



Picture: @Josh Sokoya

New *beginnings*

Noëlla Coursaris Musunka on founding Malaika, a global blueprint for community-led transformation

There are so many small but meaningful ways people can affect positive change,' says Noëlla Coursaris Musunka, CEO and founder of non-profit organisation Malaika. 'Everyone has a voice in this world, so you must use it. If you are fortunate, you ought to share your wealth with others. And if you can only donate your time, even an hour can make a huge difference in the lives of those who are less fortunate.'

Despite her international platform – having spoken at TED, UNICEF, Harvard and our recent Attivo networking evening – advocating for equal education and opportunity, Noëlla remains hands-on: she devotes up to 30 pro bono hours a week to the foundation, while balancing her roles sitting on several international advisory boards. 'Philanthropy is tough,' she admits. 'To fundraise, to work in Congo where there's a lot of conflict... it hasn't been easy. You must be extremely street smart.'

Born in Lubumbashi, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Noëlla's early life was shaped by profound loss; her father died when she was just five years old, prompting her mother, facing an impossible economic situation, to send her to relatives in Europe in search of education and opportunity. Noëlla went on to earn a diploma in business management before

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making her mark in the fashion world.

After winning an Agent Provocateur modelling competition, Noëlla's career skyrocketed, taking her between London and New York for over a decade. But it was her emotional return to the DRC at 18, reuniting with her mother after 13 years apart, that sparked the most purpose-driven chapter of her life so far: an urge to create opportunities for girls in her homeland.

In 2007, she launched the Georges Malaika Foundation, named in honour of her father – and now simply known as 'Malaika.' What began as an effort to sponsor 10 girls from an orphanage in Lubumbashi, a remote village with no electricity, clean water or roads, has since grown into a powerful, community-led ecosystem, a lifeline that touches many thousands of lives every year.

Malaika is now a blueprint for sustainable, locally driven change. At its heart is a school and a range of programs in nearby Kalembo in which 430 girls, aged five to 18, receive free, accredited education in subjects from

STEM and coding to arts, music, theatre and sport. The school runs entirely on solar power and has achieved a pass rate of above 95 per cent on national Grade 6 exams for seven consecutive years, and many of its graduates have gone on to university.

Beyond the classroom, Malaika supports broader aims: its community centre serves over 6,000 people annually, offering literacy, digital training, health education and sports. The vocational training centre equips adults and out-of-school youth with practical skills, including carpentry and IT, and provides nationally recognised qualifications that can help lead to employment.

Meanwhile, its clean water programme has drilled or refurbished more than 30 wells, giving over 36,000 people access to safe drinking water. A working organic farm supports the preparation of over 190,000 nutritious meals each year, which is vital in a region where some children may only eat twice a week at home.

For Noëlla, the key to Malaika's success lies in its roots: 'It is led by and built with the community,' she says. Change only happens, she insists, when those who know the culture, politics and local realities lead the way. 'You can't just get someone from Washington or London to run a foundation.'

With Malaika approaching its 20th anniversary, Noëlla's goal is to see the model replicated globally. It's a huge challenge, and Noëlla says the fact her family – she has two children who are also involved in the charity's work – are her support is crucial. 'My number one source of energy is my kids.'

malaika.org