

House Foreign Affairs Committee

Sub-Committee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

Hearing on
Rwanda: Democracy Thwarted?

September 27th, 2017 – 3:00 p.m.
2200 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Mr. Mike Jobbins
Director of Global Affairs and Partnerships
Search for Common Ground

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, Members of the Committee, and distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you today. Thank you for convening this important hearing and for maintaining a focus on Africa's Great Lakes Region in general, and on Rwanda in particular.

I am the Director of Global Affairs with Search for Common Ground (Search), one of the largest organizations dedicated to transforming conflict in the Great Lakes region and around the world. Search was founded upon the philosophy that conflict is an inevitable part of human societies and is neither good nor bad. Problem-solving requires constructive debate and differences of opinion – between men and women, between groups, political ideologies, religions, or regions – and is the only way that any society can advance. But while constructive conflict can lead to more inclusive development and social outcomes, destructive conflict lead to violence, oppression and is the primary cause of extreme poverty and humanitarian need.

Search began its work in the Great Lakes in 1995, amidst one of the worst periods of destructive conflict in recent history. Search began working in Burundi amidst that country's civil war, looking at similar dynamics to those that fueled Rwanda's horrific genocide and supporting Burundians seeking to chart a different path, where media could bring people together and heal divides rather than ignite tensions and spark violence. Recognizing the shared challenges and important regional factors driving conflict throughout the Great Lakes, Search expanded its work to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2001 and Rwanda in 2006 with the aim of supporting inclusive decision-making and reconciliation efforts.

Over the past decade, Search has worked closely with Rwandan government, media, civil society, and local communities to support reconciliation, address land disputes, and build the capacity of civil society and government institutions with a focus on youth. Search works with Rwandan partners including Government,ⁱ civil society, and media outlets across the countryⁱⁱ with support of grants from the U.S. government,ⁱⁱⁱ European governments,^{iv} UNICEF, as well as private philanthropists and foundations. While my testimony is informed by the time I have spent with Search, the opinions and perspectives are my own.

Twenty-three years following the genocide, Rwanda has seen impressive economic growth and a concerted effort from national and international actors to heal wounds and rebuild communities, and has been held up as a model of recovery and reconciliation. In the last decade, the country has faced three broad challenges: first, how to chart a path to economic growth overcoming the steep structural challenges that the country faced, second, how to establish post-conflict governance, and third how to ensure security nationally, with the regional implications in the troubled Great Lakes. I will focus my remarks on progress in these three sectors, with particular attention to women's participation, before offering a few recommendations for U.S. policy.

A Rapidly Transforming Economy and Agriculture Sector to Meet the Needs of a Growing Population

Rwanda has experienced dramatic economic growth. In the last 15 years, the economy has quintupled, from 1.3 to 8.3 billion dollars per year. The Rwandan economy is increasingly connected to the region and the wider world. Internet access has grown 250% since 2010, and more than a third of its GDP comes from global trade.^v Much of Rwanda's economic growth has been driven by a transition away from subsistence economy and commodity exports towards greater value-added in the services and agricultural sector, facilitated by a regulatory environment that supports business and entrepreneurship and the Government's Vision 2020 plan for economic reforms.

This rapid growth has been even more striking considering the structural challenges that the country faced. Rwanda is landlocked, one of the most densely populated countries in the world and heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture. To illustrate the challenge: the UN estimates that Rwanda's population will nearly double by 2050.^{vi} At the same time, the International Food Policy Research Institute forecasts that staple crop yields may drop due to changing soil productivity and climate change. This is a particular challenge for the young population. More than half of the population is under 20 years of age, and for the 80% who live in rural areas, access to land and agricultural productivity are critical to their future in terms of health, development, and the security of the country as a whole.^{vii}

Addressing land scarcity. In this context of land scarcity, disputes over the allocation, access, and ownership of land remain the most common cause of conflict for ordinary Rwandans. The Government has tried to address this issue by adopting new policies and putting in place local conflict mediators known as *Abunzi*.^{viii} While their mandate on mediation is broad, Search's research has found that approximately 80% of the cases they deal with are related to land. These local mediators are on the frontlines of challenging deep inequalities. For example, while women are legally entitled to inherit property, this right is not always recognized or respected in practice. Traditional norms and limited access to justice continue to obstruct women's ability to assert their rights, leaving them and their children economically and socially vulnerable. So, the Government is focused on incorporating women into the *Abunzi* structure, and it is starting to produce some early results in terms of supporting women's equal access to justice.

