

Vignesh Alagappan

This summer, I found myself reflecting often on "Year of Wonders", by Geraldine Brooks. I had never really given the book much thought before - it had always been just another high school reading assignment in the verbal purgatory of endless such high school reading assignments. Year of Wonders tells the story of the small English village of Eyam in 1666: the year of The Great Plague of London. It is a story of unprecedented times and of new normals.

2020 has been another such 'Year of Wonders'. No one really saw this coming, except, perhaps, the wonderfully talented numerologists at BuzzFeed. The events of this year - and the resultant shift to remote work - have created a highly unusual internship experience across all divisions of the Margolis Center. In my case, this internship experience has consisted of me navigating the healthcare landscape of Namibia through a small camera on top of my computer screen.

I decided to join the Global Health and Innovation division of the Margolis Center out of a longstanding interest in sustainable development, and a firm belief in the importance of global health equity. Here is the crux of it: Over one trillion US Dollars have been delivered in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Africa over the past 60 years. This does not include humanitarian support, private philanthropy, and vaccination programs - all of which have had significant, positive effects on child mortality rates and life expectancy in the region. Rather, ODA is the process through which one government transfers large amounts of funds and resources to another government in order to help the latter grow its economy towards self-sufficiency. However, in that timeframe, poverty levels have increased across the continent, and real economic growth in most aid-dependent African countries continues to underperform expectations year-on-year.

Indeed, a compelling case might be made that this spending on ODA has created a sort of neocolonialism: "Poor Countries" have become so dependent on aid from "Rich Countries" that the Rich Countries can now essentially buy their foreign policy. Rich Countries can tell Poor Countries how to vote at the United Nations; Rich Countries can control who is elected to their parliaments; Rich Countries can extract resources from their ground and medicines from their rainforests without ever being held accountable to the communities they destroy through their plunder.

It seems likely, then, that true economic development in Africa will not be ushered in by Western paternalism, but by local activism. And that activism often takes the form of innovation - finding African solutions to African problems. This summer, I worked with the African Collaborative for Health Financing Solutions (ACS) – a team within the Global Health and Innovation Center that aims to facilitate this very style of grassroots innovation. ACS provides a platform for bringing local stakeholders together to create solutions that do not need Western oversight. We aim to break the cycle of aid dependency by providing support for the **process** of innovation, not by imposing Western ideas on the African countries in which we operate.

The work itself has been rewarding, albeit challenging at times due to its remote nature. On a weekly basis, we had to coordinate multiple Zoom calls across several countries, and even those of us based right here in North Carolina were never quite in the same room. However, this experience gave me valuable insight into what remote work is like, and the projects I worked on have helped me gain important practical experience with the software, workflow processes, and ethical standards of active global health research. I also had to grapple with the challenges of data scarcity. In the classroom, the raw data is provided for you, and the thrust of the work is in the analysis. The 'real world' is not nearly so kind. A significant portion of my time was spent in 'desk review', and PubMed quickly climbed past Instagram in my "Most Visited Sites" list as I hunted through countless journal

articles, searching for the data and anecdotal evidence we needed to make confident recommendations to our stakeholders.

I came into this internship strongly considering graduate study in Development Economics, and my experiences with ACS have further affirmed this path. I have contributed to active projects in areas of academic interest to me, and I am confident that the skills I have gained will give me a more accurate expectation of what my own research projects in this field might look like in graduate school and beyond.