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Spring 2017, Affordable Drinking Water in Emerging Markets: Student Field Research in Rwanda

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UNH Global

Affordable Drinking Water in Emerging Markets: Student Field Research in Rwanda

Ilona Drew (MPP '18)

Friday, March 17, 2017

During J-Term, I had the amazing opportunity to travel to Africa to visit the Rwanda headquarters of Jibu, an East African company that provides clean water and entrepreneurial opportunities in Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda. I am currently in my second semester of a Master's in Public Policy program at the University of New Hampshire. Last fall I participated in a conference organized by the Center for Social Innovation and Enterprise's Social Sector Franchise Initiative, which assists the growing social sector franchise field. Social sector franchising uses the franchise model to reach thousands of customers through a methodology not unlike a fast food or hotel franchise. Jibu, founded by father-son social entrepreneurs, is a financially sustainable franchise business committed to creating economic and entrepreneurial opportunity and increasing access to radically, affordable clean drinking water in emerging markets.

So, when the possibility arose to visit Jibu's operations in Africa and see what they were doing first hand, I was ecstatic. I applied for, and was granted, a position as an Action Student Research Assistant to complete a week of field research, as part of the Social Sector Franchise Initiative's Living Case Study Accelerator. I packed up my clothes, notebooks, audio and video recording equipment, and a little bit of courage, and boarded a plane to head to Africa for the very first time!

I landed in Kigali, Rwanda around 8:00pm local time after 3 connections and 20 hours of travel. I got through customs, took the shuttle to my hotel, checked in, ate some rice, and zipped myself into my mosquito-net tent-bed for my first night halfway across the world.

My eyes opened the next day, and I sprung out of bed like a kid on Christmas morning, running to the windows to see where on earth I had landed. From my hotel room on the 10th floor, I could see pedestrians, storefronts, dusty red streets, buildings, colorful roofs, and a hodgepodge of unfamiliar architecture. I could see the hazy hills with scattered buildings, lakes and farmland. To call it beautiful would be an understatement!

I ate a quick but delicious breakfast at my hotel, and headed downstairs to meet my host, Jane. Jane (or Cyuzuzo, to her family) is Jibu

Rwanda's administrative assistant. Twenty-one

years old, fluent in four languages (English, French, Kinyarwanda, and Swahili), and studying Business Management at Mount Kenya University, Jane arranged all my visits, showed me the city, advocated for and translated my interviews, constantly made sure I was comfortable, and became a great friend throughout my trip.

That first morning, she walked me down the hill to the Jibu corporate office. In this clean, bright space, I met the Kigali team: Galen, the CEO, who was visiting from his normal home-base in Kampala; Nathan, Rwanda Country Director; Sosthene, Lead Accountant; Innocent, Accountant; Matt, Chief Technician; Bruno, Technician; Fiacre, Technician; Anastase, Technician; and Claude, Inventory Manager. Together, this team is responsible for the operations and organization of all of Kigali's 24 franchise locations and roughly 80 microfranchisees. These tiny businesses operate water purification machines and bottle clean water in Jibu's patented bottles. Microfranchisees sell water, more or less door to door, often outfitted with a special bicycle or motorbike that can hold two large bottles at a time. Clean water sold at a very low price, displaces the need to boil water on charcoal fires, which fill homes with smoke and soot using trees felled from local forests. In the three countries where Jibu operates, they have created 150 new businesses and more than 500 jobs and sold more than 15 million liters of water.



Jane (l.), Jibu Rwanda's administrative assistant and my guide, Ilona on right

With Jane's expert coordination, we planned our first day of visiting Jibu's franchise locations and meeting the owners, managers, technicians, and customers that make Jibu what it is. Through a combination of crowded city buses and nerve-wracking boda-boda (Kigali's motorcycle taxis!) excursions, we set off to explore the city and meet the Jibu franchisees.



