Abroad Experiences

Unlike most students in the major, my time abroad was not a continuous 8 weeks in one country or with one specific program. Instead, my requirement was fulfilled with three smaller trips; two to Central America and one to the Indian sub-continent. While eight weeks may provide the perfect duration to intimately get to know an area’s culture and landscape, I contend that numerous short trips also are beneficial in understanding other’s ways of life and other cultures. Because I was fortunate enough to go to three places, I feel as though I have gained additional insight through the ability to compare and contrast the history, agricultural practices, and development quandaries in each location.

The first international trip of my college career was during sophomore year. A friend informed me of an agricultural service-learning trip going to Guatemala that she would be leading. Coffee production, from the tree to the cup, was the focus of the trip. Managing a café here on campus and harboring a deep seated love for the drink, I knew I wanted to go. We would be living and working in the homes of coffee farmers who had recently started a collective. Half of the trip was oriented in helping the farmers with their daily work: weeding the fields, picking the ripe coffee cherries, preparing soil for plantings. The other half was spent learning about different aspects of the cultivation, production, and marketing of coffee. The newly formed cooperative consisted of roughly 20 farmers and was expected to expand in size due to the interest among local farmers who were originally skeptical. A small NGO, ‘As Green As It Gets”, which was comprised of only 4 full time staff and a fluctuating number of part time / volunteer positions filled by transient young adults traveling through the country, had come to San Miguel de Escobar a few years before and helped the farmers coalesce around the concept of collective production and marketing. In the years since the cooperative’s inception, it has grown to include roughly 20 farmers and has expanded from the just coffee production and marketing to cosmetics derived from avocado oil and fashionable handbags from burlap sacks. Coffee from the cooperative can now be sold throughout Canada and the United States, and some permanent contracts have been signed with
American consumers. Unlike some cooperatives, As Green As It Gets rejects the organic and fair trade certifications and instead relies on its marketing to convey it’s environmentally conscious and community empowerment commitments. The finished product, coffee which was been grown, picked, pulped, dried, roasted, and ground in the community, is marketed with the name of the farmer who grew the beans, establishing the direct relationship of the consumer and the producer.

My second experience abroad was initiated by an international agriculture class I was enrolled in. The course, IARD 4010/6010: Experiencing Latin America was a year-long course with a field component during winter break that visited Chiapas, Mexico. The first half of the course focused on providing the historical context of the region and painting the picture of life in Chiapas today. Relevant socio-political history, economic policies, and nutritional status of the populace were all studied to help create the framework in which to analyze the problems plaguing the state today. Bisecting the course was the field visit in the December 2010/January 2011 which sought to add first person perspective and interactions into life in the south of Mexico. The spring semester was designed around a large research project that participants of the field component were required to complete.

Chiapas is the southernmost state of Mexico and embodies the complexity of factors that compound development work. Endowed with numerous natural resources and part of the largest rainforest in North America, the region is highly heterogeneous, both in terms of topographic variability and social structure. Unlike the Northern regions of Mexico where the indigenous cultures have been historically decimated or integrated within the larger Mexican society, numerous ethnic groups have remained intact and retained a greater degree of their traditional ways of life in the southern states. These minorities, descendants of the powerful Maya civilization, are today the some of the poorest, most under-educated and malnourished people in all of Mexico.

The ratification of NAFTA, the free trade agreement between North American countries, and other national policies that have solidified the market economy throughout Mexico have undermined the identify of these minorities groups and has exacerbated marginalization of these ethnic groups. One of the most important implications of trade
bloc was the liberalization of maize, an crop endemic to Mexico and one that remains integral in the to the lives of rural people throughout the country. Without restrictions between the highly subsidized industrial agriculture of the USA and the production in Mexico, small-scale farmers throughout the country were unable to find earn the same market price for their crop due the inundation of cheap corn coming from north of the border. Frustration and anger with the injustices imposed by capitalist policies came to a head in 1994, when an armed social movement of mostly indigenous peoples rebelled and occupied a few small towns claiming ‘Ya basta,’ or ‘enough is enough.’ The dissidents demanded autonomy and control of local resources. Although the armed resistance was suppressed quickly, resistance to national policies continues and indigenous peoples aligned with the movement have been afforded some autonomy and cool disregard from the central government. Today the movement is transitioning, and the direct democracy approach is being tested against the power of globalization.

The field component of this class tried to create an itinerary which exposed us to these different factors. Land tenure, efficacy of governmental subsidies and development programs, externalities of liberalized trade of agricultural products, positive and negatives of (eco-) tourism, implications of the social movement, environmental conservation/preservation initiatives were all touched upon in this trip. This complexity created by the inextricable impacts of these factors allowed for students from a diverse array of majors to find a relevant topic to pursue for future investigation and research in the next semester. The close relations we established with influential people that were sympathetic to the Zapatista cause allowed us to have access to the communities and seats of local government in the autonomous regions of the highlands. We were with the southern Mexico’s director of the Kellogg Foundation, a major donator and facilitator for development projects in the nation. We met distinguished scientists that were creating solutions to the rampant malnourishment, researchers who were trying to catalogue endemic biodiversity for preservation purposes and local religious leaders and community leaders who were central in retaining cultural identify and tradition. This trip created unforgettable opportunities to talk with salt of the earth farmers, masked indigenous people rejecting the Mexican authority and trying to establish an egalitarian
self-governance structure, and concerned Mexican citizens trying to satisfy the development needs of the marginalized while respecting their culture and identity.

