

Students Helping Honduras Service Trip

El Progreso, Honduras

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*Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies
International Development Department*

Daniel Anderson, Alex Bruce, Ali Gross and Jason Loughnane

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between January 8 and 17, 2011, twelve SAIS students and the wife of one SAIS student volunteered in El Progreso, Honduras with an NGO called Students Helping Honduras (SHH) and had the opportunity to experience the rich culture of Latin America through a new international service trip. Representing five different concentrations, including international development, the students assisted in efforts to build a new elementary school in the small village of Rio Chiquito while also learning about local microfinance projects and the myriad challenges facing Honduran youth. This report includes a summary of the trip and reflections from each of the four IDEV concentrators.

The trip was coordinated through the Washington, DC Young Professionals Chapter of SHH in collaboration with SAISCorps, the Johns Hopkins SAIS service club. Students Helping Honduras aims “to build a movement of young leaders to empower orphaned and vulnerable children in Honduras” through conducting development and educational projects. SHH’s roots date back to 2005, when an undergraduate student from Mary Washington University named Shin Fujiyama traveled to Honduras as a volunteer. Upon returning to campus, Shin and his sister Cosmo began fundraising efforts that enabled a group of seven students to return to Honduras in 2007 and led to the formation of a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Since then, SHH has raised over \$1 million. In 2009, SHH’s founder, Shin Fujiyama, was honored as part of the CNN Hero Award program. A central component of the organization’s mission is to provide opportunities for students to get involved with service, which is achieved through administering service trips. To date, over 100 universities across the United States have been represented by volunteers in Honduras.

TRIP SUMMARY

The activities planned for the trip were derived from three primary goals – assisting with and learning about development in Honduras, planning for future development projects in Honduras, and enjoying and learning from local Honduran culture.

Six days of the trip were spent volunteering with SHH, while the remaining three days included travel in and out of Honduras and a brief side trip to the Mayan ruins in Copán. While working with SHH, students assisted in the construction of two new elementary school buildings in the small village of Rio Chiquito, where Honduran students only had access to one small building for all of their educational activities. Over the course of the week, SAIS students assisted with laying of cinderblocks, pouring of foundational cement, and the moving of earth around the construction site. Over the course of their four days working at the site, the volunteers succeeded in constructing four walls for one building and setting up the roof supports for the second building. Moreover, the worksite was landscaped to help with drainage and transit. The other two days working with SHH were spent visiting other worksites in the greater El Progreso area to learn about ongoing development efforts and volunteering in the state-run Honduras Institute for Families (INFA), a state-run orphanage. In all of these efforts, SAIS volunteers assisted with and learned from development efforts in Honduras.

A hallmark of the trip was the opportunity to learn about local microfinance operations and to discuss ways of making development and educational efforts in Honduras increasingly sustainable. In the first case, SAIS

students planned and translated a meeting with a local microfinance loan officer. The meeting was run by two SAIS volunteers who also translated the event for those volunteers who did not speak Spanish. Students learned about the challenges of introducing a new microfinance program into a community and learned about how one small microfinance organization adapted to meet these challenges. SAIS volunteers also engaged in a series of reflections aimed at addressing the challenges they observed in their daily service activities. Many of the suggestions and ideas discussed by SAIS students were shared with SHH for future projects and form the basis for designing enhanced service trips in the future. All of these activities helped SAIS students learn about development in Honduras while also helping to further improve future projects and trips.

Throughout the entire trip, SAIS volunteers had opportunities to learn about local Honduran culture and interact with local Hondurans. A highlight of this interaction was working with two local Honduran university students who volunteered alongside the SAIS team daily. Aiming to give back to their own community, they also helped provide a window into Honduran culture and society. Moreover, volunteers worked daily with other Hondurans from local communities who provided direction at the construction site and technical experience. Students also had the chance to sample Honduran dance, food and cultural sites. In particular, students learned Latin dances, explored a Honduran market, made baleadas (a favorite Honduran cuisine) with local families, and visited the Mayan ruins at Copán. These cultural activities were not only fun, but also informative. They provided a depth that helped put many of the volunteer activities into perspective and helped immerse the volunteers deeper into the environment they were helping serve.

The trip would not have been possible without support from many generous individual donors, grants from SAIS' International Development Department and Johns Hopkins University, and generous donations from Advanced Simulation Technology, Carolina Business Interior, and the Oak Ridge Associated Universities. Special thanks is also due to Lisa Kahn, Director of Student Life at Johns Hopkins SAIS, who provided expert guidance on applying for grant funds and establishing a new service trip. Stephan Vitvitsky, past president of SAISCorps, was also instrumental in the early planning stages of the trip and deserves many thanks.

In short, the first ever SAIS service trip to Honduras was a success and met each of the three goals set forth: assisting with and learning about development in Honduras, planning for future development projects in Honduras and enjoying and learning from local Honduran culture. SAISCorps and this year's trip planners are especially excited about putting together an even more successful trip to Honduras next year, and Students Helping Honduras is eager to continue a lasting partnership with SAIS students.