To support alternative dispute resolution (ADR) in this sector, Search partnered with the Ministry of Justice to provide training and coaching to 4,000 *Abunzi* community mediators, including female *Abunzi*; and with the National Women's Council to identify and train community resource people who could serve as advocates for marginalized groups, and particularly for women, as they tried to assert their rights to property and inheritance. Search has also been producing radio programming to ensure that rural residents had access to information on the latest land laws and policies and the opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns and conduct participatory theater performances that encouraged creative problem-solving so that families and communities could address land conflicts themselves, without needing the involvement of the over-burdened justice system. This partnership has thus far yielded promising results. For example, Search conducted a recent study in Gisagara District that found an 85% satisfaction rate with female mediators, and that women's emerging leadership as *Abunzi* was opening entry points for their involvement in community decision-making fora, including within churches and other social settings.

Inclusive diversification. At the same time, given the demographic pressure, agriculture in its current form will not sustain Rwanda's growing population. There has been an important focus on developing alternative livelihoods and ensuring equal access to opportunities – particularly for rural youth and women – to benefit from the economic transformation. As in all societies undergoing rapid economic transformation, the poorest and least-educated struggle to take advantage of new opportunities in the services-oriented, globalized, and higher-technology economy. Impediments include a lack of information and access to opportunities, capital and education to seize opportunities, and a lack of exposure to role models and examples of entrepreneurship. Looking forward, emphasizing alternative livelihoods, and with an approach that recognizes the diverse needs and interests of the Rwandan population in this area, will be critical if Rwanda is going to meet its target of becoming a middle-income country

Search has worked with the Rwandan business community, radio, and television to help extend and popularize the opportunities created by the new economy. Search worked with Rwandan media producers to develop a weekly radio show highlighting vocational training and entrepreneurship opportunities and feature creative economic undertakings of young people, particularly aimed at rural audiences. Search also created *Zamuka*, a reality TV show akin to America's *Shark Tank*, which featured contestants learning the challenges, strategies, and paths to create a successful business. As one of the first TV reality shows produced in Rwanda by Rwandans, it succeeded in harnessing the diverse initiatives underway to support economic development, creating more information-sharing and cohesion among the various actors trying to support this sector.^{ix}

Establishing Effective and Citizen Participation in Post-Conflict Governance

Rwanda is often celebrated as a champion of good governance on the continent. It ranks 44th out of 168 countries on the Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index^x and 62 out of 189 in the World Bank's 2016 Doing Business report^{xi}, some of the best scores of any African country. At the social level, Rwanda has made admirable progress in reconciling citizens from different backgrounds who have to live together in their communities despite what role they played in the genocide. Hundreds of thousands of people have been punished for the crimes committed, and on a day to day level people are moving on with their lives. At the same time, not even 25 years is a very short timeframe to truly overcome the horror that the country experienced. While the country has set aside ethnic identity in favor of national unity as Rwandans, recovery naturally takes time and many still struggle with trauma.

Accountability, performance and participation. Rwanda has achieved these successes through a governance model that focuses on professional, results-oriented and technocratic governance with strong central leadership in policymaking and implementation. The strong coordinating role that the central government plays across society has helped stamp out corruption and driven a coherent policy agenda. Local officials are charged with balancing an emphasis on efficiency and a pressure to “deliver” with the impetus to create opportunities for citizen input and explain policy. The best local administrators create windows for citizens to tailor and shape policy implementation, but in other circumstances, Rwandan citizens struggle to find a window to feed into decision-making, and sometimes feel that policies are made despite them, rather than for their benefit.

Search has partnered with the Ministry of Local Government to foster inclusive and participatory governance to improve development outcomes with a particular focus on two-way communications and the relationship between local officials and citizens in the context of national policy reform. Jointly, Search has trained officials in different districts to support them on how to identify and manage rumors, build more active communications strategies, and work with local radio stations to provide better access to information and platforms for dialogue that can inform government about citizen concerns and feedback on existing policies. This partnership aims to reduce the need for top-down policy enforcement, towards better communication and alignment between officials and ordinary citizens around common long-term interests improving sustainability through ownership and participation.

Media and civil society have a key role to play in promoting sustainable peace and inclusive governance. Yet they face internal challenges that prevent them from fulfilling this role. Search has been working with the media sector since it began working in Rwanda in 2006, and it has built strong partnerships with both government and independent outlets that have common interests of mission and purpose at their core, rather than transactional exchanges. Civil society in general, and media in particular, remain a critical partner, Search will continue to leverage its Common Ground approach to strengthen the capacity of media and civil society to engage with the authorities and with the population in a constructive and inclusive manner. Search's experience has shown that investing in promoting diversity in the media sector can yield positive results. Search aims for inclusion in all of its media programs—at the national and regional level, seeking to include diverse perspectives and experiences to broaden listeners' understanding of a particular issue or concept.