India

The final installment to my undergraduate international experience saga was rooted in the counter-part class to the IARD 4010: Latin America Class, IARD 6020: Agriculture in Developing Nations. This course has the same structure as 4010; two semesters with a field trip during winter break. Unlike the Mexico course, which placed more of an emphasis on the social aspects of development, the India course examined the agricultural sector of Indian and studied the deficiencies and potential solutions through science and technology. I was a member of the ‘Rural Infrastructure’ and ‘Agricultural Systems’ groups, which focused on the agronomic and infrastructure component of the agricultural complex. Our visits in the subcontinent captured all levels of Indian society: we visited universities with missions very similar to our nation’s land grant schools; we talked with numerous NGOs that were instrumental in mobilizing local communities and advocating for social causes; we met communities groups that have been successful in local governance and utilizing governmental schemes; we visited research institutions where cutting edge research was being done to create an agricultural system that is better adapted for the current and future climate; we met with public agencies and officials to assess the role and impact the state and central government’s role in development work.

A central problem that my group sought to study was the transmission of agricultural knowledge from the cities and research centers to the small scale farmers living in regions removed from extension agents or agricultural resources. Market information and pricing of crops is an essential component in ensuring a farmer gets a fair price for his product and influences the farmer’s decisions as to what he wants to plants. Often, middlemen who would transport the product from the country to the market get away with undercutting payments to the farmers and turning a profit at the market. A major emphasis of the agricultural universities we visited was on extension and the dissemination of market prices and other question a farmer may have. We visited a farmer call center that serves as a hotline for any agriculture questions that farmers may have. The respondents spoke numerous languages, were well educated, and took calls
from all over India. Another professor who lectured us was explaining his work predicting market prices for different commodities to help farmers plan out their crop choices.

The proper role of genetically altered crops is a debate worldwide, but it was interesting to hear arguments on both sides of the issue from the Indian perspective. Today, no genetically altered food crop is allowed in the Indian market. However, parties advocating for their adopting have seeds developed and are petitioning for regulations to be relaxed. This camp of people views the crops as another tool which can be utilized to maximize yields and demonstrate increased resistance to pests. Others pointed to the unknown health and environmental ramifications, the monopolies of markets by large agricultural commodities, and lament over the loss of traditional varieties as evidence against GM crops.

My Indian experience was much more explicitly focused on agriculture than the Mexico trip. I personally felt that the India journey was much more institutional, and was much more focused on developing scientific and technologic solutions to the problems on the subcontinent. In Mexico, I felt that the trip was much more oriented in exposing the layers of conflict and complexity of the problems while interacting with local people. I consider the Mexico trip more social science oriented and the India trip more focused on utilizing the scientific method and research for developing solutions.

All three trips were highly educational and provided formative experiences which have helped mold my perspective of the world and role of international development. The Mexico and Guatemala trips helped to reveal some of the policies that create resentment towards America. In the Mexico case, intentional liberalization of corn has undermined countless small scale farmers throughout the countryside and has dampened the strength of their agricultural sector. In Guatemala, the criticisms of the fair trade and organic certification schemes have made me conscious of the power of marketing and branding and have prompted more skepticism in my analysis of products. The magnitude of the population on the sub-continent and the need to feed so many people has softened my views on genetically engineered seeds and the large scale agriculture production model. Although I do not agree fully that these tools represent a panacea for India, I think they
have a role in the future of agriculture in India and are a necessary component for addressing food security in a country soon to be the most populated in the world.

The friends I made and interactions I experienced while abroad are the most valuable things I will take away from each country. It was through conversations with my Guatemalan, Mexican, and Indian friends that I really came to understand and appreciate their respective cultures and way of life. Through mutual curiosity about each other’s home, family, and traditions, national and cultural identities were temporarily suspended and for a few minutes the common emotions and experiences of being human were raw and exposed. It is in those glimpses of universal fraternity that have really cemented my desire to work internationally and do my part to create systems that meet the needs of the people without sacrificing the integrity of the natural environment.

People all over the world are struggling to make ends meet. For some, each day is a new battle of survival. Throughout these three trips and via my interactions and experiences with such a diverse set of farmers, public officials, researchers, and international development works, my fears of a parsimonious, selfish world have been assuaged. Negativity about the world’s future is omnipresent and is often sensationalized to overshadow the positive contributions being made by people like those I have met through my travels. While the negativity is not wholly fabricated, my travels and experiences have dispelled a significant portion of my doubt and have diminished my sometimes jaded and sardonic attitude towards development work and people’s motives. There are good people everywhere making bon fide efforts to concurrently achieve access to the universal human rights, agricultural sustainability, and the preservation of the natural functions which provide the hospitable conditions we take for granted.

International development demands a conscientious planning and respect for local traditions and values. People with good intentions have implemented policies that have widened the gap between the haves and the have-nots, contributed to the erosion of local culture, and have not taken the local knowledge, wants or desires, into consideration. Early works of international development contained an inherent bias towards western ideals. Today, the development agenda has evolved to be more participatory and inclusive. However, vestiges of top-down unilateral development agenda still exist in
many organizations. Through my travels and exposure to a host of development agencies, I have developed a personal list of characteristics an enterprise must have to be effective in effecting change that is beneficial to all parties. This checklist will influence where I seek employment, who I want to associate and collaborate with, and which organizations I will choose to support. The ability to analyze an organization’s intent and efficacy is one of the most important skills I have learned during my time abroad. There are countless organizations that are doing development work, but some are managed poorly and the methodology used is not effective in creating the desired solutions. The ability to sift through organizations and find one that reflects my values and idea of development work is one of the most important things I have learned while abroad, and one that I will continue to expand upon as I pursue a career that will, at least indirectly, be applicable to international development.