The Omidyar Network and Hivos we set out to create a space for technologists, business leaders, developers, designers and the larger tech community. The space helps us convene, collaborate and celebrate this narrative of African tech. Each day, developers congregate, work through their vision of what utility they can provide, we hack, have coffee and hack some more, get on Skype calls at odd times of the night, then yes…hack some more after that. Ushahidi is still largely virtual, it is in our DNA after all: the iHub is one of those nodes of communities that is a key part of our interactions. Other nodes are the offices of our partners in the bay area and the countless coffee shops and co-working spaces that cater to the modern day location agnostic web worker, volunteer or simply…geek.

Being on the ground, connecting with each node in our global interconnected community is something I can term a gift. In Zambia I got to see first hand how our platform was being deployed on the ground, publicized over radio; to give citizens a voice during the elections there. While I was there, I met with a group of young developers, volunteers and journalists who were exploring how to grow the nascent tech community in Lusaka. As in

other cases, what helps innovation is a mix of on-the-ground reality, coding skills and most of all the open source community online. When people are gathered based on passion for what they do that is when you see innovations. When there is a direct correlation between the problem and the possible solution, the promise of the tech entrepreneur or mobile developer is to architect the avenue. We have a long way to go, but we can imagine the world differently and go about building out our vision. Having the tools and the team to do this is like being handed Thor's hammer.

I notice the growth of similar spaces like the iHub in Africa and I notice that countries and philanthropic organizations are setting up self-styled tech cities. Some will work, some will not work. In Kenya there is the idea of Konza City. While it looks great on paper and I really would like to see it happen, I am only cautiously optimistic. Why? Partly because most governments haven't a clue how to innovate, much less foster it.

If the goal is to spur innovation, it takes humility to listen, to look around and participate with innovators wherever they may be first. To see potential where others see trash, to support and uplift without supplanting and dictating. To connect with others based on passion, that is where the most influence happens. There is a need for acknowledgment that innovation is a culture with a thumbprint that can be unique, dynamic and most of all long range. One has to think about social impact, philanthropy or investing. To see solutions where others see problems you have to get back on the ground and listen. This is something we are striving for as we grow Ushahidi around the world and invite others to join us, build communities around the issues and explore solutions collaboratively.