It had always been a dream of mine to work with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Since I became interested in the intersection between agriculture and development I have signed up to receive a variety of publications by different organizations focused on improving rural livelihoods through agricultural improvements. In fact, I had previously searched for internships at the United Nations, but my search came up short since the better known opportunities are only available to graduate students. My initial attraction to working with these organizations was their international scope as well as their varied and interdisciplinary approach to assessing solutions to highly complex problems. I further became interested in the FAO when I learned about their gender mainstreaming initiatives across all aspects of agriculture. I happened along the internship opportunity when looking through the IARD website early during Spring semester. At first I thought that it was too late to apply but decided to inquire about the possibilities for the following summer. When Professor Hobbs expressed that they were still considering applications I decided to apply.

With 2014 as the international year of family farming, and with a project focused on non-timber forest products I figured that this would be the perfect time and project to work on with the FAO. A focus on both non-timber forest products and family farming would ideally mean working with many female farmers and on topics that directly deal with the improvement of rural livelihoods. To be frank, I was not expecting to receive and offer from the FAO, nevertheless from the project I was most interested in. However, after learning that I was offered the only internship position in Rwanda, I decided to decline another offer I had received through the Crops and Soil Science Department in CALS to work in China on organic vegetable production to accept this non-timber forest product internship.
I feel that my trip to Rwanda was quite indicative of my experience there and through my internship. During the first part of the summer I was in Ecuador working as the Ecotourism team leader for the IARD 4011 course. After completing my work there, I traveled to New York City where I spent two days prior to embarking on this life-changing adventure. I do not think that I had a full grasp of what I was really doing until my flight to Amsterdam was departing; I was going to a continent I had never stepped foot on before to work with people I had never met and without a single familiar face. Already on the way to Rwanda, it was too late for any second thoughts. As luck would have it, my flight from New York City to Amsterdam was delayed for an hour, the exact layover time I had until my flight to Kigali. Taking things with stride and attempting to see how I can make the circumstances favorable, I decided to step out of the airport and spend a day in Amsterdam. Making friends along the way, I was able to visit and get a small taste of Amsterdam. As a consequence of missing my direct flight to Kigali, I had to take a detour through Kenyatta airport in Nairobi, arriving a day later than expected in the land of a thousand hills. With the excitement and sleep deprivation, I do not recall having first impressions other than being extremely thankful that a colleague at the FAO, whom I told about my updated itinerary, made sure to have a driver waiting for me when I arrived.

My first days in Rwanda were spent getting acquainted to my nearest surroundings. My home for the first week was a rather well known hostel. Having relied too heavily on reviews, I assumed that this was going to be a pleasant stay. Overpriced and quite honestly in subpar conditions, I decided that I could not stay there for more than a week; I was originally hoping to be there for two weeks until I found permanent housing. Aside from the less than pleasant conditions, the people I met while in the hostel were absolutely fantastic. While I preferred to stay away from the loud and honestly obnoxious tourists, mostly European and Americans, I preferred to chat with the people working at the hostel. My first friend in Rwanda was a young man called Serge who worked at the hostel. He soon introduced me to more people whom I spent my mornings and afternoons with; it would be an understatement to say that the people were extremely warm and welcoming.

What is more, the Rwandans I met at the hostel were more than eager to speak to me. I realized that people were very familiar with the typical muzungu (translated to white person) foreigner, I was a bit of a wild care. With black curly hair, and tanner than most Europeans, many Rwandans did not know what exactly to think of me. Common questions that I received
during my stay were: “Can I touch your hair?” and “Are you half caste?” I believe this latter question came from people’s thoughts that I was half black and half white. An advantage from the ambiguity regarding my ethnicity was being able to play different roles throughout my stay; when it was convenient I was American and knew English, but sometimes I knew very little English and was from whatever South American country I felt like being that day. My ability to play different roles throughout my stay was a privilege I had never quite experienced and certainly made me reflect on my identity and how I presented myself to others; this type of reflection came at a key point in my life since I had just received my American citizenship this past February.

My first day at the FAO office could not have been more perfectly timed. The entire office was having a meeting, so I was able to meet all of the wonderful people I had the blessing to interact with. The meeting was conducted half in English and half in French. I must say that I was a little misled; I was told that French was certainly not necessary for my internship. While I certainly got by, some level of proficiency in French would have made the entire process much simpler, but what’s the fun in that? Interestingly enough, when I had done my research about Rwanda prior to applying to this internship, all information also said that English was another national language. Sure. It turns out this was a recent government initiative and not everyone in Rwanda, particularly outside the formal work force (with development and international organizations), spoke English. However, when it was spoken, French was used to supplement the gaps. Thankfully, I had decided to learn a tiny bit of French, which, even though it was at a proficiency of maybe a 3 year old, certainly helped. The first week in the FAO certainly gave me an insight that work occurs at a much slower pace than we are used to here in the United States. For example, it took about two days for me to meet with my advisor. This was not unique to work with the FAO, but it spanned the entire country and all sectors of life. If you were going to an a la carte restaurant, I hope you budgeted in about 2 hours to have your food served to you. It took about half a month, maybe a bit more, for me to adjust to the pace of work and life. Once I stopped getting annoyed at how long everything took, and generally how informal things were (even within the office), I became accustomed and simply adjusted.

