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Panorama - Jefferson Mok

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THE ROOFTOPS PROJECT

Photographer/Artist: Jefferson Mok



Panorama

Jefferson Mok

What is your real estate strategy when you are the first on-the-ground representative of a social service not-for-profit entering a remote market abroad with a new program? **Jefferson Mok** reflects on four years in Burundi in conversation with The Rooftops Project's **Arthy Bakthavasalam** and **Professor James Hagy**.



Main courtyard, child soldier rehabilitation center, Bugarama, Burundi, 35km outside Bujumbura. Higher elevation and cooler climates contributed to a quieter, more refreshing environment. Behind, open-air shelters provided activity spaces.

Photographer/Artist: Jefferson Mok

Jefferson Mok left the familiar comforts of home in the U.S. in June 2008 to establish a new office and program in Bujumbura, Burundi on behalf of a Midwest-based, U.S. not-for-profit social service organization. While there, his work also extended to projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. In his last year in Burundi, using funding from his alma mater, Grinnell College, he established and hosted an independent radio program called Imagine Burundi. He is now a dual-degree student in Journalism and International Relations at Columbia University in New York City.

RTP: What was your background before accepting your posting in Africa?

Jeff: I was born in Hong Kong, but lived and was educated in the U.S. After

college, I taught English in Japan, China, and France. Then I went to work for a social service organization in the United States, handling political asylum cases. The opportunity came to establish and run a three-year project in Burundi, originally an assignment to set up a shelter for girls who were former soldiers.

RTP: What were the circumstances that led to this perceived need?

Jeff: This part of Africa has a Belgian colonial heritage and is French-speaking. Burundi is an agriculturally fertile country, but it has limited resources and is hard to reach. The region had experienced an ethnic civil war – or more accurately a guerilla operation – in the country for more than 13 years.

Our original, core program was to serve girls – children – who had served as soldiers in the conflict, and often who had suffered sexual violence. The idea was to establish a shelter for them, providing three months of residential support along with counseling, education, and job-training.

RTP: What was your role?

Jeff: I was sent as the first representative of the organization in the country. So there was no greeting party. This was one of our first endeavors to set up an office in Africa as an international not-for-profit organization.

The distinction between not-for-profit work in the United States and serving as a non-governmental organization is huge. It is a completely different world. I think a lot of non-governmental organizations that operate in these contexts tend to represent the corporate sector. They chase after grants, competing against other organizations for very limited funding. They have big contracts, perhaps bidding on the contracts, not unlike a private security firm working abroad.

An organization like the one I was with is very much a shoestring budget not-for-profit, more invested in social justice issues. These organizations may typically have high personnel turnover because of the modest salaries and the nature of the work. Expanding internationally for the first time, we had no infrastructure. Nothing.



Photographer/Artist: Jefferson Mok



Large activities hall at the child soldier rehabilitation center, with communal space for group meetings, banquets, games and performances.

RTP: When you got off the plane in Burundi, what was your immediate plan? Where did you stay?

Jeff: I had nowhere to live. I literally landed on the ground with my bags. Nobody picked me up. I had to make my own contacts.

Burundi is a cash economy. I was given a check for operational funds, which I couldn't cash for three weeks. So I was living on my savings, which ran down pretty quickly and then ran out completely. I had no control over how I would access my grant money. My organization tried to wire me some money and failed at first.

One unexpected upside was how far an expatriate's salary can go sometimes in a market like Burundi. At the same time it can mean that, once they are settled in, young international staff or volunteers of relief or social service organizations can have an outsized influence on local affairs because of their new and surprising status of wealth.

The money got to me eventually. By that point I was staying in a hotel. This hotel is illustrative of how dire my circumstances were. It shows the mercy I was at in this context. It was called the Christmas Club Hotel, located directly across the street from the Central Intelligence Services, the operations of which include arrests and interrogations. I won't forget that place.

RTP: What lesson would you draw from that experience?

Jeff: This is where the international development organizations have massive amounts of experience. They know that, for example, an expatriate worker expects a certain level of compensation and comfort. I was fine to forgo that, but basic services, basic resources, would have been useful. I think this is where inexperience impacts the planning and design of a project like this.

The original grant proposal completely outsourced operations to a local organization. It didn't anticipate that I would go on this project and our organization wasn't planning to open a local office. That would have been disastrous. Within months of my being there, it was apparent that the partners meant to implement the project either had no capacity to do so or didn't exist. Without a local presence it would have been impossible to trace the money and nobody would have been served by the grant.

So I had to redesign the whole proposal, which would lead to problems later on. But in the short term it allowed me to proceed with the work.

