Rwanda, Human Rights, and Development

By Andrew Dusek

This past winter, Andrew Dusek who graduated with a minor in IDS and a major in Political Science, had the privilege of traveling to Rwanda as part of an international human rights delegation with an organization called Global Youth Connect. GYC is dedicated to empowering individuals from around the world to advance human rights through youth activism. As one of fifteen delegates from North America, Andrew participated alongside his Rwandan counterparts in cross-cultural human rights learning workshops, volunteer service activities, and sustained human rights activism while engaging with grassroots NGOs, policy makers, and other key stakeholders through advocacy.

One of the key areas of focus was the complicated relationship between human rights and development. In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, the country was economically and morally decimated. Survivors were left with the daunting task of rebuilding a country that had failed to protect them from harm. Worst of all, they were forced to do so alongside many of the same people who had killed their friends and families.

Today, Rwanda has truly risen from the ashes. With record high primary school attendance, a progressive national parliament with a female majority, and investments in new technologies opening up the country to growing Internet accessibility, e-commerce, and foreign direct investment, Rwanda is a paragon of political and economic development in Africa. Yet there are still many areas that need improvement. Issues such as juvenile justice, the rights of indigenous peoples, and the status of refugees continue to cause concern.

During his three-week visit, Andrew volunteered for an NGO in the capital city of Kigali called Health Development Initiative. Although HDI is dedicated to improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare through advocacy, education, and training, the organization’s work extends far beyond the field of health care. Andrew did field research and created outreach materials to educate key stakeholders in the Rwandan government and the development community on the rights of a historically marginalized, indigenous group known as the Community of Potters. He traveled to remote villages to speak with local leaders about issues ranging from adequate housing and the importance of agriculture to personal security and access to health insurance. The stigmatization that the Potters suffer prevents them from identifying as true Rwandans and makes integrating into society nearly impossible. As a result, the Potters remain isolated and ignored.

The group presented their findings to the district mayor of Karongi, who reports directly to President Kagame. The mayor was very impressed and said that he would devote more time and resources to helping the Potters in his district. They also met with officials from the U.S. Embassy, UNDP, and the Rwandan Ministry of Youth who shared what they were doing to further the country’s development. Although Andrew’s group was encouraged by the positive responses to their work, they were constantly reminded of the limited resources and bureaucratic challenges that inhibit progress.

“Rwanda is called ‘the land of a thousand hills,’ and it often feels like development work in the country is one uphill struggle after another,” states Andrew, “but, as I’ve learned from my time aiding the struggle towards lasting peace and sustainable development, sometimes it’s important to stand back and marvel at...”
Kimber and a young friend in a village in Nakaseke District, Uganda.

Kimber Haddix McKay, Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology, is working with students and Ugandan colleagues on a study of disease prevalence and health seeking behavior in central Uganda this spring. Two UM students (undergraduate Ann Tezak, who returned to MT from UG last Fall, and graduate student Laura Stanley, who is currently in UG) are working with the traditional healer organization PROMETRA, and will contribute to the study based on their research on traditional healing practices and the interplay between traditional and allopathic healing systems.

The program for this summer is already at full enrollment so students should be sure to contact Keith Bosak or Laura Caplins early for next summer’s program. While the cost of such programs seems daunting at first glance, there are a variety of aid options available to students interested. Student aid applies to summer study abroad programs and there are a variety of scholarship aid resources available to any prospective enrollees.

In cooperation with Asociacion Nuestros Ahijados, Peter Koehn, Phyllis Ngai, their twin 13-year-old boys Justin and Jason, and 34 other members of the UCC church spent their spring break building houses for needy residents of Antigua in Guatemala. While in Guatemala, Peter also explored internship opportunities for IDS students.
The most powerful teachers I have found in India are my women teachers; gentle, statuesque beings wielding machetes. For three months I am interning at Vanastree, a collective of seed-keeping women who market and sell value-added garden products. I found it funny that, when researching my new Indian home of Sirsi, Karnataka, it’s qualities resembled Missoula’s on paper. Sirsi is about the same population size and density as Missoula, located in one of the least populated regions in India in the midst of a wealth of natural forest resources and with the whole slew of human and resource rights issues attached along with it.

First, a little back round on where I am interning. Vanastree means ‘women of the forest’ in Kannada, the language of the Karnataka state of southwest India. As a collective, the Vanastree women each keep a home-garden, save and share indigenous and open-pollinated seeds with each other, and work out of an office in Sirsi town packaging various products that they brand with the Vanastree label. Their products vary from spices to craft items. This work helps empower these women in the confines of the traditional woman’s role in rural India by giving them an external source of income and a social support network.

