In August 2016, I traveled to Yaoundé, Cameroon to meet up with a class of 2015 IARD alumnus, Franck Omambélé, for his project to bring water to the community of Nkoabang. Over the three weeks that I was there, I grew to love the food, people, and culture of the country. So much so, that I have made a commitment to pursue policy work in African economic development as a career. This portfolio documents my experience in Yaoundé, Cameroon through the Cornell Institute for African Development.
WEEK 1: BEGINNING THE PROJECT

I arrived in Cameroon on August 2, 2016 in the evening. After less than an hour in the country, I experienced something that changed my worldview, I witnessed a bribe. On our way home from the airport, our taxi driver was pulled over by a police officer. He asked for my passport and Franck’s. When we handed them to him, he gave it right back—Franck told me this is because people are scared of America. Then, the police officer made a comment to the driver about his ID and about the car, saying that his headlight was broken, which it was not. The driver then handed the police officer a handful of bills. However, the police officer was still harassing him, so he handed him some more money. Then we were able to leave.

This was an eye-opening experience for me because less than a week prior, I was studying at Princeton University for a program in international affairs. I had completed a research project on political corruption and Boko Haram in Nigeria; one of the things I addressed in my paper was bribery. Seeing a bribe happen right in front of me, I was able to see and feel how engrained bribes were in the culture. If the driver had not given the cop money, he could have been thrown in jail. Throughout college, I have been interested in economic policy and this experience made me realize that change cannot always be made by tackling policies or creating new ones. Bribery, which is punishable in America, was part of the culture, almost a way of life in Cameroon. I was able to see that addressing cultural structures is just as important as addressing political structures and often much harder to change.

Once we arrived at our destination, the apartment I would be sleeping in for the next three weeks, we were welcomed by Franck’s brother and sister. They had prepared fried plantains and fried fish for me, two of my favorite foods.

The next day, I traveled to the site of the well with Franck. The Nkoabang community welcomed me with food and showed me around the property. One of the places they took me was to a pond where they collected water for many years. I was in complete shock, the water was murky and there was litter inside. One of the women in the community told me that in the
community, there is no running water, so they often had to fetch water at 4am from the gas station across the street and even use the water from this pond if they run out during the day.

Seeing this pond (pictured below) on my first day made me realize how large the economic disparities are between the United States and Cameroon. If an apartment in my hometown of New York City did not have running water, it would be deemed uninhabitable, but in Cameroon, nearly everyone’s home is without water. Seeing this water source really gave this trip purpose and I was excited to begin the project.

Image 2: Pond on property in Nkoabang
When the engineers arrived to begin digging the well, I was very excited. I had never been a part of a project like this before and I knew the immense impact it would have. Nearly everyday in the first week, was spent at the well site, checking up on its progress and sometimes helping out. The men were digging into the ground until they found water, so the process took weeks. Below is a picture of me helping to move the dirt being dug up from the ground.

Image 3: One of the Cameroonian engineers taking measures for the well

Image 4: Me carrying dirt being dug up from the well
To thank us for a hard day of work, the community cooked us a meal. Pictured to the right is traditional soup in Cameroon and it was served with a side of cassava. Every meal I had in Cameroon was tasty and exciting and this became one of my favorite dishes.

During the meal, everyone was speaking French. I have studied French since middle school, and even took three-college level courses, but speaking with native speakers was much harder than I would have ever imagined. I would often just listen to conversations and try to pick out words that were familiar. In the classroom, professors speak slowly, use simple vocabulary, and follow grammar structures, but with native speakers it is completely different. They often use slang and speak very quickly, which made me feel uncomfortable. This was definitely a challenge and fear that I had to overcome—speaking French to native speakers—but by the end of the week, I was making small conversation with people and beginning to feel relaxed.

**WEEK 2: RESEARCHING ACCESS TO WATER**

In the second week, I spent a lot of time learning more about access to water in Cameroon. Franck took me to many sites where people fetch water and I was shocked by the conditions. There were times when I could hardly get down or up a path without help and there were people who traveled the same paths everyday with gallons of water balanced on their heads. Pictured to the right is an image of me climbing up a path that people use to fetch water; the path was slippery and narrow.
The most humbling experience was when Franck and I woke up at 3am to document the families in Nkoabang as they collected water for the day. We went the day after a heavy rainfall, so there were not a lot of people, but it was still an incredible experience. It made me learn not to take running water for granted. I even carried one of the buckets on my head to one of the homes right across the street. I spilled a significant amount of the water and I was shocked by how heavy it was. I could not imagine waking up at 3am in the morning every single day to collect water.
Week 3: Exploration & Good-Byes

In my last week, there was not much I could help with because the engineers were still digging for water. This left me time to explore the city more and learn about the culture. One of the most exciting things I did was attend a soccer match. I watched as people, who I had come to know, play on teams with their neighbors and coworkers. There were arguments over goals, women selling fried fish on sticks, and the view of an incredible landscape. It was in this moment that I really felt like I was a part of the community.

In the three that I was in Cameroon, I made so many incredible relationships and I was sad to say goodbye. There were so many people I met who changed my life and I hope I was able to change theirs. On the day of my departure, one of the girls in the Nkoabang community made a cake for me to say ‘thank you.’ She was thankful that she would no longer have to get up at 3am everyday, even on a school day, to fetch water.
Conclusion: Moving forward

My experience in Cameroon, with the help of the Cornell Institute for African Development, has made me want to pursue a career in African development. I have traveled to other developing countries before (China, Brazil, Ethiopia) and worked on research, but traveling to Cameroon and building a well that has had such a direct impact on people’s lives, has made me want to return to the country and create other projects. When I returned to America, I immediately enrolled in Professor Kyle’s course: Introduction to the Economics of Development (AEM 2350). In this course, I have been learning more about Cameroon through writing assignments researching the economics of the country – including poverty rates and international debt. My experience in August was truly amazing and I hope that this project will continue for years to come so that other students will have a chance to experience Cameroon like I did.

Thank you, Cornell Institute for African Development!