

Final Internship Report

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This summer, I worked with Think Impact (TI), an organization that seeks to use market based solutions to address social problems within rural African communities. TI runs the Innovation Institute every summer, when they drop young American "scholars" into African villages and have these students collaborate with community members to create social enterprises. Working with TI was the perfect opportunity to get out and create something real – a tangible business - that chips away at one of the broad range of issues that plague materially poor communities. I co-created a design team with five villagers and one American student, and sought to improve health and sanitation in Hlalakahle, South Africa. Our team was struck by the lack of proper trash disposal - the current methods of disposal limited to burning trash or throwing it into the streets (both which evidently have negative health consequences). Our team developed a trash-collection service that collects, sorts, and distributes garbage for repurposing as art or household goods. Arriving at this solution involved countless hours of research, brainstorming and prototyping. The exposure I received this summer made me realize the huge potential of creating products that have positive social implications and how much fun hands on, grassroots development can be. As of now, I have tentatively switched my major to Engineering Sciences modified with Development Economics in hopes of pursuing a career of working to develop simple, innovative products and services that can significantly improve the quality of life in rural communities.

While a development organization, Think Impact's approach challenges the traditional model of aid. Instead of providing handouts, TI encourages the use of local assets to solve local problems. This approach not only creates more sustainable development, it also gave me the perspective that I wasn't in my community to give – I was there to learn and share perspectives.

The most exciting designs and ideas can emerge at the nexus of different perspectives, and Think Impact sets the stage for such productive cross-cultural interactions.

Broadly our mission was to catalyze the realization, amongst our community members, that they are capable of lifting themselves out of the poverty trap if they think innovatively, take risks, see everything with a lens of opportunity, and take ownership of their problems. If I was to distill the message of Think Impact to three words, it would be: find assets everywhere. Really, everything around is an asset, and attempting to reuse these resources in creative ways can have profound impacts on the world. This idea applies at Dartmouth just as much as it does in rural South Africa. The best way to show people the potential of what they have around them is to create something with them using only local resources. This is why our short-term goal was to create a social enterprise. To achieve this, the Think Impact curriculum is broadly divided into three stages - Immersion, Inspiration, and Innovation.

Immersion was about empathy and shared austerity. Coming to a new continent, the Immersion stage was fundamental for me to build relationships, absorb the culture, learn the dos and don'ts of village life, and begin to uncover the local assets. Think Impact gave us suggestions on how to begin our exploration, but I had a lot of freedom to develop my own approach. I took the "culture shock" in stride. I milked cows, joined workers lifting stones to dam a river, bucket-bathed under the fresh morning sky, pushed water-filled wheelbarrows, ground maize, peed in a bucket, tried new foods, hand-washed laundry, had African drumming lessons, and helped lay the foundation for a house. I worked hard to bridge the gap between myself and the community, trying to demonstrate that contrary to their assumptions, foreigners are just as human as they are. While my role as an outsider was important to bringing a unique perspective to the design process, I wanted to be seen as an equal by the community. I went door to door interviewing anyone I

met, privileged to capture stories that would otherwise have gone unwritten. I was a child in an adults body (the villagers thought me to be aged no less than forty – mostly because of my beard), barraging the villagers with questions to become competent in their culture and grow up in two short weeks. The chance to ask “why” about everything was my favorite part of this phase.

Inspiration saw the formation of design teams - groups consisting of one or two scholars alongside at least 4 community members. I decided that working with another scholar, Anna, would make me most effective, which turned out to be a wonderful decision. While choosing to work with another scholar was easy, the process of inviting community members to our team was very challenging. Our collaboration allowed us to stay positive – to play on one another's strengths, and identify ways in which we could improve our teamwork. There were many hiccups as we sought out locals to bring together a team. We met many people, but some factor or another made them a poor match for our team. And then there was Roy. He was one of our first choices, an extremely talented builder, welder, and architect, who managed to draw beautiful floor plans for homes without any formal education. He committed to our team, but arrived to our first meeting late and heavily intoxicated. This was a blow to our already small team's morale, especially in light of the fact that all the other design teams in our village were already functional. But we persevered, and quickly made two exciting additions to our team. From there we created a name (Xipanu Xa Hikokwalahokayini – the team of asking why), various rituals (starting meetings with a prayer, and having game breaks every hour), and a charter (terms for how to make meetings function well). For our first meeting, each member was tasked with making a novel invention using three pieces of trash they found in the community. I was overwhelmed by the creativity we saw – they made jump ropes, mats, small model homes,