Daniel Anderson

Participating in the January 2011 Honduras service trip was a very valuable experience, both from a personal and education perspective. Firstly, I really enjoyed having the opportunity to get to know and build rapport with fellow SAIS students through working at the job site. Coordinating tasks, designing approaches to overcome obstacles and putting our sweat into mixing cement and laying cinder blocks were ideal ways to establish and deepen personal relationships with fellow classmates. With regards to my knowledge of international development, the trip provided the opportunity to develop a first-hand understanding of the challenges facing low-income communities in Central America. Spending the day working in the communities, as well as having the opportunity to eat lunch every day in local households, was particularly helpful in acquiring a deeper understanding of everyday life in the community and the overall level of development. Visiting the state-run orphanage stands out as a particularly poignant



experience, primarily because it drove home the massive obstacles that these children face in creating a stable future. Given that these children will be put on the streets once they reach age 14 with no financial or emotional support and only a very basic education, the obstacles to achieving a productive professional and personal life seem nearly insurmountable. Lastly, I really enjoyed the cultural perspectives I gained through interacting with Honduran children, volunteers and employees of Students Helping Honduras. Such interactions were invaluable in understanding the cultural foundations of the people and the country.

Alex Bruce

While living in Egypt I saw slums made of mud and brick rather than corrugated metal as they were in Honduras. I saw open sewers and the lack of any sustainable infrastructure in both countries. But, having never before traveled to Latin America, when juxtaposing my extensive experience in the Middle East with what I saw for a brief week in Honduras, what struck me the most, despite the countries having similar per capita GDP, was the lack of government pervasiveness in people's daily lives. I rarely saw a police officer anywhere in Honduras, though private security guards were ubiquitous. Government buildings, even in the relatively large town of El Progreso, seemed lacking. There were few paved roads, even in the city center of El Progreso, and none linking a string of small villages which, in composite, probably had several thousand residents. All these superficial yet telling observations perhaps suggest regional and cultural differences, or varying levels of international development aid, but they nevertheless alter the way people conduct their lives daily.



Ali Gross

The Students Helping Honduras service trip to El Progreso exceeded my expectations. Initially, I hadn't expected the trip to be as educational as it was since we were focusing largely on contributing manual labor. Having such a diverse group of students (including concentrators from IDEV, Strategic Studies, ERE, AFP and LASP) allowed people to draw on their distinct backgrounds as well as the various classes they've taken to offer unique points of view to a development-oriented discussion.



Although the trip focused mainly on grassroots projects, the main success of the trip for me was that it required students to think about the macroeconomic issues surrounding these micro-level projects. For instance, when visiting the state-run orphanage, we were informed that most of the children are released to the streets at 13 years old because there are few places for them to go. While the orphanage was surrounded by rich, gated communities, the local headquarters of the gang MS-13 was located one mile down the road. With few options upon release at 13 years old, many of the children from the orphanages end up in gangs. Beyond this occurrence being a tragedy in itself, as was brought up by a strategic study concentrator on the trip, this is only one instance where a local development issue can turn into a U.S. national security threat as MS-13 is popular in various regions in the U.S. This brought up discussions not only of what could be done in the near future to provide guidance for children being released from the orphanage, but also forced us to think about the bigger picture – for instance many children end up there after being trafficked or after their parents abuse them or die of AIDS.

One of the most challenging issues confronted on this trip and a reoccurring theme in our group's discussions was the question of the sustainability of grassroots development projects. While Students Helping Honduras has been successful in changing the lives of the people of Villa Soleada (by helping them build a community with housing, small farming plots, an education center, etc.) the question remains of what would happen if SHH left. Because many of the people work within the community (owning small convenient shops, etc.) it begs the question of whether such a community can ever be self-sufficient and exist independently of volunteer donations and goodwill. It appears part of the answer would be to help the people living in Villa Soleada find jobs outside of the community to generate an inflow of income from external sources. However, stable, non-seasonal jobs are scarce in Honduras. While answers to these complex questions may not currently exist, this trip was a great way to get international relations students to think about some of the major development issues within a local context.

Beyond giving students the opportunity to travel to another country, practice Spanish, spend time with local Hondurans and learn about development issues, the SHH trip was a great way to get to know fellow students better.

Jason Loughnane

My experience in El Progreso was one of hope tempered with uncertainty. SAIS has taught me to approach development work with a more critical eye, and this project, more than any of my prior volunteer experiences, enlightened me to the inherent contradictions of volunteer service trips. Thus, while I really enjoyed seeing the significant progress we made building walls and roof beams to help add three rooms to a tiny schoolhouse in the village of Rio Chiquito, my Melissa Thomas-trained mind kept wondering whether local Hondurans could have done our work more effectively. Furthermore, while we were all happy that desperately needed schools were being built, one couldn't help but wonder what the children had to study for, being that their local job market was so depressed.



Our group, and those of us concentrating in International Development especially, spent each evening dissecting these questions and the logic of our work, trying to balance our idealistic eagerness to volunteer against our more cynical academic and inquiring minds. Though we marveled at the incredible projects which Students Helping Honduras has accomplished, we had doubts as to the most effective uses of the volunteers' time and money.

What couldn't be doubted was the awesome camaraderie of our team. Whether it was the tag-team efforts of a 10-person cement mixing squad trying to keep the concrete "volcano" from "erupting" or building a human chain to move 130 cinder blocks halfway across the site, our team worked together gloriously. Although beset by a variety of maladies including sunburn, bug bites, blisters, backaches, and the dreaded "Baleada's Revenge," we worked tirelessly through it all and had a blast in our effort. We finished our week with a well-deserved soak in the natural hot springs above Copan Ruinas, telling stories and laughing over Port Royal beers before returning to SAIS, our development experience having brought us many more questions than answers.

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