Chile and Rimisp

Chile is often placed on a pedestal as South America’s most advanced economy, boasting the highest per capita income, the safest streets, and the most liberal trade policies on the continent. Having spent six weeks living and working in the capital city of Santiago, I would certainly say that these claims have some basis – at any time of day or night, I felt safer walking around Santiago than I often do in Chicago, and Chileans are always on time (which says quite a bit in South America). The capital city is generally clean and run like a well-oiled machine, standing somewhat in contrast to Buenos Aires, Argentina, which I had visited prior to the start of my work. That said, the city of Santiago is far from representative of Chile as a whole, a nation that is as diverse in its socioeconomic makeup as it is in its landscape. Income inequality is one of the country’s major issues and it has a GINI coefficient lower than far poorer Honduras. Furthermore, rural development in particular has been sluggish as Chile’s system of government is highly centralized, entailing both procedural delays and ineffective policy at the end of the day. For these reasons and more, an NGO named Rimisp: The Latin American Center for Rural Development has been working for years to assist the government in using more accurate information from the ground to inform more relevant policy and facilitate decentralization over time. My work during the summer (winter in the southern hemisphere) of 2014 involved research in a southern region of Chile, called Los Rios.

The goal of my research in Los Rios was to identify the spatial distribution of poverty in the region, how it related to occupation and gender, and what steps the new regional government might take to improve the situation. My deliverables were, first, a work plan laying out my time
at Rimisp, and a report – a snapshot of rural Los Rios that sought to define what exactly “rural” means in the context of the region, and how the government might make better policy to address issues of infrastructure, poverty, agricultural productivity, and so on. There were essentially three phases of my work, the first involving data analysis from the census, the second being a series of interviews with local stakeholders, and the final one being the drafting of the report. For the first and third phases, I was positioned in Santiago at Rimisp’s office downtown, but for the second I spent a week in the southern city of Valdivia to do a dozen interviews with stakeholders from various backgrounds. I would say that the first and third phases of my project were the more straightforward aspects – looking at statistical tables, doing things to them in excel, analyzing population and occupation data, reading reports, and writing papers were all things I was familiar with before arriving in Santiago. The interviews were by far the most difficult and rewarding part of my time in Chile.

I had thought I was relatively prepared to tackle a Spanish immersion experience, having done serious review for the semester leading up to it and having listened to essentially all Latin music for months. I was wrong. Chilean Spanish is the most bizarre version of the language I have heard – coupling extremely fast talkers with lots of dropped consonants and an endless supply of slang words made the first couple of weeks a bumpy ride. Over time though, I started to catch on to enough of the dialect (known affectionately as Chileñol) to make sense of the general thrust of the sentences spoken to me, which helped considerably when I went down south for interviews. Though I had structured them to flow from one question to the other and cover all of the points I hoped to learn about, I quickly found out that I was going to have to reinvent my questionnaire at every interview. Given the diverse backgrounds of the people I was interviewing – ranging from regional government officials to businessmen to NGO leaders to potato farmers –
I needed to both adjust my language and adjust my angle depending on how they sized me up when I walked in. Luckily, I was able to record all of my interviews. This served to both allow me to revisit their answers (which, of course, I did not understand fully until I went back to them), and deflate whatever ego I had left as I heard their rapid, smooth Spanish juxtaposed with my own. I was humbled by how easily and quickly I was accepted and welcomed into people's homes, offices, and conversations. This warmth helped me ask a wide range of questions and get a feel for the perspectives of the various stakeholders. At the end of the day, my report combined these perspectives with the data I had originally analyzed - the report was then submitted to the newly established Regional Government of Los Rios to inform their future rural development policy.

Overall, the experience of working in Chile was a rewarding one for a number of reasons. Firstly, living and working in a country that operated in a language that I did not speak fluently was a chance for me challenge myself and adapt to a totally new place and culture. Moreover, working with people who came from radically different backgrounds and had varying perspectives was refreshing. Beyond the superficial experience of being in a new part of the world, I also got more exposure to my field of study - doing NGO work, getting a deeper look at rural poverty in Chile, and examining policy prescriptions was new and has helped me further shape my potential career path. I feel that I learned a great deal from interacting with people from all strata of society, and working with keen, enthusiastic people at Rimisp who were also driven to improve the quality of life of their fellow Chileans. While giving me more exposure to real world data analysis, this internship also gave me a crash course in navigating sensitivities of working in conjunction with a government agency - being careful to offer some insight into the future benefits of what you're doing while also not promising too much on behalf of the
government. It also solidified my appreciation for the fact that different stakeholders bring dramatically different experiences to the discussion and have a lot to say - often they just need someone to listen. The process of synthesizing these different viewpoints such that I didn't place too much weight on any one perspective was also a valuable exercise in my opinion.

As positive as the overall experience was, it wasn't without its shortfalls. My main issue with the internship was how much desk work and waiting I ended up doing - there were weeks when I had to wait two or three days to receive information from a contact in Los Rios and couldn't proceed until that time. I felt that these days could certainly have been put to better use. It led me to realize however, that waiting is part of the deal when you're working for a lesser known entity like an NGO - people are not likely to put you high on their priority lists. Negatives aside though, the experience of working with an NGO like Rimisp was one I would definitely recommend to any student looking to broaden their horizons. Not only was I given a high degree of autonomy in planning and executing my project, but that autonomy carried into adjusting to life, just *life*, in another country. Setting aside romanticized vignettes of living and working abroad, a valuable realization in my opinion is that, no matter where you go in the world, people are just trying to get by. Of all the epiphanies one might reach as a result of travel and immersion in another culture, I feel that coming to an understanding that people all over the world are essentially the same at their core is perhaps the most potent and inspiring.