RTP: Was an established office space, a real estate presence, an important early factor for getting approval for your program?

Jeff: Absolutely. Not having housing, not having an office, plays into the credibility of the organization. We were not just new in Burundi, but new as an international player. Nobody had heard of us. So I had to open my own bank account and negotiate my way through all these barriers.

RTP: How did you get beyond that?

Jeff: If it weren't for the contacts I made through my grad school applications and one of the professors, who had been to Burundi recently, I would have had no resources at all. But he put me in touch with the director of an NGO who was very nice and helped me out. They had an intern who needed housing, so they let me tag along to be a roommate and it would cut costs for them. When her internship ended, she left, leaving me the whole house. And when it came time to locate an office, it was actually where I was living. At the start I was operating out of my living quarters.

RTP: The house was leased? Whose name was on the lease as tenant?

Jeff: It was leased. My organization's name was on the lease, with me signing as representative. The owner of the house was a Burundian woman, whose family had owned the house from her childhood. She was definitely well off and had had a lot of education and opportunities.

The house itself was located in a neighborhood that historically, during the colonial era, was not open to the whole population. It was where the King lived, and a lot of colonials. And there were checkpoints. You had to show permission to enter this neighborhood. Now it is considered one of the nicest, most moneyed areas in the whole city. It is very desirable to live there; it is a status symbol. It was accidental that I chose this.



Dining hall, child soldier rehabilitation center, Bugarama, Burundi.

Photographer/Artist: Jefferson Mok





Rehabilitation center for female former child soldiers, Bugarama, Burundi. The building was built with Italian styling and construction methods, originally as an eco-tourism hotel.

RTP: You mentioned that your new neighborhood had some other unexpected advantages. What were those?

Jeff: It was one of the neighborhoods that sits on the permanent power grid. It's on the line that runs all the way to the vice president's residence. So he ensures that it is never cut. Even during rotations, when power demand is high and they have to rotate people on and off power on a rationed basis, that house never had a problem. We also had a reliable water supply.

Once I realized that, when I moved out of that place and turned it into my office, I made sure my next residence was on that same line. My experience in Burundi was vastly different from that of other expats because I knew that little secret. I had living conditions with 24-hour electricity my whole four years there. That plays such a critical role in how your organization operates, how you live, and your morale.

RTP: Were you surprised that these basic needs were such a barrier to getting established?

Jeff: That is one of the key questions working in this context: how can you run your operations completely independent of the conditions at the location you are in? What needs to be imported to work outside of the limitations of the local infrastructure?

A lot of organizations had direct Internet hook-ups via satellite because in Burundi, for example, local service was via 256k modem. I was paying \$250 a month for the most basic Internet service. You don't appreciate those considerations until you're on the ground. We tried to do some background work prior to my departure, but none of it applied. Government offices that we contacted didn't know what we were talking about. Phone connections have a three-second delay. So the conversations are inevitably awful and incomprehensible.

There were a lot of offices that had to buy generators and run their operations that way to keep the lights on. But when you're running satellite hook-ups and Internet for 40 staff, you need more than a diesel generator to do that (or you need a pretty powerful one). My organization never factored those costs into the budget, but most experienced organizations do so.

RTP: While you struggled with basic infrastructure, you were continuing to cope with the realities of the financial and banking systems, too. How did that affect your selection and administration of your physical space?

Jeff: The cash economy was an interesting aspect. I paid my rent in cash six months at a time. So I was forking over six or seven thousand dollars at a time. The landlord would come over and we would have a chat. In my case initially, because it was a residence and the whole neighborhood was residential, I said I was turning the house into our organization's office. She said in that case, [she] would have to raise the rent because there are taxes that apply. Of course she never paid the taxes, but she did increase the rent by 30 percent.

We came up with a lease agreement that gradually increased the rent over three years, which I felt was a decent deal for the neighborhood and compared to what some other organizations were paying. But I also knew that we were paying 40 percent more than we should be. A Burundian would have rented the house for about half of what we were paying, in the same exact location. As an international organization, you're expected to pay above market value.

RTP: What else did you do to try to protect yourself as a tenant?

Jeff: We were very careful with contracts and grant agreements. The head office in the U.S. would try to review them where possible and anticipate any pitfalls or unclear conditions. That was really our only protection, besides offering incentives like six-months rent upfront and paying in cash. Even with



our legal preparations, we knew we would face serious challenges navigating the Burundian judicial system if any action were required, so we tried to avoid those with our negotiating.

