



Department of Communication  
The University of Texas at El Paso



**“We snuck up on the roof...”**

**The Widows of Duhozanye Rebuild their Community**

**Collaborative Answers to  
Community Problems in Save, Rwanda**

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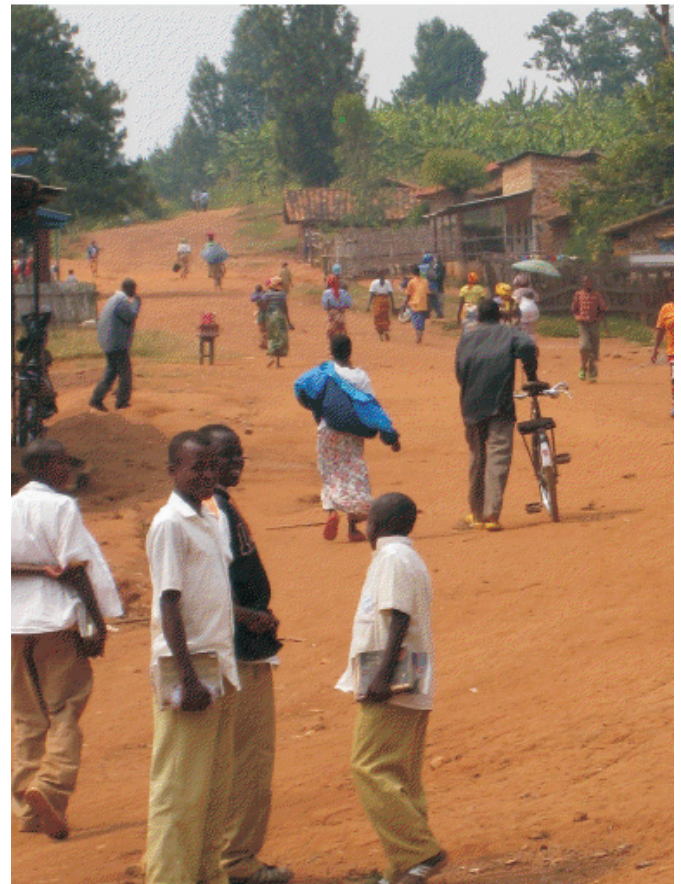
In the middle of the night, under cover of darkness, they crawled on top of half-destroyed houses. Wearing pants and wielding hammers, a few dozen Rwandan women rebuilt their communities' homes one by one. They began in 1995, just after the genocide ended. By the end of 1996, they had repaired and built more than 300 homes. Never mind that women aren't supposed to do carpentry—or even wear pants—in rural Rwanda.

Save, Rwanda (pronounced “sah vay” by locals) is the site of the first Catholic mission in the tiny Central African nation. Dirt roads and humble buildings dot the landscape, at odds with the massive church at the center of the rural village. Save, like most of the southern Gisagara district, experienced heavy casualties throughout the 1990s. In the early 1990's, Burundi's violence spilled across the border and Rwanda's civil war took its toll (though Save was not impacted as much as cities up north, closer to Uganda). Save was hardest hit from April-June 1994, the period now known as the Rwandan genocide.

Following the genocide, many of Save's residents were widows and orphans. Fathers, husbands, and brothers had been killed, pursued, or persuaded to fight in Rwanda or elsewhere in Central Africa. Entire families had relocated. Some Rwandans say that “everyone in Rwanda moved.” The widows who remained in Save beg to differ.

Before the violence ceased, Save's widows began to meet. They came together to support each other, as friends and neighbors. They named their group “duhozanye,” the Kinyarwanda word for “to console one another.” Soon, their challenges mounted; aid was slow to arrive. The widows realized that they needed to do more than console each other. Against tradition and taboo, the women of Duhozanye decided to rebuild Save, Rwanda.

The women of Duhozanye didn't start out wanting to be different. But they witnessed how vulnerable their neighbors were and wanted to protect them from further harm. So, they adopted orphans, shared their provisions, and helped how they could. Then they took a big leap. They decided to flout convention and rebuild their communities.



A typical road in Save, Rwanda, summer 2009



A genocide memorial in Save, summer 2009

They trusted that their collective strength would be enough. They knew they could salvage Save.

Interviewing Duhozanye leaders in 2009, we were struck by their insistence that they did the obvious. Yes, they flouted social convention, learned carpentry (in the dark), and kept working until the village was rebuilt despite heartache and health problems. But who wouldn't have? And who wouldn't have trusted their neighbors after such a conflict? The members of Duhozanye reinvented community and gender at the same time that they rebuilt homes. This was a remarkable response to conflict...

