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This past fall I had the opportunity to travel abroad with a program called IHP/Comparative: The Politics of Food, Water and Energy. In one semester we traveled to Vietnam, Morocco and Bolivia in an effort to study and analyze the individualized environmental issues that countries are facing as a result of climate change. Each country had different issues of concern, as well as different perspectives on how to approach the matters at hand. Throughout the program we took three classes that encouraged deeper thinking in relation to the issues that we had been seeing first hand.

Vietnam:

Vietnam was the first stop on our journey, and by far the most overwhelming. The city of Can Tho in the Mekong River Delta was the first place that we settled once we had arrived in Vietnam. The Mekong River Delta is the largest source of income for Vietnam, and is greatly threatened by flooding due to global changes in temperature. We had the opportunity to meet with several fishery owners, rice farmers, subsistence farmers and NGOs. Unfortunately, in Vietnam, the government is very restrictive about what information sharing with foreigners, and so several undercover government agents accompanied our group as a means to ensure that no government slander took place in our company. Several students and faculty members on my program found this frustrating, as they believed it hindered the viability and scope of what we were able to gain while interviewing. Conversely, I believed that it spoke volumes about the issues present in Vietnam, as it opted as an opportunity to understand the constraints surrounding Vietnamese government as well as all scopes of Vietnamese life.

Living with a host family also encouraged a more intimate understanding of life in Vietnam, as I was able to inquire about questions unavailable to me under regular circumstances. For example, sustainability initiatives are of great importance to the Vietnamese government, as they have hopes to industrialize within the near future, with most of this development dependant upon the wellbeing of the Mekong River Delta. Because the Delta is currently in danger of flooding, it is imperative that the government impose regulations that minimize damage. However, after talking to my host family, it became clear that the sustainability initiatives imposed by the government were known only to those involved in government and academia, and not to the general public.

Morocco:

In Morocco, our main focus of study was alternative energy and energy consumption. Morocco is dependent on countries throughout Africa, the Middle East, and Europe for both oil and electricity, making their future a rather uncertain one. This has encouraged Morocco to turn towards alternative sources of energy, such as wind power. Being that Morocco is on the coast of the Atlantic, its potential for wind power is quite high. The issue of energy in Morocco is also apparent in their agricultural system, as Morocco is a net-importer of food. My group and I were lucky enough to come across an unsatisfied farmer while meeting with an irrigation union about available agricultural technologies. The farmer, Jawad, an educated man, fluent in three languages was able to voice his concerns to us about agricultural policy in Morocco. Intrigued, I asked Jawad

for his email address and continued to question him about his concerns, which I later was able to incorporate into my final research paper.

My time in Morocco differed greatly from my time in Vietnam, as I was able to meet with people who were not hindered from speaking freely about their oppression. I found this to be an intriguing finding within Morocco for several reasons. Firstly, Morocco's government system is that of a constitutional monarchy, secondly, the gender relationships in Morocco can be seen as oppressive to women (especially from the perspective of an outsider), and thirdly because of the undecided successes and failures of past social revolutions such as the February 20th movement of the Arab spring. To me, it was amazing that one country could incorporate so many different kinds of political, social and economic divides into one culture.

I was able to experience these disjoints in culture through the many site visits that I was lucky enough to participate in. On one visit, we were able to spend time in a small village called Ben Smim that was fighting against water privatization laws, in an attempt to remain a subsistence community. Thirty minutes away, however, is an American style university (Alakhawayn University) that is home to some of the most privileged Moroccans in the country. The juxtaposition between these two places highlighted the extreme disparities apparent in Morocco. After hearing about what both parties had to say, it seemed that their goals were not of different visions, but of different capabilities.

The last perspective that I was able to gain was that of familial relations. Living in a home-stay for four weeks was perhaps most difficult in Morocco, being that the host families spoke only French and Arabic, two languages that most of us were not proficient in. Although this made communication difficult, I did not find that it hindered my relationships with my host family, and instead it allowed me to understand their lifestyle and culture through participation. My host mom was an elderly woman, who I was told to call mama Fatima, and was perhaps the best cook that I have ever met. Every Friday we would come home for lunch for "couscous Friday" to find a plate of couscous, lamb, and cooked vegetables that enveloped the table.

Bolivia:

Bolivia was the last country on our route, and by far the most surprising. We landed in Cochabamba, where we felt somewhat bombarded by the altitude of over 8,000 feet. The next day we met our final host families. I was introduced to my host mother, her grandson from Germany and her niece who lived in another city in Bolivia. Living with such a diverse family gave me a perspective on Bolivia that I was not yet able to have in any other country, as I got to experience the history of the country through my host mom, as well as experience the youth culture of Bolivia.

Again we were able to meet with farmers, NGOs, and local business owners in order to discuss how their lives have been disrupted by climate change. Water privatization has been a large issue in Bolivia, and has affected the entirety of the population. The fight against water privatization is one that is currently ongoing, and we were lucky enough to get the chance to speak to farmers about how this has affected them both personally and economically. However, for all of the tragedy in Bolivia (water privatization, pollution, etc.) there are exceptional cases of ingenuity that have the promise to reduce such trends. We were able to meet with an organization that collects all forms of human waste (urine and feces), and then turns them into fertilizer, simply

through allowing them several months to self-filter harmful byproducts. The agricultural sector is one that contributes greatly to water use and pollution, and this program of turning waste into fertilizer (an essential agricultural component) is ingenious, as well as cost effective.

Somehow Bolivia manages to be simultaneously the most beautiful, and most polluted country that I have ever been to. The variety in landscape is amazing; there are mountains, deserts, geysers, hot springs, forests, salt flats and lakes that in some cases just a few miles away from one another. Being able to experience the beauty of Bolivia, made witnessing the obvious issues of pollution that much more difficult to process. The issue of water privatization is especially problematic because the water sources in Bolivia are exceptionally polluted. Living in Bolivia for several weeks allowed me to create a relationship with the country that made the issues that they face feel more personal than institutional.

Summary:

The comparative aspect of my program allowed me to understand the political, social, cultural and economic distinctions that create differentiation in global environmental action. Witnessing global issues from a first hand perspective via personal renderings encouraged a different kind of comprehension on how to deal with encroaching issues of climate change. Not only did this program give me a greater understanding of scale within the realm of climate change, but it also tested my Cornell education, as I was able to apply my education to real world problems. The academic experiences on this program were mostly those of active learning, and I found that this style of practical “learning through doing” opened my eyes in a way that other abroad programs could not, due to the comparative aspect. If I had gone just to one of the countries that I had visited on this program, I would have gained a new perspective than the one that I had previously known or that is apparent in the United States. However through this experience, I was able to witness a snippet of the complexities and multidimensionality behind the crisis of global warming through several lenses. I believe that this program enhances the unique ability to interact with several communities on a personal level, and learn about both the unique issues that they are facing, as well as inquire about areas of personal interest.