

Final Report  
IE3 Global Internship – Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development  
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1. I got an internship placement in the Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD), located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia through IE3 Global Internship in May 2012. It is a non-government organization working for inclusive development in Ethiopia for people with disabilities. I was an intern at ECDD, and in charge of mainly four projects – teaching students with disabilities English at the Disability Center in Addis Ababa University (AAU), working with Aychesh, the project coordinator, to develop a “inclusive training” for employees in microfinance institutions, helping the Disability Center develop their programs and services, working on the Mustard Seeds Project that I initiated. These were the main projects that I was in charge of. I was the first IE3 intern at ECDD, and the organization was going through some changes in administration, so I was like a guinea pig in a way, but I managed to do more than that was expected of me.

2. ECDD is a project-oriented and goal-based organization that works for inclusion of people with disabilities. It works with various government agencies and other NGOs in Addis to ensure they can reach out to as many people as possible. Parents who have children with disabilities are also our targets. It has so many different projects that I cannot list them all, but the main ones are: Inclusive higher education (Disability Center at the AAU and developing such program in other public universities in different regions with financial assistance from Threshold, Finland); Reproductive and Health Services for people with disabilities (AIDS, maternity assistance, etc.); Inclusive Livelihood for people with disabilities (microfinance services, governmental assistance, employment etc.); Policy Intervention (policies in regards to people with disabilities). The biggest

challenge for ECDD, as I am sure this is the most fundamental problem for all NGOs, is money. On the staff retreat that I attended, we talked about issues like sustainability and survival. I found out that it costs much more than I thought to operate an NGO and undertake so many projects at the same time. Also, ECDD does not have a 'major' source of income (donation). All its projects are funded by different organizations as the funding is pretty diverse, and it could be either a problem or an advantage. Diversity in funding means more flexibility in projects, but it could also mean potential problems when the projects are over. NGOs in Ethiopia suffer from the same problem, and I believe that there should be governmental assistance to funding sources of NGOs as they are doing what the government cannot or does not want to do. ECDD's priority is inclusive development. In order to achieve this goal, there needs to be major changes in people's attitude towards disabilities in general. ECDD does many things to remove stigma of disabilities in Ethiopia. For example, the Mustard Seeds Project that I initiated was to remove the stigma of disabilities among microfinance providers so that people with disabilities do not suffer from being rejected repeatedly.

3. The biggest barriers were budget and stigma. As stated above, because of the diversity in funding, ECDD cannot easily start a new project before finishing up preexisting one. For example, my project was not intended for an individual to fundraise all the money; however, due to restriction on budget, I had to fundraise the money to supply to the MFI. It was a good result in the end, but I wish there was more financial assistance from the ECDD with their budget, that would have made things easier. Also, it was hard for me to find a MFI who would even consider people with disabilities as potential clients due to

the heavy stigma. It took me much longer to find one MFI to work with than I initially imagined. This is not just the case for my project. Among many projects that ECDD undertakes as an organization, sometimes they have to terminate a project due to lack of budget and manpower, and sometimes they have to delay a project indefinitely due to the government's interruption.

4. Despite all the hassles and difficulties, ECDD has been doing tremendous amount of great work. For inclusive education, ECDD contributed greatly to establishment of Disability Center at the AAU, which eventually led the University to admit more qualified students with disabilities, and made their lives much easier and enjoyable. For financial inclusion, ECDD has trained employees of various MFIs, which will hopefully lead to more inclusion of people with disabilities. ECDD is one of the very few development agencies for people with disabilities. They only hire qualified people with disabilities unless circumstances do not allow, and solely by that, ECDD is empowering and offering opportunities to many people with disabilities, and which will eventually lead to removal of disability stigma in Ethiopia. It is to show the society that people with disabilities can actually work and be a part of the society just like any other people.

