This past summer I traveled to Arusha, Tanzania with Global Service Corps. Global Service Corps is based in San Francisco, linking students with their offices in Tanzania, Thailand and Cambodia. While they are U.S.-based, the offices in the countries themselves primarily employ local people with expertise in health, agriculture and education. Although we experienced vast miscommunications between the U.S. office and the Tanzanian office, I believe that having a locally based and supported organization enhances the effectiveness of the program because GSC’s teachers had the respect as educators and fellow community members, rather than outsiders, to create a larger impact.

I spent nine weeks in Tanzania teaching both HIV/nutrition and organic agriculture. Educational workshops were divided between rural and urban regions of Arusha, which exposed me to a diverse range of cultural experiences. When we were teaching in Arusha, each volunteer stayed with a homestay family. I was extremely grateful for my two years of Kiswahili at Cornell, which allowed me to fully appreciate and gain from such an amazing experience. My homestay was always bustling with people of all different ages. It was a true cultural immersion. In addition to just experiencing the daily lives of my family, I got to experience major cultural events like my “brother’s” wedding and Nanenane (Arusha’s agricultural festival). When we weren’t teaching in Arusha town, we were in rural Maasai villages, which offered an entirely new perspective. Maasai mamas invited us into their bomas (the mud circular homes) to talk to us about their lives. Being in a much more traditional environment we first hand learned about many of the problems in development that we learn about in the classroom, for it is in these communities that condoms were forbidden and wife-beating was the norm. It shone a light onto some of the barriers to global health and international development that I’ve read about in my studies but never truly experienced. However, the Maasai communities also brought a rich culture of strong traditions, cultural dances and art, unique lifestyles and much more. The contrast between the urban setting of Arusha with its mixture of people from a range of ethnic backgrounds, with the rural Maasai communities offered us a well-rounded view of the Arusha area. Experiencing such a diverse range of culture allowed for an incredibly meaningful experience.
GSC’s two main focuses are HIV/nutrition and bio-intensive organic agriculture and volunteers can choose to participate in just one sector, or GSC’s “Integrative Program”. In Arusha city GSC primarily teaches students between the ages of 12 and 20 and then in rural Maasai communities, the target audience was adult community members. Being an IARD major and a Global Health minor, I applied to GSC under its 9-week integrative program. The first five weeks of the program were focused on HIV/nutrition and the final 4 weeks were devoted to conducting agricultural workshops. Our first week in Arusha, Tanzania was orientation. The GSC staff conducted workshops with our group of 12 volunteers about general information about Tanzania (history of Tanzania, cultural practices, and Kiswahili teachings), as well as material specific to the Nutrition and HIV seminars. We spent the last couple days of orientation developing our teaching skills and practicing our interactive curriculum with the other staff members.

The following week we broke off into teaching groups. Usually two or three volunteers would be matched up with a counterpart, who was a Tanzanian university student, to serve as a translator. My group traveled four hours from Arusha to the Maasai village of Olmolong, where we camped for the entire week. During the mornings we held 2-3 hours of Nutrition and HIV trainings for community members and then in the afternoons, we taught the older primary school students for an hour about nutrition, puberty and HIV. The following week, we were in Arusha town teaching students aged 18 to 20 years old. In addition to its weeklong health workshops, GSC also has a two-week long “Health & Life-skills Day Camp” for secondary students, aged 12-14. For weeks 4&5 we taught classes of 20 students about nutrition and health, as well as important life skills such as communication skills, decision-making skills, and other important things to help them achieve happy and healthy lives. This was an incredibly meaningful experience. At the end of two weeks I had become incredibly close with my students and I could tell that we had became role models to them. A lot of the topics discussed during the nutrition/HIV seminars as well as the day camp are sensitive issues and in most Tanzanian households, it is not culturally acceptable for mothers to teach their children about these subjects. As a result, the information we taught was extremely valuable to the students and they were very enthusiastic to learn and gain this knowledge.

The next four weeks were devoted to sustainable agriculture. GSC had developed a bio-intensive sustainable agriculture (BIA) program based on John Jeavon’s How to grow more
vegetables. The agricultural workshops taught methods of organic agriculture that can be used on a small-scale subsistence household level. Some of the techniques in the curriculum include: composting, double-dug raised beds, companion planting and crop rotation, weed control (through plant spacing, crop rotation, natural pest solutions, and physical controls), water harvesting, liquid manure, sack gardens and planning and record keeping. The curriculum was formed on the basis that BIA is environmental friendly, reduces inputs and costs to the farmer, creates higher yields, uses on-farm resources and is safer for both the vegetables and the grower. Throughout the week we would teach these techniques and lessons within a classroom, church room or outside in a communal meeting area, and then on one or two days we would meet as a class in one of our student’s households. On these days we had practicals where our entire class worked to build a compost pile, a raised-double dug bed and a hafir for water harvesting.