all from garbage. Seeing the imagination of our team gave me lots of hope on what we could accomplish, but I knew that the only way we would be able to harness the talent would be if our members committed to coming regularly and on time. And our solution to the issue of attendance turned out to be our most effective team rule, an idea I borrowed from the Rockefeller Centers Civic Skills Training in D.C. If any team member arrived at our meetings even a minute after the agreed start time, that person would have to sing and dance for the group. This generally meant that we began our meetings laughing till the tears flowed. With the singing and dancing rule, and the instant bond our team created, our group had the best punctuality and attendance of the three in our village. Also, to ensure good attendance, meetings had to be interesting and worthwhile. We met with the entire team three hours a day - from 1 to 4 in the afternoon. Anna and I spent mornings planning, thinking of ways to convey the idea of feedback, prototyping, brainstorming, innovation, biomimicry, and a long list of complicated terms that represent simple ideas. Some of the concepts made instant sense to the group, while others like constructive feedback, didn't quite catch on. It was a struggle to get our group to provide feedback on the effectiveness of meetings, or encourage them to challenge Anna and me. I stressed the need of feedback for things to improve, but despite my efforts the community members on our team were hesitant to be critical of my performance as a facilitator. The idea grew on them, and finally began to make sense in further along in the process, when I forced each person to articulate one thing they would do to improve our prototype. With this exercise, we were able to rapidly prototype and get very invested in the design process. After every meeting, Anna and I would debrief, reflecting on our effectiveness and thinking about ways to improve. It was the drive to constantly evolve that made this process so exciting for me.

After brainstorming assets, issues, and thinking about areas of interest, we began to focus in on the issue of health. To muster the group's imagination, we took random issues and paired them with three random community assets. Each person came up with some wild idea about how to make a difference. One of the weirdest ideas was "Worm Air"; using worms, rocks, and paper to increase agricultural skills and promote healthier veggie-heavy diets. How? The idea involved smashing the worms with stones so that they multiply (not scientifically sound, but it made us laugh), and then putting them in paper airplanes along with instructions on how to use the worms to improve soil quality for farming. After doing this for a while, we went through a rigorous process of interviewing a diverse group of people in the community to better understand health needs. We also made an exhaustive list of anything we saw that contributed to health, positively or negatively. After much discussion, we narrowed in on the trash problem in Hlalakahle.

Before we knew it, we were already in the Innovation phase. Our initial prototypes were gym equipment (dumbbells, exercise bikes, jump ropes) from trash, in hopes of cleaning up the trash in our community as well as creating a cheap fitness center. Gradually our focus shifted to the creation of a system to collect trash. This meant we had to create trash containers, a process of collection using donkey carts, a place to sort, and then create connections to people who could reuse the trash. Down the line, we hope to incentivize the development of new products from trash, and create cooperatives of artists who could share their skills with one another. This may become a draw for tourists visiting nearby game lodges, thus providing another source of revenue. Our business model centered around a small fee we collect upon collection, and the money that we can generate when we sell sorted materials to recyclers who come from the city or to artisans in our community. This idea, the "Ahi Basiseni Project" gained support of the

village elders and headmen, and we hope that it will become a sustainable business that generates employment and effectively cleans up our community.

Travelling to Africa for the first time, I didn't know what to expect. My parents were concerned for my health and safety, while I was more concerned by the lack of Facebook and warm showers. And then there were a bunch of other questions running through my head. Would the other American students be there for the right reasons, or CV building? Would I survive on my veggie diet? How would the community respond to my turban? But once I was actually on the ground with my homestay Maki (mother), all my fears melted away. She made a tremendous effort to make me comfortable and accommodate my vegetarianism. I was also blown away by the sincerity and general awesomeness of my fellow scholars. Working with them was a blast, and it was very apparent from their manner that they were in South Africa out of a genuine desire to learn and share. And it wasn't just them that made me comfortable. The local shopkeeper, in this isolated, rural South African village, happened to be from a region of Pakistan where my mother tongue, Punjabi, is spoken. I couldn't believe it. It was so soothing to have someone who understood a different dimension of my being in our community. And he was incredibly generous – I never left his shop empty handed. Having him around made me feel like less of an outsider. It also helped that the entire community admired my turban. Women would always stop me to learn how I tie it. In fact, there were many requests for a village-wide turban day (which didn't quite work because I only had four turbans!). I couldn't have asked for a more seamless transition. Surprisingly, the lack of internet quickly went from an annoyance to a blessing. It was as though a huge weight had lifted off my shoulders. I didn't have to constantly check my email, learn of another catastrophe in some distant part of the world or the newest gadget. I realized

how overwhelming it is to have access to more information than I can ever handle, and how being away from the internet forced me to savor the tiny things in life.