5. The ECDD's ability to make things happen is quite impressive; however, I would recommend asking for more financial assistance from different sources. It is quite hard to accomplish things because of lack of funding. Also, in order for ECDD to grow bigger as they are planning to, funding is critical. Unfortunately, I discovered that there is an understandable hierarchy in disabilities. Most of ECDD's clients have some sort of physical disabilities – blindness, deafness, physical impairments etc. However, other

aspects of disabilities, such as developmental, cognitive, and mental disabilities are not addressed and targeted at all due to the circumstances in Ethiopia. ECDD works for inclusion, which requires the basic infrastructure for people with disabilities including education, some accessibility, less stigma etc. People with cognitive, developmental, and mental disabilities are often hidden by their own families, abused by their own families, and end up being in an institution for their entire lives. I wish the ECDD could work for these people as well, but it cannot due to the heavier stigma and lack of funding and manpower. Basic infrastructure for these people is not established at all, and the cultural aspect of it makes it even more difficult. People here tend to think that a person with cognitive, developmental and mental illness is “cursed” due to their parents’ fault or other relatives’. However, considering that the same misconception was attached to physical disabilities some years ago, I believe it can change too. It will just take some decades or so to see truly inclusive Ethiopia. Other than that, I believe ECDD has been truly doing great work despite all the difficulties they faced during the past 6 years.

6. There was a staff retreat on the last week of my internship, and it was for Strategic Planning Process (SPP). It was quite a valuable experience to see how an NGO like ECDD plans for the next five years and what it is like to work for an NGO. I learned many things that I can apply to student organization I am in charge of back in Eugene. Meetings with different MFIs were quite interesting too. Some MFI managers could not handle the fact that people with disabilities can actually be good clients, some did not even consider the proposal, but some did consider and actually accepted the proposal. It was substantial learning experience to see how stigma affects different people reacting to

the same thing. I have also met with some representatives from the National Bank of Ethiopia to discuss the possible collaboration for microfinance services. They were very intelligent and educated, and so supportive that they actually offered some suggestions and advices. Deep and long conversation with Bob, the founder and the senior advisor of ECDD, has been very valuable and helpful too. He offered me some insights about the differences between working for international organizations such as UN and government agencies such as USAID and the State Department. Bob was a deputy director for International Labor Organization for more than a decade, and he also worked for the State Department as a fellow for one year. So he was a very respectful advisor for me, and I learned a lot from him and other staffs at the ECDD. I also conducted a research about microfinance situation in Ethiopia, and the paper will be presented at the Association of Ethiopian Microfinance Institutions (AEMFI) conference in upcoming September. The original plan was for me to present the paper and the general situation of accessibility to microfinance institutions at the conference, but unfortunately due to my circumstances and travel schedule, I cannot. So Aychesh, my coworker will present the paper for me. It was a good opportunity for me to conduct a research that will hopefully help the local people directly. In life, I was robbed on the second week. They took my cellphone and some cash. It was surely the first time, and now that I think about it, I could have reacted differently, but I do think it was a painful but useful experience in life. Overall, it was really the smallest things that I felt the “real” Ethiopia, such as food, transportation, inaccessibility, and sanitation. Development work is being done in different levels in Ethiopia, and they are making good progress, but it is slow. It would be

very interesting for me to come back in a few years to see how development work turned out to be like.

7. I believe I was pretty well utilized. I did not only do the work that I was told to, but I also participated in different projects that seemed interesting to me, and my own project that is something new in this society. The process of it was long and tedious, but I believe I learned more than I could ever imagine during the process and through this project.

Teaching at the University was the main goal the ECDD initially had for me, and I not only taught students, but I also helped the Disability Center develop some of the programs such as Braille training and computer skills training. After I go back to Eugene, I plan to initiate contact with the Disability Center at the University of Oregon, see the possibility of linking the two institutions' disability centers. I am one of the co-directors for the International Student Association (ISA), an executive member of Associated Students of University of Oregon (ASUO), Sociology Peer-Advisor and will be doing my practicum at the Clinical Services for children with autism. All these positions I will undertake back home are pretty exciting and something I feel passionate about. I believe my experience in Addis and the things I learned from ECDD will greatly benefit my work in those positions. Firstly, now I know what it is like to work in a professional setting and an NGO that is always in need of funding. Student organizations such as ISA and ASUO are generally the same: They need more and more funding in order to do what they are expected to. I believe I learned valuable financial management skills at ECDD, and that I can apply some of the principles to ISA and ASUO. As sociology major, now I understand what it is like to conduct an academic research through this experience, and

