Conversation #11

Why Policy Matters for Entrepreneurs

Ory Okolloh of Omidyar Network Africa

Ory Okolloh *is a well-known commentator on technology trends and governance in Africa. She has worked with organizations like Omidyar Network, Google Africa and the World Bank. She is also a co-founder of Ushahidi and Mzalendo. In 2014, she was recognized as one of Time Magazine's 100 most influential people in the world.*

Ory, you have been involved in Mzalendo and Ushahidi, you have worked for Google, and you are now in the investment space with Omidyar. You are also an active blogger and trained lawyer. How do all these different roles fit together?

I consider myself an active citizen of the world, and if something bothers me enough, then I will do something about it. I got into technology because it allows me to reach out to a number of people at once. Primarily, my efforts are directed less at solving issues but rather aimed at creating a platform that can enable citizens to solve the problems they deem relevant. Mzalendo, for example, was created to give citizens access to vital information on relevant government issues. The basic idea behind Mzalendo was to create awareness about the role and work of Members of Parliament in Kenya and increase the accessibility of such information. For Ushahidi we developed a similar idea, with a different spin to it. At Ushahidi we built a platform that allowed people to crowd-source information directly without intermediaries. My work at Google continued in a similar vein. Few things scale better than Google initiatives and at Omidyar, I am concerned with identifying the tools that entrepreneurs and innovators in our region require to succeed and scale beyond national borders. In sum, I am motivated by how I can put my skills to use most effectively—that is, providing a platform so that problems become visible and get solved.

How would you describe your work at Omidyar?

My task is to bring an African perspective into the investment opportunities. We need more investments into ventures that make sense for the region and its entrepreneurs. This simply requires a thorough understanding of both the region and the investment opportunities. For example, on the entrepreneur side, we need to demystify the art of pitching and marketing. By the same token, we need to make sure as investors that we are staying close to the trends and to how African economies are evolving. All in all, I believe that by being more connected to the region and its entrepreneurs you will identify the hidden jewels that can have an immense impact.

Why are many entrepreneurs likely to disengage with the government, or "fly under the radar," as it is often called?

Not just in Kenya but in the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa you find very young democracies that suffer from high unemployment rates

and incapable governments that are failing to provide basic services. As a consequence, the perception that you should not rely on public goods has become the status quo—up to a point where the rule of thumb has become that the less you deal with government the better. We have become very creative and innovative in developing entrepreneurial solutions that work around public goods failures. However, at some point, you will notice that you are stuck, and you will have to engage with public policy. I believe that this idea—not expecting anything from your government—is harmful. Entrepreneurship and government are not two separate issues. They are interdependent right from the start.

There is a reason why industry lobbies in Europe and America are so powerful. Yes, they are entrepreneurs but they also leverage public policy to raise issues that are of concern to them. There is a reason why Obama and any presidential candidate in the general elections in the USA has to engage with the Silicon Valley lobby. All the government chief technology officers at the current White House, for example, have been former employees of big technology companies like Google or Facebook. Engagement with the government, as entrepreneurs, is absolutely common and needed. If this is the norm in the West, then why are we being asked to ignore the government?

Let's take procurement, for example. Why are African governments not procuring more from local technology entrepreneurs if they have the capability? How do we expect the local tech sector to grow if there are no policies in place to support it? Issues like this need to be put on the table and require a solution for the benefit of the region's ICT sector.

Who are the kinds of entrepreneurs that tend to get more involved in channeling information to policymakers?
We are starting to see more senior entrepreneurs become involved. Engaging the government is hard work and requires persistence. You cannot expect to knock on their door and see the change immediately coming through. Long meetings with policymakers where you move one step backward to go one forward are exhausting, especially when you know

that you could be using this time for your business and get way more done. However, when the new solution that you crafted with policy-makers becomes national and permanent, meaning a law, then you have achieved something for everyone else as well. Entrepreneurs should see this as a different kind of hack.

Let us say entrepreneurship also has a flavor of being an activist for society. Then what should the role of the government be?

The role of the government should be to create an opportunity for entrepreneurs to thrive. That is it! I am not pushing toward the other extreme, in which government will have to do everything. I am advocating for an enabling environment.

If we step back, reflect, and realize that the Kenyan population is in general quite entrepreneurial then we can start shifting some of the responsibility to them rather than shifting it even further away from them. Governments and policymakers do not need to do everything by themselves. What if we created an environment where we can act out our entrepreneurial nature for society as a whole? If you ask someone now for a short list of items that need to change, they will tell you that they do not want to deal with the Nairobi City Council every two days as they pass by the shop or that they need a streamlined business registration process—one unified license—or that access to financing needs to be addressed. An interest rate of 25 % is not really very conducive to doing business.

However, when we disengage completely, then there is no pressure for people on the other side to do their jobs.

What are some solutions you have observed to get the government involved?

I am interested in the recent revival of residence associations, which was mostly driven by security concerns that are by now evolving into other issues. I am fascinated by the Kilimani Project Foundation, as an

example.[2] It was formed by businesses and residents in the Kilimani area and provided a forum of vital exchange in the community. The idea goes back to a famous book, *Bowling Alone*: *The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, which analyzed the decline of in-person social interactions and how this basically undermines democracy. So you have to understand your neighborhood as a community where you have clear responsibilities as residents or business people and, on the other side, figure out who is responsible for doing what in government. For example, if there is a blocked drain on your street, it is more effective for you to complain collectively to the right local government entity than to solo on social media.

All in all, we need to think about ways to keep the government involved, rather than thinking of ways to stay under the radar. If we do not bring forth the issues that matter to those that can change them, then we will end up, if we are unlucky, with solutions that are only a temporary fix—or with no solutions at all.

Thanks you, Ory!

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[2] See http://kilimani.co.ke/