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Entrepreneurship Education in Rwanda Pre-Dissertation Research Supported by the Kloeck-Jenson Travel Grant

From June to August 2008, I conducted background research in Rwanda on the topic of entrepreneurship education, with the assistance of the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-Dissertation Travel Grant.

Since the 1970s, an increasing number of international organizations and governments around the world have shown a growing interest in stimulating economic development by promoting entrepreneurship and more generally cultivating an “entrepreneurial culture”.¹ Initially, these efforts focused primarily on training existing small business owners or other adults who wanted to start small businesses; later, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, governments in several regions of the world began to introduce entrepreneurship education programs into technical and vocational schools. Most recently, an increasing number of countries are establishing courses in entrepreneurship within their general school systems, intending to reach a larger percentage of their citizens at a younger age. Rwanda is one of the countries associated with this latter development, as the Rwandan government recently decided to introduce a three-year entrepreneurship education program into the curriculum of its lower cycle of secondary school (equivalent to seventh to ninth grades in the United States). This program will soon be offered to all Rwandan students, as the country shifts towards a nine-year compulsory education system.

The express purpose of these entrepreneurship education programs, as I mentioned, is to encourage individual and social transformation towards a more “entrepreneurial culture”, with the assumption that this will both promote overall economic development, and particularly contribute to empowering the more disadvantaged members of a given society. The existing literature on these entrepreneurship education programs, however, does not take a very close or critical look at what such a cultural transformation implies, both in the short- and long-term, in different settings. I went to Rwanda to learn more about how the policy-makers and other professionals promoting entrepreneurship education there defined the notion of an “entrepreneurial culture” for themselves, and what kinds of cultural changes they hoped this new education program would catalyze in Rwanda.

The Scott Kloeck-Jenson Travel Grant allowed me to spend almost three full months in Rwanda. During that time, I met with one or more representatives from each of the eight institutions most responsible for promoting entrepreneurship education in Rwanda:

- Three internationally-linked organizations: the Promotion of Rural Small and Micro Enterprises (PPMER) project, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and Germany’s bi-lateral technical assistance agency (GTZ);

¹ See, for example, Carmela Salzano, *Towards an Entrepreneurial Culture for the Twenty-First Century: Stimulating Entrepreneurial Spirit through Entrepreneurship Education in Secondary Schools* (Geneva: ILO and UNESCO, 2006)

- Two Rwandan civil society institutions, the Center for Support to Small and Medium Enterprises in Rwanda (CAPMER) and Rwanda’s Private Sector Federation (FSP); and
- Three Rwandan government institutions, the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MINICOM), the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC), and the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC).

Additionally, I participated in two seminars related to entrepreneurship education. The first of these was a training of approximately sixty women entrepreneurs from districts throughout Rwanda’s Northern Province, offered by CAPMER and the Ministry for the Promotion of Gender and the Family (MIGEPROF). The second was a fifteen-day seminar involving selected teachers and representatives from several other entrepreneurship-related institutions, gathered together by the National Curriculum Development Center to create Rwanda’s new program of entrepreneurship education for the lower cycle of secondary school.

Through these interviews and observations, I found that the promoters of entrepreneurship education were hoping to (1) cultivate a more positive attitude and greater overall interest among Rwandans to business and private sector activities; (2) change a perceived attitude of dependence, often described as the result of cultural expectations of open-ended assistance from relatively privileged family members and others, towards a greater sense of self-responsibility and independent initiative, linked to more formal contractual relations of payment for work; (3) promote better accounting practices and compliance with tax and import laws; and (4) encourage Rwandans to be more comfortable taking on a reasonable amount of debt and managing it effectively. Reflecting another understanding of the concept of “entrepreneurship”, some of the promoters of entrepreneurship education also emphasized the importance of cultivating creativity and innovation; however, unlike the first four elements listed above, this orientation did not carry through as a central goal of the entrepreneurship curriculum that was actually being developed.

Finally, I found that these promoters of entrepreneurship education gave surprisingly little attention to the social and environmental context and implications of business activities. The possibility of orienting business activities to actually make *positive* social and environmental change, and the ethical issues relating to employee treatment, were virtually ignored, while any discussion of ethical responsibilities towards clients was usually justified only as a necessary condition for retaining their business. All of the interviewees perceived the promotion of entrepreneurship as central to the economic development of Rwanda and the advancement of Rwandans’ living conditions, and most particularly saw entrepreneurship education as an important way to support the country’s materially disadvantaged populations.

As I continue with my dissertation research, I am hoping to look more closely at the implications of some of these goals of cultural change – and the actual educational experience that eventually results from the initiative – in relation to other elements of Rwanda’s development vision, including the objectives of promoting environmental sustainability, reducing wealth inequalities, and promoting social cohesion. I hope that this research will illuminate some of the ways in which entrepreneurship education as a development strategy interacts with (and potentially supports or undermines) people’s efforts to create more socially and economically prosperous living conditions, both in Rwanda and possibly in other countries that are experimenting with similar strategies.

My thanks to Global Studies for the opportunity to carry out this work; I hope that in some way it is befitting to the memory of Scott Kloeck-Jenson and his family.