Maps have always been a source of fascination and intrigue. Today’s maps, however, can also help to save lives during disasters, document human rights abuses and monitor elections in countries under repressive rule. This presentation explores how today’s live maps can combine crowds and clouds to drive social change.

“The goal of the social good sector must be to end need, not just meet need. This means, for example, that international organizations ... must have a transition plan that is centered around devolving power, money and voice to local organizations.” – Patrick Meier

When Patrick Meier was 12 years old and living in Africa with his European parents, the first Gulf War broke out. With a big map of the Middle East, he started physically mapping the news updates with crayons and pens and markers.

Fast forward to January 12, 2010 at 4 pm – when he learned as a Tufts doctoral student about the devastating earthquake in Haiti. Patrick didn’t know if his close friends, who were in Port Au Prince at the time doing research, were alive, hurt, or even worse. So he did what he had done many times since childhood – he pulled out a map of Haiti, and started to manually map crowd-sourced pictures, updates, and video footage that were emerging, largely from local Twitter users. He did so on a free open source live mapping software platform from Africa called Ushahidi (meaning “witness” in Swahili). Soon dozens of friends and fellow students joined him in the volunteer live mapping effort from his Boston apartment – along with students in communities around the world.

Started as an emotional reaction to concern for his friends and others devastated by the earthquake, Patrick had no idea if his ad hoc efforts at sense making would be useful. Ten days later, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency referred to the live map as the most comprehensive crisis map of Haiti available to the humanitarian community. What started in his living room in snowy Boston with a bunch of friends from Tufts University, and what transformed into an “ad hoc collaboration by ordinary people wanting to help” using free open technology tools created not in Silicon Valley but in Africa, became the means for first responders being able to save hundreds of lives in Haiti – and a model for global institutions navigating humanitarian disasters thereafter. It also created physical maps of previously “dark”, unmapped areas of the world by tapping into a grassroots system of volunteers receiving and translating text message from people on the ground. And it began Patrick’s attempts to change the world in multiple ways, one map at a time, helping to revolutionize the power of ordinary citizens.

Patrick now is using his various skills as a digital humanitarian and global-local activist to
help silently transform the growth story of underdeveloped countries through technology. Over the past 15 years, he has worked around the world on a wide range of humanitarian projects with the leading international organizations including the United Nations, Red Cross and World Bank. In 2015, he authored Digital Humanitarians: How Big Data is Changing the Face of Humanitarian Response. His influential and widely-read blog iRevolutions has received millions of hits.

He currently serves as the Executive Director and Co-Founder of WeRobotics, which scales the positive impact of humanitarian aid, development and environmental projects through the use and localization of appropriate robotics solutions. These include aerial, marine and terrestrial and robotics. WeRobotics co-creates local innovation labs in developing countries (“Flying Labs”) where passionate local partners gain direct access to the professional skills and robotics technologies they need to scale their impact. In the process, WeRobotics works with these partners to incubate local businesses that offer robotics as service.

According to Patrick, “the vast majority of social good projects seem to be led by foreign experts. They parachute in to momentarily extract data from the Global South without having any local knowledge or understanding of the local context. And then they usually disappear. We founded WeRobotics to counter this foreign-first, top-down, and techno-centric approach by shifting power to local experts.” Patrick says his plan for WeRobotics “resonates with calls from leaders in the Global South: we exchange knowledge and connections with and between local experts across Flying Labs, helping them reinforce their capacity, credibility and visibility; driving new funding, technologies and leadership opportunities to local experts while actively crediting and building their human resources based on their priorities. We are actively ceding market share to local experts. Our impact metrics reflect these priorities. ... If we can cede majority market share to local experts, then others can too, along with entire sectors and industries. This is the systems change we seek, nothing less.”

Patrick is an internationally sought-out speaker, having given well over 200 talks in more than 20 countries across 6 continents. He has a PhD from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, a Pre-Doctoral Fellowship from Stanford University, an MA from Columbia University and was a visiting student at UC Berkeley. In addition, Patrick was a Research Fellow at the Peace Research Institute, Oslo and holds certificates in Complexity Science from both the Santa Fe Institute and the New England Complex Systems Institute. He has taught several professional, graduate and undergraduate courses.

Patrick’s photography and artistic sensibility – undoubtedly of use in his mapping and visualization work – has received acclaim. A President Emerita of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) once described his aerial photography of Italy as “fascinating,” “wonderful,” and “like a montage by many a contemporary artist.” His photography has also been featured by National Geographic.

Meier was born in West Africa to European parents, and lived in Kenya until he was 15. He holds a CASA-certified drone pilot license for multi-rotor, fixed-wing and powered-lift drones. He has authored numerous leading publications, including on the humanitarian use of drones. He now lives in Switzerland.

Join this Saturday’s Awakin Call with Patrick Meier! RSVP and more details here.