In the wake of a violent conflict like the Rwandan genocide, social ties are shattered—community disappears into the background for a long time. In Rwanda, the bonds that bound neighbors together were stretched or severed. Catherine Newbury and Hannah Baldwin, researchers for USAID, explained:

The war and the genocide shattered the dense local friendship networks and community solidarity that had traditionally provided solace and support for women. Family members and friends were killed or fled, and neighbors and former friends sometimes turned into enemies. What was left was not only social dislocation, but also [a] legacy of fear, insecurity, anger, and for some, a desire for revenge. Under these conditions, social trust dissolved, and many women came to feel isolated, alone, and abandoned... (2000, p. 3)

Despite the events they had just witnessed, Duhozanye members overcame their fears, frustrations, and attachments to gender norms... at lightning speed. They performed environmental assessments, gathered materials, coordinated worker schedules, and more. In essence, they became one of the premiere construction companies in their area of Southern Rwanda. While the conflict around them continued, they moved forward peacefully. It was as if the widows of Duhozanye existed outside of society sometimes. They created a world in which they had the power to move forward. What was it that enabled this group to rebuild their lives together? We asked Duhozanye leaders to tell us their stories and they



Duhozanye leader, 2009



Typical village building site, 2009

smiled. There was something sublime about the experience, something impossible to describe then or years later. Still, they tried.

Most importantly, they explained, they had a courageous founder and leader. Because she was in her eighties, she possessed a wisdom that gave them strength. She could see beyond their daily struggles to the future. She envisioned Save rebuilt and she communicated that dream to Duhozanye members. They listened to her and believed that the work could be done. They also believed in their ability to do it—even though they had grown up hearing that such physical labor was impossible for women. Sometimes there was doubt or delay, but for the most part Duhozanye members rose to challenges quickly and effectively. Wise leadership nourished members' self confidence and their social network enabled them to combine their efforts to make a

huge difference. They made their impact house by house and team by team. Soon, their success could be seen all over Save.

Through our conversations with Duhozanye leaders and members, we began to understand how difficult it is to describe post-conflict community building. Though Duhozanye members could recount their achievements in great detail, it became obvious that their greatest collective asset was an ability to quickly adjust to unfolding circumstances. Following the genocide, life was unpredictable. Some days were safer than others, some materials easier to find than others. In the wake of this instability, Duhozanye members reinvented themselves, their surroundings, and the art of carpentry again and again. They turned found objects into building materials and empty lots into homes. In the process, they discovered resources within their environment and themselves. As researchers, we wanted to discover how they did what they did. In the end, we realized that it is difficult to capture or replicate what bold, creative communities do to survive and thrive in the wake of conflict. They operate from an understanding of their circumstances and capacities that outsiders cannot fully appreciate. In the end, we bore witness to something remarkable in Save. And it didn't just end with houses.

Shortly after their reconstruction efforts began, Duhozanye members realized that they needed to think about the long-term



Duhozanye microcredit boxes, 2009

economic health of their communities. As women, they had little experience in business, finance, or public administration. As creative community leaders, they saw opportunities in front of them. Land was becoming available, foreign aid was beginning to trickle in, and members had homemaking skills and life experience they could leverage. The widows of Duhozanye assessed their individual and collective capacities and launched projects likely to succeed.

In the years since the genocide, Duhozanye has built a headquarters complete with an office, meeting rooms, a guest house, animal pens, a bottle distribution center, and more. The organization has maintained the Save genocide memorial, where more than 3,000 Rwandans are buried. Duhozanye has distributed more than 80 cows which have been shared by more than 250 households. Duhozanye members have engaged in cooperative sunflower farming, livestock breeding, beekeeping, sewing, and dozens of other projects. More than 50 Duhozanye microcredit groups—run by women—have enable the rural poor to meet their financial obligations, launch small enterprises, and save for the future.

Today Duhozanye boasts more than 4,000 active members. Duhozanye members support each other in many ways. They extend microcredit loans to each other and participate in collaborative business projects. They help care for each other's children and their communities' orphans. Duhozanye is a political force to be reckoned with as well. Members have held elected office in nearly half of the districts' sectors. Duhozanye-backed political officials promote “universal human rights,” and strive for “justice for the underprivileged.” Duhozanye members are proud that they have been able to raise awareness of their communities' needs, send orphans to school, and find jobs for struggling widows. The organization has received commendations from national and local government leaders and the United Nations. Duhozanye now serves as a model for nongovernmental (NGO) and nonprofit organizations coordinating community-based economic development and post-conflict reconstruction activities in Rwanda and beyond.



Duhozanye sunflower field, 2009



Duhozanye seamstress at work, summer 2009



other as neighbors. According to Duhozanye leaders, the organizations' projects “have enabled members to liberate themselves from isolation, to integrate into socio-economic development and even to serve as role models in their communities.” As leaders, they view Duhozanye as a collaborative answer to shared problems. As outside observers, we see Duhozanye as an important post-conflict case study.



