My arrival to Gabon was exciting as it was some time since I had visited a non-English country for some time and the driver who picked me up could not speak more than a few English words. It became an instant immersion in a new country and culture and it set the tone for my entire stay in Central Africa. Home to one of the largest portions of the undisturbed Central African Forest, Gabon has nearly 80% heavily wooded land-base with only a small portion of savanna grasslands in the Southwest. Needless to say agriculture is not a top priority or commodity as lumber and oil makes up the majority of this small country’s GDP. I noticed this right off as the standard of living was high and domestic food production low with most food items being imported into the country at great expense. It turns out that the only product whose demand is met domestically is eggs and chicken was much more available to consumers even though the local fishing reserves are relatively untapped.

Putting all these initial observations aside I was excited to hear what kind of positions and goals the office had towards conservation agriculture in a tropical forest setting. I was surprised to hear how progressive my advisors and colleague were towards zero-burning techniques and cover crop strategies and I learned a lot of what these types of conservation practices mean in a climate that was hotter and wetter than I had been in before. I was placed on a team with another intern from Gabon, Stevy George, to work on conservation and intensification of banana/plantain production in the Remboue Valley. This is an area about 60 miles west of the capital where there has been some successful banana production for several generations. The project has been going on for almost 2 years when I joined the team and the main goals were to try and organize local village enclaves and get them to plant cooperative plantations that would be tended communally. Furthermore, these test plots could be used as trials for other research with new cover crops and innovative cultural practices. All the while our focus was to recommend conservation practices that were implementable, available, and beneficial to the locals.

Although this was a larger longitudinal study, I felt like I could contribute to the goals and experience what it was like to be a part of such a case study. The sustainability of the project was in question because it was difficult to get locals to work in a community plot as well as become full-time farmers. Most individuals in the area would spend half of the year working in Libreville and half at home in the forest. This along with the difficulties in farming in a dense forest (poor transportation, elephant pressure, and heavy brush), made progress slower on the implementation side of the project. On the planning organizational side of the project that was undertaken in the office in Libreville was just as awkward and lethargic. I personally had to pressure some of my superiors to schedule meetings and arrange supplies so that some of our missions actually occurred as planned. Nonetheless, I enjoyed being proactive in my internship and getting to work with local farmers and hear what kind of frustrations they had.
Every other week the office hosted several conferences that dealt with trade-related issues in the Central African region that the sub regional FAO office covered. For example, one conference brought almost a dozen countries together to discuss protocols for restrictions of some live plant material and other products which could be invasive or dangerous to domestic industries. It was surprising how far behind these polices were in comparison to the western world because borders were totally lax. It seemed that lack of awareness, poor infrastructure and funding were the cause of these deficiencies, but I was surprised at the backseat role the FAO and other institutions took in this dialogue. However, it is apparent that the job of the FAO is as consultant to a nation’s government and can only recommend what steps to take to reach higher favor in the global marketplace. Although I believe this stance is necessary and valid in the international development arena, I learned from my internship that I became quickly frustrated with this mind-set and that I struggled seeing the long-term progress when it seemed initial headway was minimal.

My final involvement during my internship was the development of some agricultural ‘protocols’ concerning the diversification of production in Gabon, specifically with livestock and mushroom cultivation. Although they were only initial outlines that required more research and implementation I was awed by the lack of experience and interest in alternative agricultural crops and products outside of what was already produced: sweet potatoes, bananas, and manioc. It could be easily observed that not only do these crops fail to excel over time if not rotated with other types of crops, but the diet of the locals, as in most impoverished areas, is predominately starch based. When posing questions of alternative legume crops and livestock I received laughter by both the locals and my fellow colleagues that such ideas were never seen in the area and probably would not work. Hopefully, the little influence I left behind can be fostered to introduce a more diverse agricultural production in Gabon.

In all, I found my stay to be an interesting adventure although at times I was frustrated. It brought new perspectives to my experience as to what development is and what progress looks like through the eyes of a large multi-lateral institution. I hope that I will be able to use the tools and things I learned down the road and perhaps see a different part of the world that functions differently than the continent of Africa.