Fostering women's participation. One of the other areas of dramatic progress has been in tackling structural gender issues. Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in National Legislature at 64%^{xii}, ranks 5th in the world for the equality of access to economic, health, and educational opportunities (the U.S. ranked 45th)^{xiii}, and has equal participation of girls and boys in the school system. This progress is remarkable, particularly against the backdrop of traditional patriarchal norms, and is attributable in many ways to the prioritization at the highest level. There is of course, still progress yet to be made, especially in rural areas where many Rwandan women face discrimination and violence within their household. Search has been working with the Ministry of Gender and Family as well as women leaders in civil society and in the media to help build the confidence and legitimacy to play a meaningful role in decision-making processes beyond the top level of politics.

High level representation has not yet been fully translated into protection and inclusion: over a third of women report that they have experienced physical violence in their lives, with 14% of women having experienced physical violence in the past year.^{xiv} Through its work with *Abunzi* and local leaders, Search is working to address gender-based conflicts at the intra-household level, which are often related to land, inheritance, or decision-making. Search also worked with Rwandan media outlets and the *Association Rwandaise des Femmes des Medias* to improve the quality and availability of women's voices within the media sector, especially in the newsroom reporting (rather than human-interest, or “women's” issues), reached more than 2.5 million Rwandan listeners and found that more than three quarters of listeners across the region found that public access to good quality programs on gender and women's rights had increased.^{xv}

Building Stability in the Wider Region

At the regional level, the Great Lakes and Central Africa remain profoundly unstable. Rwanda's relations with its neighbors continue to be challenging in a context of political crisis in the region, and especially in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Diplomatic relations between Rwanda and Burundi have worsened since the Burundi crisis began in April 2015, driving a breakdown in the free movement of people and goods that have been critical to both countries' economies. With less trade, market prices of local goods are increasing, directly impacting ordinary citizens given the minimal cushion they have for price shocks. These tensions are particularly affecting small-scale petty traders, the majority of whom are women, who earn their survival selling agricultural products across the border.^{xvi} Further, Rwanda is currently hosting more than 87,000 Burundians,^{xvii} increasing the demographic pressure in the country. With crises and humanitarian calls to action in Somalia, South Sudan, and the DRC as well, there is little attention and limited resources to also attend to the Burundian situation and support its refugees. Past grievances in the region could also lead to further manipulation, population movements and deterioration of the economy, fueling cross-border violence that could lead to a regional conflict, especially as the DRC is heading towards a contentious electoral process.

To address misunderstandings and stereotypes in the wider region, Search developed a live regional call-in program. *Generation Grands Lacs* ran for nearly 10 years and reached millions from Matadi to Kigali,

highlighting young people's voices from Rwanda, Burundi and DRC as they sought to discuss and search for solutions to some of the region's long-running problems; evaluations found that the radio program reduced people's stereotypes about each other and contributed to better understanding and relationships between divided groups. Rwanda is an island of stability in a chronically fragile region, but long-term peace and economic growth for citizens throughout the wider Great Lakes Region relies on the entire region transitioning away from the legacy of violence and chronic fragility, and building a shared and inclusive future.

Key Recommendations

In view of these observations, I will conclude with four recommendations for U.S. policy.

First, sustain U.S. diplomatic engagement in Rwanda and the Great Lakes Region is vital. Although there are many competing interests and areas for the U.S. and the international community, the Great Lakes Region must not be forgotten and deserves high-level diplomatic attention. While the region may seem remote to many Americans, the horrors of genocide, civil war, and humanitarian crises that have been unleashed upon the citizens of Rwanda, DRC, Burundi, Uganda, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic in recent years continue to cost far too many lives and massive amounts of international assistance focused on saving lives rather than promoting growth. Rwanda is part of that context, and sustained diplomatic engagement is required both to sustain the U.S.-Rwanda partnership, and within the wider region. This is particularly true as President Kagame assumes the African Union Presidency in January, and as the U.S. continues to work with the region to support peace efforts in areas that are experiencing accentuated crises.