Save's future: Schoolgirls, 2009

The story of Duhozanye is a powerful reminder that the poor and vulnerable possess important local knowledge, creative energy, and passion for social change. Despite their meager resources, creative community members find answers to problems that seem insurmountable. Community leaders, like the widows of Duhozanye, move their communities and countries forward.

In the wake of tragedy, the widows of Save, Rwanda came together to help each other cope and survive. In the months and years that followed, the members of Duhozanye took great risks to aid their neighbors. They broke taboo and tradition when they “snuck up on the roof” of one house, then another, then hundreds more. They broke new ground when they launched business initiatives, microcredit funds, and established safety nets for their communities. They acted out in many ways, not knowing if their efforts would succeed. Over the years, they established a track record as an innovative, community-centered, grassroots development organization focused on the needs of at-risk people. As scholars, we view them as models for community-based social change. In Southern Rwanda, the leaders and members of Duhozanye are called “heroes.” In the global community, they are the living embodiment of social justice.

Duhozanye's work continues today, but not without challenges. Despite all that they have achieved, Duhozanye leaders feel guilt and anxiety about the targets they fail to reach. Despite all of their business enterprises, Duhozanye members still struggle to pay their children's school fees, health care premiums (i.e., mutuelle payments), and other family expenses. The members of one microcredit group showed us their emergency fund “waiting list.” Because the groups' members are too poor to cover each others needs, we learned, the waiting list will likely never end. In that list lies the final lesson of our case study. Without access to capital and assistance from wealthier individuals, organizations, and governments, the poorest of the poor often fall short of their goals. The women of Duhozanye hold many answers to complex problems, but they need resources to realize their dreams.

#### Reference

Newbury, C., & Baldwin, H. (2000). *Aftermath: Women in postgenocide Rwanda*. Washington D.C.: Center for Development Information and Evaluation. USAID.

To learn more about Duhozanye or other community-based organizations in Southern Rwanda, contact Sarah E. Ryan at [seryan@utep.edu](mailto:seryan@utep.edu).

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Annie Balocating is a Workforce Programs Associate in the City University of New York Adult and Continuing Education Office. Ms. Balocating holds an M.P.A. from Baruch College/CUNY, an M.A. in Anthropology from Hunter College/CUNY, and a B.A. in English from Michigan State University. At M.S.U., Ms. Balocating was a Community Development Coordinator for the Residential Option in Arts & Letters (ROIAL) program and coordinated ROIAL student projects with the Lost Boys of Sudan residing in Lansing, Michigan. At M.S.U.'s *MATRIX: The Center for Humane Arts, Letters & Social Sciences Online*, she assisted with the project, "The Internet and Women's Democratic Organizing," with NGOs in Mali, Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria. More recently, her M.A. thesis on Rwandan genocide memorials and collective remembrance was nominated for the 2009 Hunter College Shuster Award for Outstanding Thesis. Ms. Balocating has conducted research and guest lectured in Rwanda since 2008. Her Rwanda research has been featured in *Peace Review*.

The Social Justice Initiative, operating under the auspices of the Department of Communication at The University of Texas at El Paso, is committed to social justice through local, regional, national, and global programs, publications, and products. The initiative began in December, 2008. After a UTEP prayer vigil for the victims of the Mumbai terrorist attacks, one student talked to another about the powerful difference people make when they unite for a good cause. Another student joined the conversation, echoing the sentiment... Building on the momentum of teamwork, collective goodwill, and respectful cohesion, Dr. Arvind Singhal of the Department of Communication and Lucia Dura, one of the graduate students involved in the peace event, co-launched the Social Justice Speaker and Publication Series. The first panel of the Social Justice series featured Emira Montes Zuta, Radio producer and former promoter of Bienvenida Salud, Minga Peru's popular on-air, intercultural radio-educative project. The initial publication series featured three pieces on Minga Peru's work in the Amazon. The initiative has grown to include more partners, events, publications, products, and causes. For more information on SJI, contact Arvind Singhal at [asinghal@utep.edu](mailto:asinghal@utep.edu) or Lucia Dura at [ldura@miners.utep.edu](mailto:ldura@miners.utep.edu).

The Rwanda Research Group is a faculty-student collaborative committed to grounded, interdisciplinary research that promotes peace in Rwanda. The RRG was founded in 2007 by Annie Balocating, Satoshi Ohno, Sarah Ryan, Della Saju, and Jennifer Walker. Since 2007, the RRG has produced articles, papers, and reports on good governance, the imihigo process (i.e., performance contracting), post-secondary education, women's agronomy organizations, and the practice of umuganda (i.e., communal labor). The RRG's work was featured in a special issue of *Peace Review* commemorating the 15th anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. Austin Berescik-Johns, Katerra Billy, and Darlene Nzorubara have contributed to recent RRG lectures and publications. For more information on the RRG, contact Sarah E. Ryan at [seryan@utep.edu](mailto:seryan@utep.edu).



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