RTP: The lack of transparency, together with being new to the region, must have been challenging. How could you be sure that the landlord owned the property? Or that you wouldn't suffer interference from others?

Jeff: Here's another personal anecdote to illustrate your questions. Once I moved out of the office, I found my own place to live. It was in a house that was divided in two; the landlord lived in one half and I lived in the other.

What I didn't know was that when I moved in, they were building a hotel. Now, this is a residential neighborhood. But the way real estate worked there, if it is desirable land, you build as big as you can. They don't think about whether the infrastructure for a residential neighborhood is going to support a 200-room hotel. They're not thinking about that.

So when they build a hotel next to a house – in this case, *my house* – they don't think how the plumbing is going to work, or where the parking lot is going to be. They don't think about building next to a private residence and what that will mean for their operation – moving materials in, all the dust and noise.

What happens? They started building into my yard. There was a wall separating the two properties, but if you stood directly under the wall and looked up, you could see all the scaffolding hanging over. You realized that there was no way they could build the hotel and maintain this house next to it.

One day, I came home and noticed workers going into my property and coming out. A stream of them—I'm talking about a dozen people carrying 50-pound bags of concrete. I thought, "What could this be?" So I went into my backyard and what they had done was to build an entire platform staircase to guide them going up above the wall to the second or third story of their construction and down again. It was a temporary structure but well-crafted. They were transporting materials through my backyard, up the stairs, completely without my permission.

I had a guard who had thought, "They are entitled to do this, it's O.K., they aren't entering the house." So the guard gave them access, even though it is a private residence with a gate.

I threatened to take it down, but realized that I was powerless to do anything about it.



The headquarters of Mok's organization in Bujumbura, Burundi. Project staff converted the four-bedroom house into an office space, a common practice of organizations operating in locations where office buildings are scarce.

RTP: It doesn't sound like there was much governmental oversight of the project.

Jeff: That is an issue. I brought that up with my landlord, that obviously next door they were violating all kinds of ordinances. Specifically there was an ordinance that said that they could not build so close to a private residence. He said, "You're right, this is ridiculous." He was, on the surface, outraged on my behalf.

A couple of weeks passed, nothing really happened, and I brought it up again. And he said, "You know, it's already done." I asked what he meant. He said, "I went all the way to the urban planning department and I talked to some people. They told me that the owner of this hotel arranged everything. He is a very wealthy and powerful man and there's nothing that you can do."

RTP: What did you do?

Jeff: I told him, "Thanks. I'm moving out."

RTP: What did the landlord do then?

Jeff: Not long after that, the owner cut the house in half. He let the hotel buy out the plot that I had been living in, which demolished it to turn into a parking lot. They had built the hotel with no planning, thinking, "Oh, we'll find a parking lot somewhere." The hotel was so big that it essentially occupied their whole parcel. There was perhaps six inches between their structure and the road, no place for parking. They just banked on the fact that they could buy out this private residence and turn it into their parking lot afterwards.

I don't know how these hotel developments accumulated their money. They may even have been government people. They may not have known what to do with their funds. But Burundi has a tradition of land ownership that is very central to their notions of wealth and prestige. So, I think it has become a fad to build these boutique hotels. They were popping up all over the city. In a city that really receives no tourism, that gets the occasional conference but has large chain hotels already there that everybody uses. I can guarantee you that capacity at these hotels is less than 30 percent.

I don't think they care about seriously investing in running a good hotel. I got the sense that these hotels really didn't expect to run as profitable enterprises. There is no way that they are going to turn a profit. These are massive buildings. The one built next to me has a pool on the top floor. This is a country where you can't even get running water half the time. So it's comical. But that money belonged to a private citizen, regardless of where it came from, and they're entitled to waste it how they can and how they want.

Bujumbura has a small-town feel to begin with; a main boulevard, a very narrow space for the commercial center. There aren't many business districts, commercial districts that could support the infrastructure necessary for a hotel. I don't think it was ever planned. You can take a look at the traffic situation and see the gridlock that happens. All single-lane roads. There is just no urban planning, no thought into how to make it a functional city.

I would say, though, that Burundians love their country and they want to see it progress. They may see these hotels as a sign of development. It's something that Burundi doesn't have. It builds status. It shows that it's a capital city and it deserves to have hotels like this. Like any captain of industry or business



leader, the hotels think their businesses contribute to the overall economic health of the country.

RTP: What were the first steps in getting your operation started?

Jeff: We had not yet begun the process to obtain authority to operate as an NGO in Burundi, which was the first objective. This process, which was complex and took lots of direct effort on the ground in the capital, ended up taking 15 months.