Second, learn lessons from Rwanda for other complex emergencies. Rwanda has made impressive gains in terms of security, development and reconciliation, but challenges still remain. Rwanda will continue to face dense population yet limited economic opportunities as a land-locked, resource-limited country; high expectations of economic growth and service delivery; and where the legacy of trauma still impedes collaborative problem-solving. Other fragile contexts in the region have been beset by see-sawing international attention and a lack of support for transitioning from emergency post-conflict assistance to reconciliation and economic recovery. At the same time, some of the legislation currently being considered by Congress, including the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, seem to be promising windows to improve our own government's ability to respond to crises and prevent genocide.

Third, strengthen regional economic integration. Population density and environmental shocks pose existential threats to the entire Great Lakes Region. Sustaining the needed economic growth in Rwanda, and achieving growth in its neighbors, relies upon integration. Yet recent events have shown some of the weaknesses of regional structures. The Economic Community for the Great Lakes which brought together Rwanda, Burundi and DRC to address issues of common interests is not currently functioning. The ICGLR and the East African Community offer windows and frameworks for cooperation, but as recent conflicts within the region show, economic cooperation needs to be complemented by efforts that meet citizens' basic needs, support people-to-people reconciliation efforts, and lay the groundwork for dealing with the legacies of the past.

Finally, continue to support and accompany Rwanda in overcoming the legacy of the genocide and reconciling itself with the horrific events of the past. Even though Rwanda is making much progress in dealing with the aftermath of the genocide and a series of the massacres which marked its history, its horrific past and its related trauma still affect other avenues to lasting peace and stability in Rwanda and in the whole region. Atrocities of this history and their consequences in the aftermath should pave ways to a much more open society, where conflicts and differences are dealt with openly and through dialogue. The U.S. Congress should focus its engagement in working with the Rwandan Government and supporting the Rwandan people to build a bright future.

-
- ⁱ Key Government partners include the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, Ministry of Local Government, the National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation, the Rwanda Natural Resources Authority, and the Media High Council.
- ⁱⁱ Media partners include the Rwanda Broadcast Authority, Radio Ishingiro, Radio Isangano, Radio Izuba, Radio Salus, Radio Isango Star, Contact FM, Radio and TV 10, and Radio Huguka.
- ⁱⁱⁱ This includes U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Conflict Management and Mitigation, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and the U.S. Institute of Peace
- ^{iv} Including the Belgian, British, Dutch, Finish, and Swedish governments, as well as the European Union
- ^v World Bank. [Rwanda Country Profile](#). Washington, DC September 2017.
- ^{vi} United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. "[World Population Prospects 2017: Rwanda, Total Population, Probabilistic Projections](#)." DESA/Populations Division. 2017.
- ^{vii} National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda. "Thematic Report: Population Size, Structure and Distribution" *Fourth Population and Housing Census of Rwanda*. Kigali, January 2014.
- ^{viii} An excellent summary of this institution was published by the South African NGO Accord in : Mutisi, Martha. "[The Abunzi Mediation in Rwanda: Opportunities for Engaging with Traditional Institutions of Conflict Resolution](#)." *Accord Policy & Practice Briefs*. Mt. Edgecombe, South Africa, November 2011.
- ^{ix} Nuwakora, Cliff Bernard. CASE International Consultants. [Final Report for the Progress Evaluation of SFCG's Entrepreneurship-Focused Initiatives Programme](#). Kampala. September, 2014.
- ^x Transparency International. [Corruption Perceptions Index 2015](#). 2015.
- ^{xi} World Bank Group. [Doing Business 2016: Measuring Regulatory Quality and Efficiency](#). Washington DC 2016.
- ^{xii} Inter-Parliamentary Union. "[Women in National Parliaments](#)." August 2017.
- ^{xiii} World Economic Forum. "[Rankings: Global Gender Gap Index 2016](#)." 2016.
- ^{xiv} The Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey. "[Rwanda: 2014-15 Demographic and Health Survey Key Findings](#)." Kigali 2015.
- ^{xv} Chirhalwirwa, Pascal and Mary Myers. "[Media a Voice for All: Final Evaluation Report](#)." Search for Common Ground and iMedia. Washington, DC October 2014
- ^{xvi} Kalisa, Narcisse and Gabrielle Solanet. "[Improving the Cross Border Trade Environment through Improved Research and Advocacy on Cross Border Trade Issues](#)." Search for Common Ground. Kigali February 2017.
- ^{xvii} Representing over 21% of the total of Burundian refugees in the region; UNHCR figures, as of September 18, 2017. "[Refugees from Burundi related to the current situation – breakdown per country](#)." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2017.