When I embarked on this internship, I hoped that the forest would teach me about development and that the plants in the area would teach me about the people. I’m a passionate horticulturalist at heart so instead of starting with the people, I wanted to start with their surroundings in order to study how human growth burgeoned out of their environment. What I came to find in Sirsi is a town of people living peacefully with the environment, with no abject poverty and no industrial agriculture in this almost wholly farmland landscape. How could this be? In India? How had so many supposedly necessary evils of development escaped the grasp of a town whose size ended up feeling much larger than Missoula, but whose people shared the same similar type of community?

I had arrived on a doorstep of rural development. Sirsi town does not appear rural by any means. All of the modern conveniences are here in this bustling town but slip 20 minutes away from the congested downtown roads, and you’ll find yourself in the midst of areca-nut plantations and rice paddy fields with villages comprised of entire lineages of family members; truly rural living. It is in these villages where the Vanastree women are sprinkled, growing organic vegetables and holding reverence for healthy crop seeds. There is a level of sacredness in relation to the environment and the natural landscape. Even small children freely spout out the names of every flower, tree, and garden vegetable.

During my time in India I have come in contact with rural-dwelling Indians, city-dwelling Indians, and rural Indians who have found themselves in urban centers. They each make distinctions about themselves and their ways of life. Village children have told me that urban peoples do not agree with their rural lifestyle; city-dwellers have relayed that villagers are too ‘stuck in their ways’. They are two different worlds; the rural and urban India. Differences are held onto with a strong sense of identity. Yet because of communication and entertainment technology, these worlds are increasingly in communication with each other. Daily, people in Sirsi and the surrounding villages would talk of the flock of people moving into the cities and away from rural, agricultural lives. Yet all of the former villagers that I met who had found lives in urban centers spoke of hopes for a rural renaissance; a return to a slower, land-based life with extended family units.

I cannot even begin to predict the direction which rural development will take in these areas. I can only share the sentiments of a rural renaissance.

(Racheal Shear is an IDS Minor who graduated in 2010 with a major in Environmental Studies)
NEW IDS PEACE CORP PREP PROGRAM

The University of Montana, in partnership with the United States Peace Corps, is pleased to announce the first Peace Corps Preparatory Program to be instated at a public university. Beginning in Spring 2011, students at the University of Montana can earn a Peace Corps certificate demonstrating completion of preparatory coursework through participation in the International Development Studies minor. Preparatory coursework will aid in increasing volunteer effectiveness and better equip students for international service.

The existing International Development Studies minor provides a strong framework for the general Peace Corps certificate program. “We are deeply honored that the Peace Corps has recognized the instructional expertise and efforts of IDS faculty members by designating The University of Montana as its first public university to offer Peace Corps Prep certification,” said Peter Koehn, IDS program director. “Given the amazing degree of interest in service in low-income countries that exists on this campus and the doors that open upon completion of a PC assignment, I expect that many more UM students will elect to complete the IDS minor and one of the new Peace Corps Prep track options.” In cooperation with Tenly Snow, the Peace Corps strategic representative on campus, IDS is also developing opportunities for students to complete additional coursework to prepare for service in the Peace Corps’ special assignment areas: environment, health and HIV/AIDS, youth and community development, business and information communication technology, agriculture/forestry, education, and civic engagement.

As the third school in the nation and the first public university to introduce a Peace Corps Prep Program, the University of Montana is a natural choice for a preparatory program. Historically the University of Montana has produced 765 volunteers; currently there are 33 active Peace Corps volunteers. “Peace Corps is excited to welcome The University of Montana to the Peace Corps Prep Program,” said B.J. Whetstine, Peace Corps national outreach specialist. “This new initiative only serves to strengthen an already thriving partnership. UM already offers two Peace Corps Master’s International Programs. Peace Corps Prep will extend new opportunities for students to complete additional coursework to prepare for service in the Peace Corps’ special assignment areas: environment, health and HIV/AIDS, youth and community development, business and information communication technology, agriculture/forestry, education, and civic engagement.

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UPCOMING IDS CORE COURSES

Summer 2011:
GPHY 141S Geography of World Regions
PSCI 463 Development Administration (Mexico Study Abroad Program).

Fall 2011:
ANTH 329 Social Change in Non-Western Societies
COMM 251X International and Development Communication
GPHY 141S Geography of World Regions
PSCI 463 Development Administration
SOCI 170 Intro to Rural and Environmental Change
SOCI 371 Social Change and Global Environment

What is International Development Studies?

International Development Studies is an interdisciplinary field of study focusing on the interconnected processes of social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental change taking place in low-income countries and disadvantaged regions of wealthy countries. Coursework in the minor emphasizes a global perspective on the process of change and development, critical analysis of the role of internal and external influences on the development process, and applications to local (including Montana) situations and challenges. The IDS minor takes advantage of existing faculty expertise and courses to offer an interdisciplinary experience for those students interested in either international or domestic development work. Students minoring in IDS will develop knowledge and skills appropriate for graduate study and for working in non-governmental organizations, international and bilateral government development organizations, the U.S. Peace Corps and other national/international equivalents, and / or community-development groups.

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