Nobody was willing to work with me based on name recognition, on brand alone. A friend of mine was the head of the office for the Clinton Foundation's Clinton Health Access Initiative. She still required several months to go through the registration process but breezed through it more or less because of the established reputation of the Clinton Foundation.

RTP: What were the other challenges in that process?

Jeff: Some of it was bureaucracy. But there sometimes also seemed to be a lack of enthusiasm for offering treatment to the population to be served by the program. This was so even though we were not working from a social justice or a legal perspective, but just to provide supportive services to the individuals. Completely independent of our work, the International Criminal Court, the ICC, was pushing for indictments of individuals associated with the past conflict. Perhaps for this reason, too, there was suspicion about our objectives.

And when government officials with whom I was dealing would leave the ministry, the process would need to start over again. Just in the time I was there, Burundi also had three different U.S. ambassadors. I was lucky that each of them provided important support for our efforts.

RTP: How modern were the government offices you visited?

Jeff: These were mostly legacy buildings from colonial times. Concrete blocks with poor plumbing and inadequate or faulty wiring. One had elevators that probably had not functioned in decades. Equipment was often scarce for the government, too. On one visit, I accidentally stepped on and broke a computer cable that led to the ministry's printer. They explained to me that this stopped work, and they were very glad to see me about a week later, when I was able to come back with a replacement cable for them.

RTP: While you continued to work on NGO status from the Burundi authorities, you also ventured into the Democratic Republic of the Congo. What were your objectives there and how did a physical presence fit into that assignment?

Jeff: The DR Congo is another French-speaking, former Belgian colony. We received a U.S. government grant aimed at the effort to combat human trafficking. Our mission was to establish a transit shelter to identify family members of permanent residents.

RTP: Did you establish residence there, too?

Jeff: No. I went back and forth. It was extremely difficult. I took taxis at first, but once I'd purchased a vehicle, I drove myself. I trusted my driving more than I trusted local drivers, seeing how they operate on the roads. Some other



Project staff and local government officials inaugurate the child soldier rehabilitation center, Bugarama, Burundi.

organizations had their staff travel in convoys, to protect against the constant problem of breakdowns on the road.

RTP: You had challenges and issues as a tenant in the DR Congo, too?

Jeff: The landlord tried to raise the rent. We paid a few months rent up front as a compromise to help keep the rent down. Meanwhile, neighbors were stealing electricity and water through illegal connections to our service lines, exposing us to those costs. It wasn't clear whether the landlord had a role in this.

RTP: What was your involvement in Rwanda?

Jeff: Previously, my organization already had a mental health care training project to help women and children living with HIV/AIDS. That was actually our first project in that region and helped us obtain the Burundi grant. But that project did not include a permanent office, instead working through a local organization. We were hoping to try the same approach in Burundi but decided it was best if I set up permanent operations instead. Subsequently, from Burundi, we wanted to seek new projects in Rwanda, possibly setting up an office in Kigali, the capital. But it was a crowded field. Although there was some interest, at the time of my departure, we had not yet obtained funding for a new project there.

RTP: Eventually, you obtained official status as an NGO in Burundi. What criteria did you establish for selecting a suitable location and facility for your program's clients?

Jeff: The Burundi project had a narrow focus, in the sense that it was supposed to create a residential facility for the rehabilitation and reintegration of young women who had been conscripted into armed groups. We were not originally expecting actual combatants, but logistical support personnel, people who had been drafted in to cook and clean for the soldiers, or even taken in as sex slaves and wives for soldiers.

So we needed a space that was going to be conducive to mental health care. That meant it had to be quiet. It had to be a little bit apart from the general population, secure, unobtrusive. And it was actually very difficult to find a place like that within the city limits, within Bujumbura, the capital itself, and accessible to the population we wanted to serve.



RTP: How important was flexibility?

Jeff: As a new program without a recognized brand in the region, much of our early work was to get established, focusing our objectives and skills to attract and support the passions of available funders. Some funders have their own criteria, for example, not serving boys or men but only women. Most of this funding is also short-term, or can be scaled back unexpectedly.

RTP: It sounds like a tough assignment, to find a location that would work within all of those objectives.

Jeff: Yes. But, through hitting the pavement and talking to people, I eventually made contact with an Italian priest who had been in Burundi for about 40 years. Over that time, he had generated all sorts of projects, building churches, houses, doing all kinds of agricultural projects to help sustainability of food and security for people. One of the things he built, right before I got there was – once again, of all things – a hotel facility, built like an Italian-style villa from imported Italian stone. It was located about 35km outside of Bujumbura, the capital. He was hoping to use it to develop eco-tourism. He wanted to attract people to come see his parish and the projects he could do with their support.