After meeting my advisor and realizing that he had one of the lowest English speaking proficiencies in the office, I was honestly very scared; I did not want to waste my time or that of others’. My fright was somewhat soothed when I met the FAO country representative who
facilitated initial communication between me and my advisor. Prior to this meeting I was told by my advisor, Soter, to have a print out of my research plan. A little confused and thinking certain things had gotten lost in translation, I came up with a rough draft of what I thought I would be working within his project. Turns out there was nothing lost in translation, I was expected to conduct my own research. At this point, I feel there was some miscommunication between Cornell, DC, and Rwanda about the internship. First, I was placed under the supervision of an individual with very limited English, and everyone at the FAO office in Rwanda expected me to conduct my own research, without any guidance, that would still be helpful the larger non-timber forest product they were engaging in. Aside from miscommunication, this may have been odd timing, since Soter was just finishing one of this projects on Bamboo but was looking to start new projects on two other forest products, honey and mushrooms. Given my initial interest in mushrooms, I was tasked with doing research that would facilitate his work. Frankly, I did not start work until after the first week and a half. I was shocked, confused, intimidated, and honestly a little irritated on several fronts; I did not have housing for the following week and I had no idea what I was doing…or so I thought.

After securing housing independently from any assistance, I began to brainstorm. I did initial research, both literature and on the ground and decided that the most feasible and potentially most applicable and useful way to approach this study would be to focus on the different stakeholders present throughout the mushroom value chain. My first job consisted of mapping out the value chain of mushrooms (inputs needed to retail sales) and determining the different organizations and businesses that were the “big players” throughout the value chain. I decided to focus on three main categories of stakeholders: community organizations, businesses, and international organizations. As a result, I mapped out the value chain of mushrooms the different stakeholders throughout it, developed profiles for each stakeholder (based on persona interviews and correspondence as well as literature review) and from this analyzed their influence on the production and consumption of mushrooms. On a larger scale, I included my assessment of the mushroom value chain and in my final paper included what I thought the FAO should focus on, given their institutional constraints and the “mushroom scene” in Rwanda. I also decided to include some information on the potential partnerships that could be created throughout the value chain and what was the added value of the different organizations as well as their limitations and challenges. One of the most interesting things I found throughout my
research was that much attention was given to production, but certainly not enough to consumption.

The most challenging aspect of the internship was the fact that I had to forge my own path and do so in a way that would be beneficial to the people I was working with. This work required self-everything: motivation, discipline, organization, planning, and much more. For example, I had to contact the different organizations, I had to plan my transportation, and figure out the basic logistics of the interview. Saying that the guidance I was given was limited would truly be an understatement. An individual interested in this internship would need to be comfortable with discomfort and doing pretty much everything on their own. I would not recommend this work to anyone who is dependent, needs guidance (even if limited), requires oversight, is not self-motivated or driven, and does not have a thick and tough skin. I have to be honest in that I was even surprised at myself; if I was told how the premise of the internship prior to accepting, I may have very well decided to engage in the China program lead by Professor Mt. Pleasant. It is quite impossible for me to describe the huge learning curve this internship had on my personal and professional self. Though, I must stress that the levels of personal and professional development that I received were a result of my own tenacity and because I made the internship what it was.

Another fantastic takeaway from this experience was a shift in my interests. Originally I had the misconception that I was mostly interested in the production aspect of agricultural development and of that I wanted to work in research concerning agronomy and farmer-choice. After my summer working with the FAO I realized that my true interests lay in project management and development. While the research aspect of the internship was great and incredibly interesting, my favorite part was the analysis of the information I found and assessing where the FAO should go from there. I especially enjoyed thinking about how the FAO should approach their future forest products projects given the different stakeholders in the value chain. Thankfully my realization did not come too late, and I was able to take two graduate courses on finance and management of the national and international public and NGO sector this Fall semester. Needless to say, these two courses have been my favorite and I am planning on continuing my interest in project management during this upcoming semester and summer.

Aside from the professional, personal, and academic revelations I had during this trip, my time in Rwanda showed me a beautiful country and wonderful culture. When I would tell people
that I was spending my summer in Rwanda, reactions were split between: “Where is that?” and “Have you not watched Hotel Rwanda?” While I was more than aware that the Rwandan genocide occurred twenty years ago and I knew that the country had progressed incredibly from 1994, I was certainly a little nervous as to how the country’s history was portrayed, still showed, and how it was talked about. The progress that Rwanda made in the past twenty years is unbelievable.

After visiting Rwanda, it is hard to process that just twenty years prior the country was devastated by a genocide that resulted in the death of half of its population. For the first couple of weeks, I could not think of anything other than how far the country appeared to have come. Every hill I went to and every landmark I visited I tried to put in perspective and think about how it was in 1994. What happened in Rwanda was an unimaginable and incomprehensible tragedy. The reconstruction of the country and of the people is beyond amazing. While this is so, the most incredible part is that Rwandans were very opened to the history of their country. Instead of moving forward and never looking back, Rwandans were opened to speaking of the past and indicating how the country and its citizens have learned from it to collectively create a new society. Given such a dark moment in history, it would be naïve to state that there are no ethnic, political, or social tensions in the country. Rather, I think it is safe to say that the country has progressed incredibly and that while tensions do exist, the country and its people are doing their best to construct a fantastic society and future for Rwanda.

Returning to the United States after such an intense and wonderful experience was surreal. Everything worked at a faster pace, and for the first couple of times I went out to eat I was honestly amazed at the speed of the service. While coming back made me realize I missed home, I have my moments in which I crave some sambaza (tiny fried fish from Kivu lake) and cooked banana. There are also moments in which I answer with a morakoze cyanne instead of a thank you or a urichire instead of a you’re welcome. Other times, I find myself looking up videos of Intore dancers or humming along to Toto’s lyrics “I miss the rains down in Africa”, but more importantly, in times of difficulty I remember what this internship taught me: I can do anything.