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Developing Peace: Social Entrepreneurship in Troubled Regions

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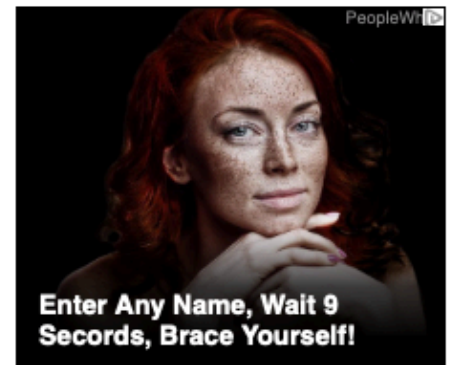
By Elise Hunter, MBA/MS candidate at Erb Institute, University of Michigan

Starting a social enterprise in a region that has experienced genocide may be considered crazy by some and selfless by others. But few recognize that these regions can offer sound business opportunities that can benefit communities and catalyze positive development. Zachary Kaufman, editor of [Social Entrepreneurship in the Age of Atrocities](#), shares his experiences in helping found the first public library in Kigali, Rwanda.

What is the first thing that pops into your head when you think about genocide? Perhaps a profound sadness, anger at the perpetrators, or disbelief about how such a horrific event could occur. If you're like me, you might wonder how you could possibly help, given how distant your existence is from the violence, both geographically and culturally. Such distance, when combined with the demands and distractions of everyday life, can cause a sense of futility.

Launching a social enterprise in a region that has experienced genocide takes tremendous courage and patience, says [Dr. Zachary Kaufman](#), a social entrepreneur, author and founder of the first public library in Rwanda. Entrepreneurs in these regions must balance their ambitions with sensitivity to the population's trauma and openness to learn from partners and customers.

Today, the [Kigali Public Library](#) offers a sunlit space open to visitors, replete with a large collection of history, nonfiction and fiction books, a children's education room, and a rooftop area that can be rented for community events. It is a hub that hosts writing competitions, storytelling sessions and computer trainings. By fulfilling its simple educational mission, the library serves as a potential mitigating force for future atrocities. "The lack of access to accurate information played an enabling role in the genocide," explains Kaufman. In months leading up to the [1994 genocide](#), Hutu-run radio stations and print media spread virulent anti-Tutsi propaganda, eventually inciting violence. A recent [Harvard Kennedy School study](#) found that Rwandan townships with greater literacy committed less violence when exposed to the widespread propaganda (controlling for a host of other factors). So it follows that an enterprise promoting literacy, such as a public library, could diminish the population's future susceptibility to such biased messages.



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Despite the library's benefit, Kaufman faced challenges in raising funds because of Rwanda's past. Some investors believed that a library was too low of a priority, and there were other more pressing needs such as health care, criminal justice and reconciliation. The trickiest obstacle was that some investors thought the region was still too volatile for outside assistance; some even insinuated that library customers would use the books as physical weapons. The belief that stability is a prerequisite for engagement is a huge misconception. "Some social enterprises are not only possible to pursue during an atrocity, but it is crucial to do so," says Kaufman. For example, protesters in the 2011 Libya uprising used [social media and other internet-based tools](#) to stay connected and to inform the world of the unfolding events.

Of course, a brick-and-mortar operation requires a baseline level of stability, which exists in Kigali, even though the region still experiences undercurrents of cultural and ethnic tension. Rwanda is still healing from the genocide, and in some cases the former perpetrators are living nearby the survivors. What's more, Kaufman faced skepticism from Rwandans. "The local population may question the motives of foreigners if they hail from a country that did not assist them during their greatest time of need," he says.

Kaufman overcame this outsider bias by seeking partnerships, understanding that to some, a local ambassador may be more inherently trustworthy than a foreigner. He partnered first with the [Rotary Club of Kigali-Virunga](#), which helped build acceptance for the project within the community. He continuously solicited feedback on his approach, from his messaging to the actual holdings of the library. The debate over the proportion of books in English, French and [Kinyarwanda](#) became a hot-button issue imbued with politics, and Kaufman treaded cautiously, relying on the expertise of professional librarians and community members.

After the library was constructed, Kaufman and his partners struggled to find committed volunteers and high-quality books. Volunteers who were “enthusiastic but did not contribute meaningfully” were turned away. Kaufman also declined ad hoc book donations as these turned out to be jumbled and caused more logistical trouble than they were worth. Instead, they chose a more centralized sourcing method through nonprofit partners, namely [Books for International Goodwill](#) and [Libraries Without Borders](#). While at first these policies may seem ungrateful, even rude, Kaufman learned quickly that accepting any book donation regardless of quality drained the library’s already stretched resources.

Fortunately today the library enjoys consistent funding and support, stemming from the U.S. through the [American Friends of the Kigali Public Library](#) and corporate donors, and from Rwanda, in small membership fees and government grants. The actual size of the library is modest yet thriving: 13 full-time employees and over 48,000 individual visits in 2012.

The Kigali Public Library is one potential social business model in communities that have experienced atrocities, but it is not the only one. As these regions develop it is important that those from the community take on positions of leadership as well in order to best represent their interests. This also helps avoid the appearance - legitimate or not - of paternalism. A local entrepreneur can often bring a perspective and tenacity that no one else can. Aki Ra of Cambodia, a former Khmer Rouge child soldier, spent the first half of his life setting land mines for Pol Pot’s regime and now dedicates his adult life to removing land mines and running the [Land Mine Museum and School](#) near Siem Reap, Cambodia.

It is clear from Kaufman’s experience that with openness, local partnerships, and a commitment to quality, social entrepreneurs from a variety of backgrounds can make a difference in a healing community. Kaufman’s key piece of advice for foreign entrepreneurs working in these regions is to “proceed with a huge dose of humility.” Good advice for anyone, really.

Entrance of Kigali Public Library; Photo courtesy of Zachary Kaufman

[Elise Hunter](#) is a writer for Student Reporter. We are a journalism incubator and online media outlet, providing media coverage of events and featuring current topics in management and economics around the world.

This post is part of a series produced by The Huffington Post and the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, in recognition of the latter’s Social Entrepreneurs Class of 2013. To see all the post in the series, click [here](#).