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Summer Internship Write-up  
Class of 1978 Foundation Fund

I spent this summer in Quito, Ecuador, working for Manna Project International. MPI is a nonprofit organization started about ten years ago by Vanderbilt students. The mission of Manna Project is to connect college students and recent graduates with opportunities to apply their education, expertise, and passion for service to communities in developing countries. More specifically, MPI volunteers employ a strategy called asset-based community development in the communities in which they work.

Asset based community development is an approach to development work that focuses on the strengths of a community and tries to build upon them. Whereas traditional development work involves finding out what a community needs and then giving it to them in some way, asset based community development looks instead for what a community already has—the individual and institutional assets that already exist in the community. Development work will then involve expanding those assets and forging connections between them, as well as using them as a model to strengthen other institutions or individuals.

I was part of the first group of summer volunteers at MPI Ecuador, and since the program was so new I was able to help with many formative decisions such as writing a mission statement and developing programs.

My specific job this summer was to conduct door-to-door surveys in each of six barrios (neighborhoods) south of Quito. These detailed surveys

asked about infrastructure and demographic details of the family and their home, as well as asking residents to describe specific abilities of each family member, such as the ability to do household chores, construction and mechanical work, agricultural work, educational work, sewing, fine arts, or sports. Participants were also asked if they had ever considered starting a business, what their plans had been, and why they had not done it. Surveys also asked about intangible values such as community closeness and hope for the future.

In response to the surveys, we developed several program ideas. Most immediately, we contacted all those who had expressed an interest in starting a business and offered them a course co-taught by MPI staff and faculty at the University of Quito in entrepreneurship and business skills. We are also working in conjunction with an Ecuadorian microfinance group to provide loans to people interested in starting businesses. We also contacted those who had expressed interest in teaching a certain skill, such as embroidery, as well as those who had expressed interest in learning that skill to set up workshops taught by community members to other members. These types of intra-community partnerships create a sustainable framework for growth, where volunteers act only as facilitators and are not crucial to the process of development.

My work this summer taught me several things: that change is incremental and that you have to accept very delayed gratification to work in sustainable development; that short term interventions that lack cultural understanding and roots within a community are likely to be fruitless in the

long run; and that development work is much more complicated than I had thought before. The summer both destroyed my idealism and renewed it: I have a better understanding of what it would take to do successful work in the developing world and I think I am more likely to accomplish my goals because of that. Thank you for funding my summer!



