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[Rob Glaser's Man in Rwanda](#)

By Marc Gunther, senior writer at FORTUNE magazine

Rob Glaser, the chairman and CEO of a Real Networks, a Seattle-based technology company, is an activist as well as a tech mogul. His Glaser Progress Foundation focuses on four areas: how we measure progress as a society, the diversity of voices in the media (which led him to support the left-wing public radio program Democracy Now), the treatment of animals and the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. It was his interest in HIV/AIDs led him to support an NGO called Project Access, which is based in Rwanda.

I met the other day with Josh Ruxin, who started Project Access. Afterwards, I talked by phone with Glaser, who visited Rwanda with his wife, Cori, as part of an extended trip through Africa in 2004. Add his name to the list of American business people (see [Why CEOs Love Rwanda](#)) who see the small African nation as a place where a confluence of internal and external forces can come together to defeat poverty and illness.

“What the world seems to need is a example of a country—a country that the world thought was hopeless, a country that is landlocked, 90% agrarian, with a malaria pandemic and an AIDS epidemic—that could be turned around,” Ruxin said. “Let’s just show that it can be done.”

Glaser said: “If you make a Rwanda a better place, you haven’t solved all the world’s problems, but you have demonstrated that the problems can be solved.”

This idea of Rwanda as an African turnaround story has captured the imagination of people at such companies as Costco, Starbucks and Google, and it is attracting top NGOs as well. By coincidence, I attended a reception this evening for Dr. Paul Farmer, the crusading public health advocate whose group, Partners in Health, works in Rwanda. (If you haven’t read it, please read [Mountains Beyond Mountains](#), Tracy Kidder’s wonderful book about Farmer.)

Of course it’s hard for me, without spending time in Rwanda, to know how much of a difference Ruxin’s Project Access is making. But he has clearly spent a lot of time thinking about how to fight global poverty. A 1992 Yale grad, Ruxin obtained a master’s in public health, a doctorate in history and then a job with Harvard prof Michael Porter’s consulting firm, which studied how countries can exploit their competitive advantages to emerge from poverty. Since then, Ruxin has worked with the textile industry in El Salvador, potatoes and coffee growing in Bolivia and tourism in the Dominican Republic. “Without real innovation, without competitiveness, it’s very hard for a poor country to avoid a downward spiral to even worse poverty,” he says.

Ruxin started Public Access in 2002 to help African countries apply for funds from the [Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria](#). He moved to Kigali, the Rwandan capital, about a year ago—in part because he was discouraged by corruption in other African countries, in part because Glaser urged him to focus. Project Access also gets support from GE, Pfizer and Becton-Dickinson.

Since settling in Kigali, Ruxin has been busy. On the HIV/AIDS issue, he helped the country's public health service apply for grants from the Global Fund, and then assisted the government as it spent the money. One result: Five years ago, Rwanda had two rural health clinics; today, it has about 240. He is also the country director for the [Millennium Villages](#) Project, a focused effort to fight poverty organized by Jeffrey Sachs at the Earth Institute at Columbia. (Sachs introduced Glaser and Ruxin.) This involves initiatives in microfinance, education and agriculture; one possible venture is a pomegranate farm. Ruxin's wife, meanwhile, is building a high-end café in Kigali and expecting their first child. (She called him, using Skype and Rwanda's excellent broadband Internet network, while we were having coffee in downtown Washington.)

Like other westerners who work in Rwanda, Ruxin has been impressed by the honesty of President Paul Kagame's regime. "I've never been asked for a bribe, never encountered petty corruption, never been threatened." But, like others, he has concerns about the government's human rights record. A friend of his recently spent eight months in jail for a crime he did not commit.

Glaser told me there are three reasons why he's excited about Rwanda. First, he said, the government is "very progress-oriented and pragmatic." Second, Rwanda is a small enough country, with about 8 million people, so you have "a feeling you can actually make a difference." Finally, the legacy of the 1994 genocide, and the ineffective response that followed, creates a moral imperative to work there. "Bill Clinton says his biggest regret was that he didn't do more at the time," Glaser says.

All this is about using business savvy, backed by about \$7 million in grants from Glaser's foundation, to improve the lives of desperately poor people. "It always takes a little longer than you think," Glaser said, "but I think we're moving the needle." The Rwanda story will take years to unfold, but it should be fascinating to watch.

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