

Project Background

This summer, I took part in the Columbia Global Leadership in Action program. I was placed in Choma, Zambia and worked with World Vision, a non-profit focused on humanitarian aid and international development in rural communities. I worked with multiple teams, assisting with and observing work across areas like WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), nutrition, health, education, entrepreneurship, and gender-based violence. My main focus was childhood malnutrition, where I developed a project that surveyed nurses and caregivers to understand the root causes underlying malnutrition and potential solutions in the communities where I worked.

This blog post is a very abbreviated version of a much (much) lengthier [account](#) that I wrote for my Cornell reflections. It recounts my time in Zambia, touching both on my and my personal experiences during my stay.

Reflection

Going to Zambia was an unexpected choice for me. After spending my first Laidlaw summer conducting research on Russian politics, I expected to travel to Eastern Europe, where I could both utilize my language skills and build upon my previous research and academic work. Geopolitics, COVID, and other factors soon made this more complicated than expected. So, I applied for a centralized Laidlaw project instead, in search of a novel experience and a learning opportunity.

Upon arrival, I allowed myself to spend the first days focused on absorption. Work at World Vision is split up between the office and “the field,” the broad term used to describe going out into the rural communities where the organization works. It took at least an hour to get to these communities, first along the main road and then along dizzying, bumpy paths that cut deep into the most rural areas.

We visited schools, where my Laidlaw colleagues ran workshops; a rural village, where World Vision surveyed residents about vaccine hesitancy in the area; and borehole sites, where community members prepared for donor visits. I spoke to people when possible but mostly observed at first, trying to learn and understand how and what I can contribute during my short time here. Everything was new to me, and it seemed that every aspect of work could use assistance, but it was hard to discern what that might look like in practice.

After learning more about World Vision’s work, I decided to focus on a program called Positive Deviance/Hearth (PD/Hearth) that aims to address issues of childhood malnutrition by teaching caregivers how to prepare foods and feed their children correctly. The program had recently been

implemented in the Moyo area where I was placed, and I hoped to understand whether the initial stages of implementation have been successful or what some of the barriers to success may be. Drawing inspiration from the medical student on the program, I put together a survey for clinical workers about the program, aiming to collect information about their experiences with receiving training and starting the program in their communities.

I was ultimately able to compile information from the survey data and from the qualitative conversations I've had with caregivers, volunteers, the District Nutritionist, World Vision staff in both the local and national offices, and nurses in another district. I learned that the PD/Hearth program was overall well-liked by communities, but that they sometimes lacked the necessary materials and personnel – primarily trained volunteers – to implement it. I thus concluded with the recommendation that the District Health Office and World Vision work together to train more volunteers and track which clinics have been trained in a more detailed manner.

The staff at World Vision encouraged us to learn as much as we could. I quickly grew to respect them for the work that they do and the vulnerable populations they serve. The work is not easy, and even in my short time in Zambia, I sensed the physical and emotional toll that it takes, and admired their dedication and perseverance. In spite of these positive experiences and feelings, working with our office does not come without challenges: logistics, timing, support, religious and cultural differences, language, and many others required adjustment and open-mindedness.

In spite of the challenges, the overall experience is an engaging one full of growth and learning. I had almost no expectations before arriving, and I think that benefitted me in being able to keep an open mind and to absorb the things I see rather than making immediate judgments about them. When I saw something I didn't understand, I generally tried to ask questions about it, and this helped inform my thoughts.

To be honest, I'm still figuring out how to talk about this experience. A friend asked me shortly after I returned if it was fun, to which I say no – the work was not fun, but it was enriching, educational, fascinating, and engaging in ways that differ from any other experience I've had in my life. As I reflect on this experience, I realize that there was so much to absorb and take in that I don't know if I could ever do the experience justice in descriptions.