Like our initial orientation, we had a week to learn about the material from GSC’s agricultural specialists and to practice building the compost pile and double dug bed, as well as prepare some of the natural pest solutions. The next two weeks we were in another rural Maasai village, Olchorovus, holding 2 separate weeklong seminars for its community members. We would spend our early mornings vaccinating chickens for New Castle disease, followed by 2-3 hours of community trainings in BIA. In the afternoons we worked with our most enthusiastic students to develop certain “advanced technologies,” which is another section of GSC’s curriculum, which includes building hafirs and grain storage facilities. For our final week, we returned to Arusha to teach some of the same 18-20 year old students that we had originally taught HIV/nutrition.

Unlike the HIV/nutrition portion of the GSC curriculum, which is much more universal, agriculture is very dependent on the site-specific context and the resources at hand. While most of the other volunteers were coming from stronger health backgrounds, my agricultural experiences and the knowledge I have gained from the IARD major made me apprehensive towards GSC’s BIA curriculum. John Jeavons had originally designed his book for the Californian suburban household, which is using vegetable gardening as a hobby rather than a substantial source of food and income. Although he believes it can be utilized throughout a global setting to provide subsistence farmers with food security, I still had some doubts that this was the best curriculum to teach. Instead, I would have proposed that GSC’s agricultural specialists have done research evaluating the current agricultural practices being used and the
resulting yields, working closer in a more evaluative process with individual farmers. This would allow GSC to gain a better grasp on the needs of the community members. Additionally, teaching agriculture should be more hands-on, whereas these workshops were mostly classroom based. I felt after teaching things such as companion planting and crop rotation in a classroom, the students were not inspired to apply these methods to their fields. More time needed to be devoted to individual farmers on their land to design a plan of action and develop a sort of record keeping. And then, GSC would be able to follow-up with farmers to assess their progress.

Another big problem I found with the agricultural education section was the amount of time and labor demanded. While a lot of the methods are applicable on small subsistence vegetable gardens, there were farmers with large corn fields, for example, which would have required many compost piles and hafirs, an overbearing demand for some students. What frustrated me most, was that GSC was so focused on simply teaching their curriculum. In the community of Olchorovus we observed substantial soil erosion and degradation, which had formed large craters and disrupted people’s attempts to farm. Many people struggled to relocate in order to find land more suitable to living. This problem of soil erosion needs to be addressed immediately or else these people might lose their homes and communities. Teaching successful means to protect their current land from being affected by the rains should be a top priority in this community, and in my opinion, should have a greater precedence than GSC’s BIA.

I greatly enjoyed the program because it gave me a critical eye towards development projects. I absolutely loved all the staff members and they made my experience very enjoyable. However, I am disappointed that after over ten years of operation GSC has not made alterations to its agricultural projects. The staff members are so dedicated and passionate, I just wish that they were taking on some of the new techniques in development interventions, particularly the participatory elements. In doing so they would realize that their current curriculum is not applicable to the people they are trying to help and they are not maximizing the benefits that they could achieve otherwise. The faults of GSC’s agricultural program have taught me a lot about where I want to go in my future. While I loved the Day Camp portion of the Nutrition/HIV section because I really could bond and offer insight to my students, I was most inspired by the agricultural program. I have grown to be very passionate in agricultural extension work after seeing all of the faults in what GSC has been promoting for the past ten years. However, I do believe that it’s through small and local nonprofits, such as Global Service Corps, that a real
impact can be made within communities. Therefore it is necessary that there are programs to enhance and develop these organizations themselves. Additionally, I was disappointed that by “integrative program,” that simply meant teaching health first and then later teaching agriculture. As I have learned through my studies at Cornell, agriculture and health are so intricately tied and I believe it is at the intersection of the two that development projects can create the most benefits. Finding this intersection and implementing it in a participatory, community-based fashion is something I’d wish to pursue in my next international experience.

Although I had a great time in Tanzania with GSC because of the amazing cultural experience, the wonderful Tanzanian people that I met, and all of the knowledge that I gained regarding international development and what is not effective, I would not recommend the program. After my nine weeks I gathered that there is a huge disconnect between the U.S. office and the in-country employees. One of GSC’s goals is to connect U.S. students with those across borders. While creating a global community should be a goal for all, I got the impression that this held too much of a priority. The U.S. office had the only responsibility of recruiting volunteers, when I believe they should have offered more guidance to make GSC’s curriculums more effective. If the program were designed so that volunteers served the purpose of collaborators, I believe that both the American volunteers and the Tanzanian GSC employees could have developed an incredibly successful program. After ten years of these programs, I am disappointed that no major improvements or modifications were made in order to create a more effective program. While I gained a lot of knowledge and experience by recognizing the faults of GSC’s current means to agricultural education, there are probably programs out there that can provide students with greater insight and experience in how to effectively create agricultural education and extension services and projects.