He said, “Why don’t you use my space for your project?” Otherwise he was going to lease the space to a business venture for \$3,000 a month. He agreed that we could use it for a fraction of what a market rental would have cost.

RTP: How did the space work for your operations?

Jeff: There was a perimeter wall for security, along with a shack out front manned by local police. Security was important to us. Our clients would spend three months resident in our program and with few visits home. The space served as their living quarters, as well as for on-site counselors and teachers, along with job-training.

RTP: How were your rights as a tenant documented?

Jeff: It was an informal process, all negotiated in French, the official language of Burundi, which had for many years been a Belgian colony. There was typically little or no legal review. There were relatively few certified lawyers

compared to the largest economies. Eventually, we put the terms into formal contracts, which my head office in the U.S. reviewed before we signed.

RTP: It must have been a real milestone to have all this completed.

Jeff: We had an opening ceremony, and I was very cognizant of the people we invited. Others tried to peek in, curious about our presence. Through these efforts, over time we built trust with the local government, and they showed up at our events. We also needed support from the local police. This was an important turning point.

RTP: Your funding and work extended to other projects as well?

Jeff: Yes. And our space needs evolved. Our organization opened a mental health facility for women with HIV who had been victims of rape. So there was a need to adapt to frequent change. For these reasons, the expatriate staff members or volunteers needed to move frequently, too.

A European funder, motivated by human rights concerns, was passionate about serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender population in Burundi, who were subject to potential criminal prosecution. Many Burundians were conservative, some possibly hostile. There was a lot of tension. We opened a center for them. The LGBT community tended to be young, and quite highly educated. We needed to win them over. It was probably the only space of its kind in the whole region, perhaps even on the whole continent at that point.

RTP: How big did your program’s presence become in Burundi?

Jeff: By the time I left, we had 50 staff across three locations.

RTP: What happened to the programs that you established, and to the associated space and facilities, when you ended your own work with the program?

Jeff: By the time I left, the structure and staff was in place. I could be replaced according to the needs of the remaining projects. My departure coincided with the end of the child soldier project, which had a duration of three years, so there was a natural evolution there. The other grants we obtained, including the anti-trafficking project and the LGBT project, continued to run to the end of their contracts. To my knowledge, the trafficking project was renewed and the LGBT shelter might have located a new donor, but the constant search for new funding and limited project lengths are some of the major drawbacks of the current development model, which aims for sustainability and stability even while introducing uncertainty.

RTP: You ended up staying in Burundi another year, establishing your own radio program. What was the objective of that?

Jeff: *Imagine Burundi* tried to introduce listeners to Burundians, to their thoughts and dreams and ideas rather than their misery and tales of woe. I realized that I would rather inspire or motivate people. We may want to hear that story of suffering because it makes us feel compassion, even confirms our antiquated notions of “Africa.” But it can be a self-serving and incomplete



View of Uvira, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where Mok established a satellite office.

Photographer/Artist: Jefferson Mok



story. *Imagine Burundi's* decision to broadcast entirely in English is also a statement about the country's future direction: Burundi is now working hard to integrate into the regional community of its Anglophone neighbors and to increase its economic and political influence. Burundians have responded to this shift by learning English in droves. I hoped that *Imagine Burundi* helped in some small way to raise that standard as well.

RTP: Where did you operate and broadcast from, and with what equipment?

Jeff: Our show was broadcast through a local station with which we partnered. The first dozen shows were produced in my spare time with just a recorder and my laptop. But I was later able to obtain a grant from Grinnell College, my alma mater, to purchase more equipment and, crucially, to hire local journalists to participate. They are the ones still carrying on with the show. Because of the infrastructural issues I've mentioned, we did not have a quiet studio. So we sometimes had to record in cars or under blankets to block out noise. In the tropical heat, these moments may have been the most threatening to my health or sanity.

RTP: When did you eventually return to the U.S.?

Jeff: I continued working on the radio project in Burundi and then traveled for some time in Asia in early 2012 before finally returning to the U.S. in June of that year.

RTP: What conclusions have you reached on reflection?

Jeff: I think about the risks that I might not take again. It is amazing that we got as much done as we did without our money being stolen while avoiding major accidents and potential failures.

RTP: We hear that you brought back with you the informal security system that you had obtained in Burundi?

Jeff: [Laughing.] Yes. Chauncey, my dog. I adopted him in Burundi, and he was actually able to return home with me. He is now living in retirement in my apartment in New York City's Harlem neighborhood.



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