will continue to do the same thing – useful research for people who need it. Since the ECDD only hires qualified people with disabilities unless circumstances do not allow, the majority of the staffs have some sort of disabilities. I now have deeper understanding and knowledge of impairments, and what accommodations they may need, but most importantly, I now understand what it is like to work with people with disabilities, which is the same way with people without disabilities. I believe impairment and disability are very different things. Social construction of disabilities could discourage and disable people who have impairments, and it is our duties as allies to remove the stigma and social construction. The biggest thing I learned here as I have sociology major and special education minor was the correct (not just politically correct) understanding of disabilities, and I would very much like to share this with as many people as possible. Another thing is development. The current international trend is heading towards more and more inclusive development. The USAID is committed to working towards inclusion, and some now the official estimation of number of world population with disabilities is 15%, not 10%. Inclusion development does not require more than people think, it merely requires people to be more considerate and conscious of another set of population. Until 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was racism and women who suffered much from oppression, but the world somewhat managed to solve many problems. As disability is the ‘final frontier’ of civilization, I believe more and more agencies and governments will partake in this final frontier issue and that it will finally become more inclusive.

8. Besides academics, I learned the most valuable life lesson at ECDD and in Ethiopia. I learned to appreciate life. Poverty, diseases, stigma and greed are found in all over this

country. It has been an opposite side of my life, very different indeed. I killed a cockroach for the first time in my life in Addis, and I got unavoidable bedbugs bites all over my body for the first time too. The experience one can get here is enormous. Developing countries can offer so much to one from a developed country. One can easily witness the “absolute poverty” that is below “one-dollar per day” line, can get ripped off and pay ten times more than locals do, experience a 5-year-old boy’s rookie pick-pocketing and so on. Sometimes it is amazing; sometimes you get furious; sometimes you find yourself crying in your room; sometimes you drink beers with a soldier with two AK-47s back in an Army truck. It could be painful if you hate bugs like I do, and it could be heartbreaking to see a 15-year-old “business-girl” asking you to be her customer for the night for 300 Birr. You see people with disabilities crawling on the muddy streets of Addis begging for 1 Birr (=0.056 USD), but you can’t give money because you think it would make them more dependent. “Shoeshine” kids follow you everywhere and try to clean your shoes for 5 Birr. All these are heartbreaking, but a component in a developing country. It is the unique feature of a developing country, and I am most thrilled to witness the process of development in Ethiopia. Not to compare my life to Ethiopians’ lives, but I do believe that I have much more than they do, and I started appreciating everything I have back home. I found that... life is actually quite beautiful when driven towards to the right direction.

9. Living in Addis for nine weeks is probably one of the best decisions I have ever made. Ethiopia has such unique culture and it is the hub of Africa development and diplomacy, so it has much to offer to any students who want an extraordinary life. ECDD exists to



make differences for the most vulnerable group in one of the world's poorest countries. Nine weeks in ECDD was not just a 'good experience' for me. Rather, it changed the way I live, the way I see things, and the way I do things. It was a transition in my life towards brighter and more righteous direction. Before, I changed my major several times, felt like I was lost in the midst of college education. Now that I am a senior and majoring in sociology, I believe this experience reconfirmed that I was right about my choice. I would recommend this particular internship to anyone who is interested in development, not just disability. ECDD essentially is a development agency working for inclusive development. The workers are very professional and knowledgeable about development, and it will be a very special experience for anyone craving for adventure.

Overall, nine weeks in Addis Ababa has been an extraordinary jaunt for me. I discovered myself through working on one country's inclusive development, and found the direction I had been looking for quite a while. I learned much more than 3 years of previous college education, and I am proud that I chose to work in Ethiopia.