An immersive summer experience

As part of my fellowship for the Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship, this summer I spent eight weeks in the Sacred Valley of Peru working for the Andean Alliance for Sustainable Development. Given that this was my first official internship off Middlebury’s protective campus, I got to experience a range of life and work situations that taught me truly valuable lessons for my future endeavors.

The importance of trusting relationships

One theme that emerged early on was the need for continuity and consistence from the NGOs working in the region. There have been too many cases where foreign groups came in to help local communities with a range of projects, took some months or even years to carry these out, and left once they were ‘done’. While some undoubtedly left a positive impact behind, they have also kept reinforcing the idea that NGO workers are only transient members of these communities. The inconsistency of faces now makes it more difficult for those who plan on staying long term, like the admirably dedicated founders of the Andean Alliance. To address this issue, every time we met with community members, my three summer team members and I were asked to always refer back to our leaders, the people who stayed around to keep our projects going even after we left. The number of personal connections that Aaron Ebner, Adam Stiegltiz and Kat Gordon altogether have established over the last 5 years is one of the most essential elements of any community development project. True social entrepreneurs first need to learn how to listen to and understand the people they are working with; however, there needs to be a great amount of trust between the parties involved for such dialogue to take place. Given the locals’ previous experience with foreign NGOs, they tend to open up and talk honestly only after a group has proven that their projects are long term, pragmatic and aligned with the local ways of living. I was impressed to see how the AASD has already managed to gain a reputation in the town of Calca, their home base, and the larger Cuzco region. They have also established an NGO network that aims to foster collaboration between domestic and international organizations in the region, so as to create a more consistence, and hence trustworthy NGO presence in the Sacred Valley.

Project sustainability through community involvement

Another crucial lesson I learnt concerns the level of community involvement needed for any successful development project. The AASD has been working on their greenhouse projects from day one onwards, and have gathered some truly valuable insights about these initiatives. One time they were offered a grant large enough to enable the construction of more than 30 greenhouses at once, a grant that could have eased their fundraising efforts tremendously. However, the money would have come with strings attached: a time frame that could not have possibly allowed the locals to build these structures on their own time. AASD decided to reject the offer, because by this time they had realized that any newly built greenhouse can only last long and serve a community well, if it is the locals themselves who end up building it. The role of NGOs, like AASD, is only complementary: they are there to facilitate the process by providing the hard-to-find plastic covers, the initial seeds and workshops on planting and seeding techniques. At the same time, the rocks for the walls and the hands that put them together have to come
from the local community, otherwise, as studies have shown, despite all economic and health benefits these greenhouses get often abandoned. It is a sense of true ownership from the communities that keeps these new assets alive.

The importance of economic incentives

While AASD has worked on a range of projects including the NGO network, the greenhouse constructions, and women’s empowerment though the promotion of traditional textiles, my job was to conduct research about ecological agriculture opportunities in the region. The AASD has realized that there are already a number of ecological producers in and around Calca, however, their produce is not yet differentiated at local markets. The terms ‘organic’ and ‘ecological’ do not mean much to local consumers who only see higher prices on seemingly identical peppers, tomatoes and potatoes. Therefore my job was to figure out what avenues would be best suited to promote such ecological produce. My teammates and I visited several EcoFerias, or organic farmers’ markets, where we interviewed sellers and customers alike to find out whether this would be a scalable avenue. We talked to restaurant and hotel owners in Calca and Cuzco, interviewed local agricultural organizers, and the Peruvian manager of the international AgroEco project. We concluded that it is definitely the hospitality industry that has the greatest potential to promote ecological food, as foreigners tend to appreciate and seek out sustainable food more than locals do at the moment. It is at medium to high-end restaurants where local ecological produce can receive the price it deserves for its contribution to environmental and human health alike. Starting with two or three restaurant first, the AASD now can pilot their program: organize some of the more motivated, organically certified producers around Calca, and hammer out the details around the ordering and delivery of their produce. Once this program gains momentum and their farmers start receiving the monetary equivalent of the extra labor and time they have invested in their work, more producers will switch back to this once dominant, traditional way of agriculture. While there is a lot to say about the underlying issues of our governing capitalist system, using such economic incentives for the benefit of the environment and human health is possibly the most potent tool in the hands of any development agency at the moment. AASD also hopes that as more and more medium and high-end restaurants get on board with the project, the supply of ecological produce will increase to the extent that the less affluent local population will get access to these healthier products as well.

