

Non-traditional student involvement in sustainable development

Recently I really enjoyed a visit from the Permanent Representative of Kenya to the United Nations, Ambassador Macharia Kamau to Utah Valley University (UVU). He gave a very engaging and encouraging presentation on the United Nation's initiative on Sustainable Development Goals. The VIP guest was hosted by UVU students, myself included on February 9, 2017. I took a lot from his presentation because it helped me understand how intergovernmental organizations like the UN view the problem of poverty, and what strategies they are enacting to fight the noble fight of poverty eradication. I connected with what the Kenyan ambassador said because I myself have been involved in many different kinds of development work in the third world over the past 8 years and currently run 2 projects in Uganda. I am grateful for the Ambassadors visit, and will be sure to apply some of the ideas and concepts he presented on in my own work.

I originally went to Africa when I was 17 years old and I visited Ethiopia on a humanitarian trip. We helped the community with building a school, latrines, and did many health out reaches especially focusing on AIDS/HIV prevention. This experience totally changed my life and my view on development, and our role as fortunate people who have access to money in the world. Shortly that trip I traveled to Peru for another humanitarian trip and helped build another school, plant trees, and do lots of community health education.

Those experiences really left an impact on me, and I knew that development work was something I would want to be involved in for the rest of my life. A few years later I dedicated my summer to work in India as a volunteer with HELP International and that was an incredible experience because I was able to live in Hyderabad full time and lead many different projects. This was the first time I really got involved in full on grassroots development, working exclusively with local community leaders who are already dedicated and working on projects. This locally lead model of development using little western influence and money began to really shape my philosophy on development.



Matthew James in Africa representing HELP International

While in India I partnered with a local man named Vamsi and we began to organize and build a primary school in an extremely rural tribal village where there was absolutely no access to education. I tried my hardest but unfortunately shortly after I returned to America the project fell apart. This failure really shaped my philosophy on development because I learned the incredible valuable lesson that you can never help a community with something they do not want help with. Looking back, I realized that Vamsi and I never actually asked the community if they wanted a school. Vamsi, being a teacher, and I myself, being an individual who grew up in the western world, forced our own ideas of what we thought the community needed, rather than asking. It is really no wonder it failed...the community had no buy in or interest. The rural

villagers we were trying to help were more focused on providing lives necessities like food and soap, not literacy or arithmetic.



Matthew James in India

Learning from my mistakes, and eager to continue working in the third world, I took a job with HELP International to run their Uganda program. Uganda, my favorite place in the world and I have been able to visit the Pearl of Africa 3 times since 2015. In Uganda, I continued working with local communities on the grassroots level with the goals to real, sustainable progress towards happier, healthier, wealthier, and more educated communities.

While being a country director in Uganda the first summer for HELP International, I met a woman that was working on starting an orphan school and began working with her a lot and eventually together we raised the funds and got the community help to build a school. Two and a

half years later it now has 140 orphans, 60 of them are who are totally homeless and we care for on a daily basis providing food, shelter, and clothing as well as an education and vocational skills like sewing and carpentry.

Another project that I have started is a small business entrepreneurship project in another part of Uganda where another very good friend of mine named Moses organizes communities into groups and teaches them how to save money on a regular basis, invest that money in themselves, and start small businesses. It has been very successful and we have had dozens of individuals become self-sufficient on their own my businesses, as well as groups work together to serve their communities and start larger scale projects. We currently have over 3,000 U.S dollars saved between 11 groups. In an effort to make the project sustainable, and not reliant on money fundraised form America, we are now launching the next phase in the project. As of this May, the project now includes Moses becoming a “middle man”, buying and transporting crops from our farmers to market places. This provides members of our groups an honest wage for their harvest, and provides a source of income for out project lead. The truck was purchased with a loan form U.S donors, with that loan being paid back to through donations to the orphanage. This innovative and sustainable model is something that I have never encountered with any other NGO, and we never would have been able to make this happen if I myself was too involved, or didn't allow local leaders to have a say.

The lesson that I have learned most in development is that it needs to happen on a very grassroots level and it needs to happen in very very close cooperation with key community leaders who are genuinely good people. This is something that is incredibly difficult to do, and takes someone a lot of time and energy and money to find individuals and communities that you can actually work with, but it is worth it. Otherwise, NGO's just end up dumping money and energy into projects that will never become sustainable and will often do more damage than good. I have been blessed to have found two people that work very hard and are people I can properly trust.

Another very important lesson that we as Americans, or really anyone coming from the first world into the third world needs to understand, is that we view money very differently. When you are in Uganda or wherever else you may be working you need to learn to view money the same as them. Ten U.S dollars is not a lot to us, but it's 35,000 Ugandan Shillings and that could cover a Ugandan's transportation costs for 2 weeks. If you start throwing around money

left and right they will not respect you, and it will create a huge class barrier between you and the community and you will not be able to accomplish meaningful work, especially without being taken advantage of.

Overall I think it's incredibly important to immerse yourself in a culture and ask a lot more questions and most importantly, listen! As a humanitarian aid worker or an NGO, you need to be in the background and really empower locals to help them help their own communities. We ought to only act as catalytic force that helps good people do the good they already would have. In the end they are the only ones that truly know how to fix their own communities, and we need to trust them. As a non-traditional student here at UVU, I am ever grateful for my universities' focus on engaged learning and my professors encouragement to be expand my education beyond the classroom.

Matt James, UVU student