I. Introduction

I travelled to Kenya for my International Experience project in a region known as South Nyanza which is on the west side of the country near Lake Victoria. The actual valley sub region which I was based in was called Alendu and the nearest village/social hub was Kosele. The tribal region was Luo land and Luo and Ki-Swahili was the languages which were predominately spoken, however English was spoken or at least understood by many of the residence. I worked as an ‘agricultural intern’ for the NGO, Rafiki Africa, which serviced the whole Alendu Valley. The area consisted of roughly 2-3 dozen families or 400-500 people. Rafiki Africa consisted of a health clinic, women’s group community center, primary school, and a farm which supported the entire program with food and fresh produce throughout the year. I was involved with most of the programs but my main responsibility was developing a dairy goat flock on site while training farmers and the women’s group to care for their own food systems with a focus on improving their nutrition.

I lived in a small mud hut with a grass roof and my only source of light was my headlamp. Most days I would go to bed around 8 pm and rise around 5:30 am. This was mostly because the sun rose and fell at 6:30 every day and rarely was anybody awake during the night-time period. My daily tasks included various manual labor and farm upkeep as well as training various locals. I worked on a very informal level which gave me the opportunity to really get to know and understand many of the individuals I came in contact with. Being an agricultural student enabled me to find many ways to offer my expertise or advice, but my main focus was to increase milk production in an area where sources of high-quality protein and essential amino acids are lacking and/or non-accessible to the general public. Specifically, the flock of goats I worked with on the farm will hopefully produce milk for the tea for the school. Many of the children who attend Rafiki Africa's Lighthouse Academy rely on the one meal and tea that is provided as their only food for the week. The secondary phase of the project was to gift goats to the women of various families so that they are able to provide good nutrition to their family and generate additional income through the sale of excess milk.

The area and land that South Nyanza encompasses is good for many forms of agriculture and crops as it has rich volcanic soil and sufficient rainfall to have at least two cropping seasons per year. Before the British occupation subsistent production was the norm with a surplus of fruit tree yields and traditional preservation methods that supported a substantial population. The introduction of access to international commodity markets by the British turned the entire region into cotton and tea production and cash-cropping as the standard for a long period. Once the British left Kenya to govern on its own, the cotton industry was virtually destroyed along with the livelihood of many of the farmers in the Alendu valley. The next and current generations of farmers are now stuck in transition where all of the traditional crops and methods are forgotten and there is no longer a market for their cotton. This history has certainly hindered the diversity of their local food systems.
and can be seen in the local wet markets. Most of this information I have gathered from a few of the village elders who have seen this happen over time.

II. NGO: Rafiki Africa

The NGO has been around now for more than 10 years but has only been ramping up involvement in the past 3-4 years due to increased funding from Churches and Schools in the US. The co-founders Roger and Dorothy Dulo both come from East Africa (Uganda and Kenya respectively) but they live in York, Pennsylvania which is how my family came to know them and their organization. It is actually the birthplace of Dorothy which the NGO’s land is located which adds and interesting perspective to the NGO’s work. There were surely opportunities to have lasting sustainable impact on most of the locals in Alendu, but it sometimes became very confusing and personal when there is personal history and context that cannot be readily understood by an outsider.

There was a defined holistic approach to the Raffiki Africa and I would argue that a horizontal model was implemented as opposed to a vertical one. In every way the first choice as far as resource allocation or purchase of supplies was to utilize local community members which were only possible if a grasp on the local community members and social constructs was held by the leadership. Almost any individual project was somehow influential on another project which made it necessary to communicate with many community members at all times. The multifaceted approach was very interesting and exciting to me and I enjoyed developing cooperation.

Looking back on the 2 months which I was there I found that some things remained dysfunctional and a hindrance to Rafiki Africa as it strived to achieve its goals, and the first being that goals were vague and often not targeted in any manner. Communication within the NGO was very much culturally determined and I noticed that I did not understand how one was to approach another individual with a conflict within the Kenyan culture. I noticed that when one community member had a quarrel or issue with a fellow member that a direct confrontation was rare if not completely non-existent. When I would direct confront someone with even a small issue I was surprised to find the individual ‘shut down’ and the only answers and feedback I would receive was only ‘Yes’ even if it was blatantly not what the individual actually felt or thought. It was frustrating to see action in complete ignorance and dysfunctional communication which in my perspective could be solved quite simply. At this point I realize that I did not exist within the culture or people to find any sort of understanding.

