Personal Reflection:
8-Week Internship with Patronato Pro Zona Mazahua A.C.

Remembering the attitude that I took into my work experience in Chiapas, México this summer is almost funny sometimes. I was indignant about the inequality and injustice that exists in the third world, which I had heard about but never experienced. I held almost entirely critical views of American-style economic development and I couldn’t get around any notions I had developed of my country doing little but damaging the rest of the world. Furthermore, I had no concept of what NGO development work was really like. I left having highly anticipated the inevitable shift in my personal viewpoints, but without considering the work I would do to find them. Needless to say, I didn’t really know what to expect, as much I may have thought I did.

Lucky for me, this didn’t matter much. One thing I was certainly not, in working for Pro Mazahua, was limited. They work through the methodology of an international-government-level initiative known in Spanish as PESA (English translation: Strategic Project for Food Security), which includes a wide variety of projects in all facets of rural community life having to do with food security. I spent about a month of my stay just being a part of everything that they had going on, which ranged from improved stove construction to general home improvements and construction of new houses, to new adaptations of milpa agriculture to control erosion, to water capturing and purification, to diet diversification, to coffee and honey production, to general development diagnostics, and so on. Additionally, the Chiapas branch of Pro Mazahua is only about a year and a half old, and the majority of their projects are still in their formative stages. Therefore, most of what I would end up doing, no matter what it was, would be in the form of a diagnostic assessment of some aspect of their communities and projects; this allowed me to remain a student first, before being a development professional, which proved to be a valuable attitude to take into a summer’s worth of work. They gave me the liberty to choose to focus on whatever interested me the most—a rare treat for an undergraduate intern.

The work that I actually produced during my stay consisted of a diagnostic assessment of coffee and honey production in the communities where Pro Mazahua works. Income generation, while it is a principle need of many of the indigenous families involved in Pro Mazahua’s projects, is not a subject that has been addressed to any great extent thus far. Given their young age, Pro Mazahua has decided to better utilize their time by prioritizing more immediate needs like diet diversification, water, and critical home improvements. As a result, I aimed to make myself instrumental by tackling an area that they had not dealt with very much yet. I made community visits to interview individual producers as well as leaders of what community producer organizations existed, as well as to learn the details of the production process and get to see how both products were harvested, prepared, and sold. The report on this assessment, which I’m currently compiling, will provide a succinct-as-possible review of all of these circumstances and seek out the most prominent livelihood threats as well as opportunities for improvement that exist for the producers. My hope is that it will be a useful reference for Pro Mazahua in the future as they move towards working with income generation in their communities more extensively.

With that said, it is clearly hard to feel truly useful when limited by time. Eight weeks proved to be a much shorter period than I expected, and I left feeling like I had just started to get
it all figured out. Learning how to adapt your perspective to a new setting well enough to start being productive takes a while. In fact, I did not even have time to visit all of the people I eventually decided I wanted to. It took a very long time to get in touch with the regional exporting cooperatives that exist in the area, such that by the time we were in contact I only had one day left.

Part of this, I think, resulted from a lack of initiative on my part. I feel like I should have been more active in pursuing leads that I found interesting right away, rather than relying on my organization for things to fall into place. Having never accepted a foreign intern before, it seemed like Pro Mazahua was attempting to organize everything for me. Not without reason, of course—when I arrived I wasn’t even exactly sure what they had to offer, so it was up to them to show me around. I will say, though, that I think it would improve the experience to have a certain set of project offers available when one signs on for the internship, in order to shorten the time it takes to get one’s bearings in a new place and work setting. Had this been the case, I think I would have felt more aware of my goals as an employee and more compelled to take things into my own hands when appropriate.

More important than all of this, however, is the growth that I feel I underwent in being on the ground with Pro Mazahua. I have gone from looking at things like poverty and inequality as injustices and disadvantages to seeing them as demonstrative of opportunities for growth and improvement, a simple but fundamentally important change in one’s attitude when attempting to tackle critical development issues. I feel like I have a fairly decent grasp on community economic, social, and environmental dynamics in Mexico and Central America. I also feel like I have a much better capacity to understand the nature of problems facing development around the world; there are trends that I saw in México that tend to repeat themselves in other places, and global dynamics of various kinds that influence all areas of the world. Having analyzed and made some sense of them once before has an empowering effect on one’s ability to do so again, and to do so with a more accurate critical lens.

As for now, I’m already investigating an opportunity to return to México this coming spring to work on a new project, different from what I was doing this summer, that would not only give me much more time in the field but allow me to more efficiently attack some of the core questions I have remaining after this summer. For example, I’m curious to experience first-hand the process of natural resource self-governance, such as among the members of a watershed. After this summer, I am convinced that a fundamental re-thinking of organization of natural resource management across the globe is necessary for progress to occur in the long term. Additionally, I’d like to approach this by focusing on individual families as a unit of measurement and contextualizing them within the broader scheme of global economic and environmental dynamics—an idea I perhaps started to look into this summer but ran out of time to pursue at any significant length. Ultimately, as a student of International Development and Natural Resources, you want to make yourself useful to the world, and you want to do so in an open-minded and curious, investigative way, and it’s asking and following up on questions like these that will get you there. This, to me, is why an experience like the one I had in México is as valuable as your professors tell you it is, and then some. I can already tell that the perspective and mindset that I gained from this summer will surely lead me to many interesting and exciting places in my career, and perhaps do so very soon.