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Reflection Paper on International Experience

I still remember it like it was yesterday. I had some of the best moments of my life in the summer of 2012. This stems from the fact that, as an IARD student at Cornell University, I was required to get an international experience and learn about the cultures of other countries and their agricultural practices. Thus I interned at MINADER (The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) in Cameroon. Having been born and raised in Cameroon, I chose to go back home because growing up there was not easy and I always wanted to help my country. The people I grew up with and I faced was what most African children living in rural areas have been experiencing for the past few decades. I wanted to contribute to the development of agriculture in Cameroon, so the trip was a great opportunity to go and start something amazing. At the same time I was also blessed to see my family that I have not seen for seven years.

Being from Cameroon gave me a big advantage because I knew how the system and people work, so I did not have the culture shock that most students have when they travel to a country for the first time. I did, however, eventually have to adjust myself to the fact that people were usually a little late but after a week we all started respecting what being on time means. With my internship at MINADER, I was given the opportunity to work on practically anything I wanted that was related to agriculture. I chose to conduct my research by comparing urban agriculture and traditional agriculture in Cameroon and use my studies to benefit both my faculty and the MINADER itself. I spent two wonderful months working at the ministry of agriculture and I was also involved in many curriculum activities such as volunteering to teach English to high
school students and organizing three breakfasts per week for two dozen children under 12 years old, and a soccer tournament open to anyone. With the help of some generous friends, I was able to raise $800 before leaving Cornell, and this helped to finance all these activities.

During my time in Cameroon, I lived with my family in Oyak, a small locality in the middle of 3 other big cities (Ekounou, Kodengu and Nkomo), with 3,000-4000 habitants. The first occupants of Oyak found it difficult to choose where it belonged and decided to give it the name Oyak. I had to immediately adapt to everything - nutrition, family’s activities, etc. - I was going to bed around 9pm and waking up at 6 am.

For my international experience to be successful and full of activities, I had the help of Professor Parfait Eloundou Enyegue who teaches in the Department of Development and Sociology at Cornell University. He put me in contact with Rigobert Matiké, one of his former students, who is now working with the MINADER. Mr. Matiké is now the Chief of Division and gives training to rural business and pastoral farmers. I still recall my first day in the office. I went to his office and I gave my name to his secretary then I told her that I have a meeting with him. I think she was shocked because of my age. She asked me twice if I was sure about the person that I was looking for. Then she went to his office and told Mr. Matiké that I was waiting outside and he asked her to let me in. We talked about what I will be doing and set a schedule where I was required to be in his office 3 times per week and the rest of the week I would go around different farms and markets, or meet with someone from his division for field trips at my convenience. When I was leaving that day, his secretary asked me some personal
questions that I answered and then she asked why I was interested in agriculture because usually it is something that only old people do in the city. I answered that there is no age to eat and thus there is no age for farming, she looked at me and smiled.

My first week was the toughest one because the transportation was not easy at all. The days that I had to go to his office, I was taking 3 taxis just to get there and the same number to come back and sometimes I would be spending one and a half hour waiting for the taxi. But as soon as I got there, work started. I spent half of my time reading agricultural books given by Mr. Matiké and the other half is what I enjoyed the most. I was going to different farms, mostly farms owned by families. Their main reason for farming was to feed their families and then use the rest to generate income by selling. I enjoyed going to the farms early in the morning and helping farmers. They all used traditional agriculture and fallowing but every time I asked the question about nitrogen fixation, most of them did not know what it was about, even though they were using it. I explained to them what nitrogen fixation is and I told them that organic matter, such as compost, composted manure, and cover crop, will not only increase nitrogen and other nutrient levels but will also improve soil structure and stimulate beneficial microorganisms. All of them started using more organic matter and they saw a big difference between the farms where organic matter was put and the ones that had none.

Saturday is the most exciting day of the week because it is the market day where people come with their products early in the morning even before the sun rises, then with their own buckets or tapestry they will lay their merchandize and start calling people to come and buy their product. No receipts are needed or any proof of selling, the only thing needed is your voice. Being a good talker and being old in the business will make you
have more customers than everyone else, no matter how hard the market is because sometimes the seller will decrease the price for the buyer and it benefits both of them. In the evening after the market is closed, the youth gathered together and played soccer until the sun set.

At the end of my 2 months there, I learned a lot from Mr. Matiké and the farmers and it was good to see how someone as young as I was, was listened to and asked for advice. More youth started getting involved in agriculture especially in my locality and I hope they are still doing it. Even if they stopped, I know I will go back one day and make them more involved or even find others who will teach agriculture and farming to the rest of the community.