III. Projects and work experiences

As said before my main project was developing a dairy goat flock and training community members to care for animals that would produce ample amounts of milk. I worked closely with two young farmers, Bernard and Brian, who lived with me on the Rafiki farm. They are two individuals I feel I had the most impact on and we became very well accustomed to each other during my 2 month stay. Both men had some agricultural knowledge and really taught me a lot since this was my first experience directly working in a tropical cropping system. There are very many issues that the seven nannies were dealing with which I saw instantly and consequently they produced little to no milk. Knowing that my impact was limited as it was I decided to take a very ‘soft’ approach by not offering advice or
recommendations, but instead simply asked questions. Granted some of my questions were pointed but it was exciting to see both men come to conclusions on their own and go out and solve some the issues that were hurting their productivity. I was there to offer my own advice and knowledge if questions were asked of me, but as I mentioned before, when I directly confronted them about issues that I disagreed with, a real consensus was never made. It was not until the last weeks that I was in Alendu that I saw some signs of real progress; however the lasting impact of my interactions with Bernard and Brian are uncertain.

Once a week I met with a women’s group from the local community who were interested in being trained to care for dairy goats. I was extremely surprised how studious the women became and how thirsty they were for knowledge. At the end of one of the sessions I concluded that I would have a small quiz the next week to see if they had retained some of the information we had discussed about dairy animal nutrition and the quality of forage. Their eyes widened and they jumped up and wrote down everything I had written down and asked what kind of questions I would likely ask. Rafiki Africa has a focus on targeting women in the community as the most cost-effective impact population and I saw first-hand why they and so many other NGO’s and development programs do so.

IV. Impacts

The most enjoyable experience I had on my trip was the complete submersion I had into the community and culture in the place I was staying. After learning a little bit of the local language and working alongside many of the people, I felt like people interacted with me in a less distant manner which I had not broken through on my last trip to East Africa. Most of the time I was the only non-Kenyan in a 10-mile radius. This made it almost mandatory for me to assimilate just to remain ‘sane’. It was a life changing experience to really feel like a true minority and have certain pressures on my social interactions that I have never felt before. Although my 'Americanism' remained very much intact it is interesting to speculate how 'Africanized' one can become if you were to stay for more than 2 months.

Agriculturally speaking, my stay was very informative and an amazing learning experience for as far as teaching and consultation goes. I observed how a tropical cropping system works and what impacts certain crops have on nutrition and farmers income. I enjoyed the hands-on nature of my project and tried my best to keep up with the only-by-hand fieldwork.

There were times which I did not enjoy my time in Kenya, but I realize this is just a part of the experience. I had contracted a few bizarre infections while I was there and also got a really nasty spider-bite which prevented me from walking for more than a week. The most trying aspect of my trip was actually the complete immersion which I enjoyed so much. More specifically it was the isolation which I felt. Sometimes there were times when I needed to process certain things but I had no one to talk to. It was not because the people whom I stayed with did not have proficient English (or me proficient Luo), but rather that an invisible barrier of understanding or perspective prevented me from comfortably venting or discussing what was happening around me. I tend to be a more introverted person, but I tend to process things vocally and dislike journaling.

V. Ethical dilemmas

I there were a few ethical dilemmas which bothered me throughout my stay in Kenya. The first and foremost ethical conflict was the local culture’s outlook and perception of young children. In this culture
Age means everything and if you are younger you get thrown in the dirt in almost all situations. Adults regard towards children was actually offensive to me. They were physically and vocally abused and if food was less the youngest of the group were the ones not to eat. This was a puzzling phenomenon which is the complete opposite of western society where youth are nurtured and protected. It can be concluded that this was primarily culturally driven but I saw no effective way to break the self-reinforcing cycle.

Seeing the women shy away from any success was the most frustrating thing for me. When I would end a training session for taking care of dairy goats I would ask all of the women who would be interested in having a goat of their own to care for. Very few of them showed legitimate interest and I later found out it was because of the unwanted attention and/or success that could kickback on them. For example one woman was beat with a machete by her own husband because she was embarrassing him as striving to be more successful than him. I tried to be convincing and encouraging but I was unprepared for a roadblock such as this.

VI. Conclusive Findings and Changes of perspective

The most interesting that that I learned about myself is that I love teaching and sharing laughter with other people. This might be more of a reflection on how social interaction was conducted in Alendu, but I never knew I could have so much laughter and happiness just by being with other people no matter the situation or occasion. I also found that development work can be much more taxing than I first thought. You must keep a sort of removed perspective if you really want make a positive impact and you must not make a personal crusade to make a change because half of the time you are completely wrong or misguided and the other half of time you are perceived that way by those around you. I know that I have learned so much during my stay of two moths in Kenya and the experience will impact me in the way I interact with the world for years to come.