Before going to South Africa, I had also been puzzled by one of Think Impact's rules – the one about how students couldn't leave their homestays after sunset. That meant we were confined to our homes after 6 PM! That just seemed like an enormous amount of free time, so half of my luggage was books. Quickly though, I began to prioritize sitting around the fire with my family, staring at the stars, sleeping, thinking about my project, or just reflecting on my life by journaling and realized that these activities easily filled up my time. I did get lots of time to read, but I vastly overestimated how much free time I had, and I certainly wasn't close to being bored out of my mind like a thought I'd be with a 6 PM curfew.

This summer differed from my prior experiences working in rural India. It was my first time working in the field of development through an organization, without complete freedom to follow my every whim. At the same time, it was a happy medium between doing whatever I wanted, and being told what to do. We had a number of deliverables and a broad framework, but I still had a lot of flexibility to explore. Working with Think Impact gave me a vocabulary, a way to articulate ideas that had occurred to me during my past experiences working in India, ideas that were never substantiated or named. I experienced the power of living in the communities you engage, a concept that I have seriously undervalued in the past. The understanding and empathy that emerged from living in a homestay was crucial to my effectiveness as an agent for change. One of Think Impact's failures also made me more cognizant of one my failings in the past. It is vital for the success of any development initiative to follow up regularly with the communities with which you work. Without that, any impact you have will be erased on departure. Additionally, it is important to have metrics to evaluate your success for two reasons.

The very process of creating metrics forces you to contemplate your mission and your goals. Secondly, without feedback it is impossible to improve your strategies. These are all things I plan to carry forward as I return to working in Punjab.

There are lots of other lessons that I will carry forward. I learned how genuinely fulfilling a life without internet and other distractions is. I began to understand the importance of routines, and how instrumental accountability partners can be in helping you stick to your schedule. My roommate, Matt, and I both came into the summer hoping to exercise every day. And we did it (well, almost, if I hadn't gotten shin splints)! Every morning we would wake at sunrise, and go for a thirty-minute run to the nearest game reserve. The days I was down, he would help motivate me to get out of bed, and on his down days, I would support him. I also learned the power of setting goals, and breaking them into concrete achievable steps that make them much less daunting. One of my goals was to gain between seven and fifteen pounds and I managed to gain thirteen! Another was to improve my writing, so every night I would journal. I also learned that in teams it's important to step back and not push for your own ideas. At times I grew frustrated because I felt my ideas were the best and most innovative, but I had to let go and recognize that this wasn't my show. This process was about creating a mind shift, and that meant being more of a facilitator than a leader. I learned a lot about the importance of constructive feedback and creating effective team dynamics. The team culture Anna and I created is something I aspire to replicate again in the future. We were extremely honest with one another, which gave me confidence in my abilities. I knew if I did something wrong, Anna would be there to tell me so that I could do it differently the next time. Finally, I learned that while development work can be frustrating, it's important to remember that just your presence can have many positive externalities. Seeing Matt and I exercise every morning got the communities youth

wondering why they didn't do the same. A fitness group was born, and every morning on our run out, Matt and I would see the newly formed troupe of village youngsters on their way home.

These are just a few of the lessons that I have realized, but I am certain that this experience has influenced me in intangible ways, and taught me things that I have yet not become conscious of.

This summer demonstrated the power of bringing together different cultures, innovation, and development. I grew more certain that I would like to dedicate my life to helping people realize their potentials and uncovered a powerful way to empower communities using local resources. I can't wait to apply these techniques to my work in Punjab. The night before we departed Hlalakahle, my fellow American students and I buried a time capsule in my back yard, promising that we will reunite in twenty years. I'm going to make it happen sooner. As odd as this may sound, this summer was my perfect vacation. I made best friends, started a business, immersed myself in a new culture, reflected on who I am, achieved goals, and minimized my environmental footprint with a surprisingly fulfilling simple existence. I really didn't want to leave.