

Juliana Rotich

Title: Co-founder and executive director

Companies: Ushahidi, iHub

Size: 29 employees; \$1.8m endowment

GLOBAL VOICE: Sharing solutions from the edge

In six years, Juliana Rotich has helped make Ushahidi a nonprofit technology juggernaut with a global mission: change the way information flows in the world—especially in overlooked or troubled regions.

Ms Rotich poses a simple question: In contrast with its image as a continent full of problems, what if solutions to global challenges came from Africa? Indeed, she has shown that developing regions are full of new and good ideas. “The Internet is not the purview just of English-speaking people,” she says. “Solutions also can come from the edge.”

Ushahidi traces its origins to 2008, when election violence rocked Kenya, a country that had seemed safely on the road to peaceful democracy. Ms Rotich, Kenyan by birth, was living in Chicago and working for a large human resources consulting firm as a systems analyst and programmer. But she spent her evenings and weekends connecting on social media with fellow Kenyan émigrés dismayed by the turmoil in their home country.

Kenyans and other activists with a passion for social media and expertise in digital technology teamed up, including Ms Rotich, Ory Okolloh and several others, who launched an interactive network aimed at mapping the trouble spots. Ms Rotich soon relocated to Nairobi, followed by Ms Okolloh, to nurture what became Ushahidi, which means “testimony” in Swahili.

Ushahidi quickly evolved into a not-for-profit digital platform that connects and gives a voice to communities facing social, political or medical duress—in Kenya and beyond.

Under Ms Rotich’s leadership, Ushahidi became an umbrella for networked initiatives that locate and connect people in difficult circumstances. Free and open software tools equip ordinary individuals and groups with a suite of mobile applications: interactive maps that keep up with changing conditions, a tool to gather and analyse global crisis data from multiple sources and two-way texting channels accessible anywhere a humanitarian emergency arises.

Ushahidi’s social technologies now assist organisations in countries and regions from Kenya to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to Gaza, to Haiti and tsunami-ravaged areas of Japan.

Acclaim follows Ms Rotich, who also co-founded iHub, a co-working space in Nairobi that has helped the tech community in Africa grow to 14,000 members. Firms it has nurtured have created more than 1,000 jobs. *Fortune* magazine put her on its roster of “World’s 50 Greatest Leaders”. She is one of the “100 Most Influential Tech Women on Twitter”, according to *Business Insider*. The prestigious World Economic Forum named Ms Rotich social entrepreneur of the year in 2011. Her recent TED talk introduced Ushahidi to more than a half million global viewers.

The advice she often gives not-for-profit social businesses with local goals is to tap the growing array of open-source tools already available and customise them to suit their needs. "Do not start from scratch," she says.

She also warns budding activists and entrepreneurs to focus on utility over appearance. "It's not just about what looks pretty," Ms Rotich says. "Software needs to work for each situation and solve a problem."



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Social business leader