Building on human capital

Another realization I had concerned our work methods and team dynamics. First of all, without a reliable internet connection I was quickly forced to redesign my usual researching techniques. When we got introduced to our ‘Team Peru 2013’ challenge, my initial reaction was to Google what has been done in other parts of the world to promote ecological agriculture. The frustration that came with our consistently failed attempts to connect to the ‘global library of ideas’ made us turn our attention to our immediate surroundings instead. We realized that all the information we needed was right in front of us: guarded but not hidden by the people around us. So we set out to interview as many locals as possible to hear their views about our big idea. Using IDEO’s ‘Business Model Canvas’, we categorized them into potential customer segments and key partners, and kept notes on the emerging themes we gathered from all our interactions. Soon our walls were covered with pink-blue-yellow post-its, and it was time to distill our findings down to one main, complex, but coherent idea. (In our case this was to build our pilot restaurant
supply model.) To get to this conclusion, therefore, we used hardly any technology in the usual sense, but relied a lot more on the human capital around us: the knowledge, experience and critical feedback of the local stakeholders involved. We had to face a number of challenges, of course, as life in the Sacred Valley seemed to follow a much slower tempo, meetings were forgotten, family situations took precedence and so on, but we eventually managed to adjust to our local context.

Another aspect to the same idea of human capital came into play within our own working group. I realized that it is in intense working-living situations like ours that we can best practice our empathy, communication and conflict resolution skills. It is easy to make yourself understood when you share a lot of history with the people around you, but it is a lot more challenging to find common ground when team members are coming from diverse backgrounds. Sometimes it is inherent cultural differences, sometimes personal experiences that stand in the way of clear communication, but in any case, there are many ways to overcome these obstacles. The bigger the challenge, the greater the reward. I learnt that addressing differences requires a great deal of honesty and sensitivity, but it is essential to all fruitful collaboration between people.

Read, reflect, and integrate

Adjusting to a much slower pace of work came with its advantages as well: I finally had more time to delve into some of the books on my reading list. E.F.Schumacher’s *Small is beautiful*, Jeffrey Sachs’ *The end of poverty*, and Mark Tercek’s *Nature’s fortune* helped me tremendously to improve my systems-thinking approach to the issues around me – which is probably my number one learning objective with any major task. I also realized how crucial reflection is to any learning process. It is not until the moment we connect our new lessons with our previous experiences that we truly can grasp the meaning of new wisdoms. Sometimes this means that I have to translate wonderfully eloquent lines into five-word sentences, other times I have to draw a concept map with funny-looking ‘clouds’ and ‘thunderbolts’, or most preferably, I have to just take a couple of hours, a pen and a journal and let these ideas run rampant. However, at the end of the day, it is only in action that our ideas are tested, so I need to maintain a conscious effort to integrate these newly embraced ideas into my work at Middlebury and beyond. Some concepts that kept me thinking included the importance of freedom for human creativity in any labor, the conflict between perceived economic development and the consequent loss of personal connections and ownership over jobs, and one of our greatest human vices, our inability to delay gratification.

My internship with the Andean Alliance and my overall experience in Peru this summer has given me truly valuable insights into the world of development. I could not be more thankful to the AASD but even more importantly the Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship for their incredible support and mentorship. This fellowship, that has and will shape my life in many remarkable ways, is no more than the people behind it, to whom I will be forever immensely grateful.