Ilona (r.) interviewing Charles (l.), one of the first Jibu water franchisees in Rwanda

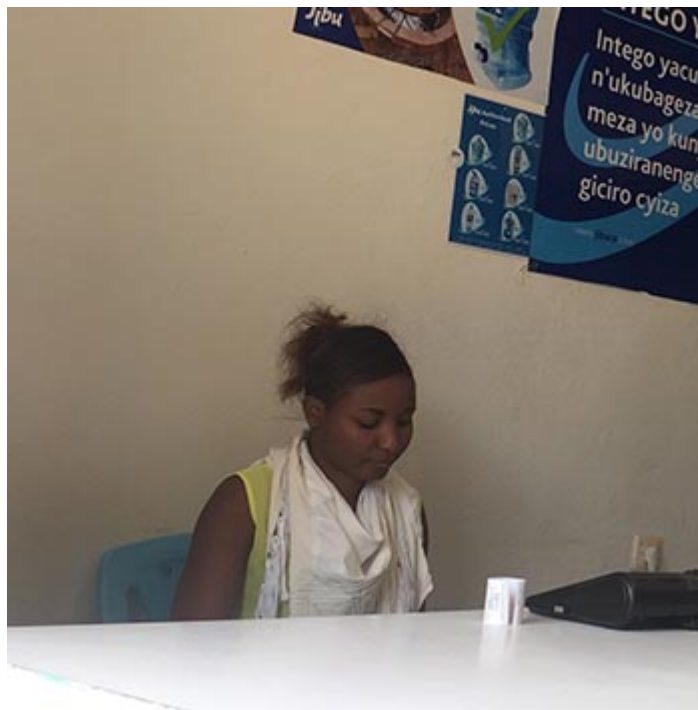
Our first stop was to visit Charles at the district of Kimironko 1, one of Jibu Rwanda's first franchise owners. At any given franchise, you'll find an owner, a store manager, one or two front desk attendants, and a team of on-site technicians. The store manager, Daniel in this case, coordinates the staff and the microfranchisees and is responsible for the day-to-day operations at the franchise. The front desk attendants interact directly with customers, taking orders and payment, and basic accounting measures. The technician staff is responsible for receiving used water containers, cleaning and sterilizing them, running the water purification system, and refilling the bottles.

After interviewing Charles and Daniel, we boarded another bus to head north to Kibagabaga, Jibu Rwanda's newest franchise location. On the way, I got to know Jane a little better, and she told me more about Jibu and how much she enjoyed working for them. One of the most striking things about my visit was how genuinely enthusiastic and open everyone was about working for such an innovative company like Jibu. When Jane spoke, wide eyed, about some of Jibu's community outreach efforts, her passion and appreciation for the work that Jibu was doing was contagious and inspiring.

At Kibagabaga, we met Jackson, the franchise owner. This brand-new location is a perfect example of why Jibu is so successful. Jackson, with a background in hospitality, started off as a microfranchisee, and quickly joined the ranks of the top performers in Kigali. Recognizing his drive

and success Jibu gave Jackson his own franchise shortly before my visit. Now he will have microfranchisees selling water for him. In our interview, Jackson said that he wishes to work with Jibu for all of his life.

At the same store, I met Beliz, a young girl whose life has changed dramatically from her relationship with Jibu. Beliz joined Jibu through Spring Girls, a program where adolescent girls are given basic business-skills training and empowered as entrepreneurs. Through this program, she built her own microfranchise, and then had the opportunity to become store manager for Jackson as he opened his franchise location. She spoke of her excitement as she could finally start saving some money, and looked forward to soon getting her own apartment and paying her own rent.



Beliz, who joined the Jibu team through Spring Girls

Over the course of the week, I heard many similar stories—of people whose lives had been dramatically changed for the better because of their relationships with Jibu. Every customer I met with discussed the real, logistical and financial benefits to using Jibu. Previously, they walked whatever the distance was to the water source, carried it home, and had to purify it (which required purchasing charcoal, starting a fire, waiting for the water to boil—and then waiting for the water to cool enough to drink). If you were thirsty, this process could take hours, not to mention that the water still wasn't necessarily clear and fully purified. With Jibu, Kigali residents simply have to walk to a conveniently located franchise, and purchase a refill for less than the cost of the charcoal they used to use to purify the water.

Overall, my visit to Rwanda was amazing, informative, and eye-opening. It was inspiring to see Jibu using the franchise model to truly transform lives. With every interview, I learned more about the real, quantifiable impact Jibu was having on the lives of the people in Kigali. And, during a quick trip to a national park, I even got to meet some hippos!



A panoramic view of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda

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