Students' Reflect on the Frugal Innovation Practicum in Malawi

Michigan State University (MSU) students Jodie Zhu and Kevin Mills talk about their experience visiting Lilongwe, Malawi, as part of a pilot program called the Frugal Innovation Practicum. They worked with students at Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) in Malawi on solutions to food-based issues that could be implemented without needing a lot of money to work. In this podcast, Jodie and Kevin talk about their experience, and share some of the results of the practicum. Listen to the Podcast

STUDENT BLOGS
FRUGAL INNOVATION PRACTICUM, MALAWI

A group of MSU students and faculty working with the Global Center for Food Systems Innovation (GCFSI) went to Malawi recently to start two weeks of research and education. The Frugal Innovations Program brought the MSU students together with students from LUANAR in Malawi to study food system problems in the southeastern African country. The students represent a variety of disciplines, and sought solutions to food system issues in Malawi that can be implemented frugally. Find below student blogs from Malawi.

A Tale of Two Markets

“To say the culture is different would be an understatement. Today was my second full day in Malawi and the first experience within the markets. Yesterday we were able to meet with the LUANAR students, get to know each other, and familiarize ourselves with where we were staying.” Read more from Kevin Mills
High Hopes for Market Solutions

"Muddy alleyways outlined with trash smoothly laid against the ground. Vendors aggressively shouting at you to buy products from them; 'hey beautiful sister; come see these tomatoes- you buy?'

The foreign smell of Malawi markets, filling my lungs. I was yet to accommodate myself to the hustle and bustle of Malawian people sweeping past me."  Read more from Lindsay Strong

The Start of Lilongwe Market Visits

"August 10th was a very exciting day. Not only did we all converge in class together for the first time, we also had the chance to explore the Lilongwe main markets. I must say, I was quite blown away by some of the observations my team and other teams made. Being a local, I guess I have been turning a blind eye towards some of the issues."  Read more from Christie Kang'ombe

Electricity, Water, Food Processing are Market Needs

"After reading so much about the informal markets, today we finally made it to Lilongwe food markets. We visited the new town market Tsoka and the central market in Lilongwe old town, and three local supermarkets, including the People's, Shoprite, and Chipiko."  Read more from Jodie Zhu

Musings in Malawi: A First Look at Markets in Lilongwe

"I want to thank the sun and dirt and heartbeat that comes with visiting a Malawian urban market for the first time. I'm striving to balance the demands of being present in the market, and simultaneously aware of my biases and perspective as a cis-female Filipina American student from Michigan State, originally from Midland, Michigan."  Read more from Trish Abalo
Researching Markets for Frugal Opportunities

"It was quite interesting and adventurous to go into the markets and super markets this time, although I have gone in them several times before. The discussions I had with my group members as we toured the markets made me more sensitive to the challenges and levels of innovations portrayed by the sellers. I discussed several issues with my group members. Among others they were planning issues, market associations, process and activities in buying and selling of food, infrastructure and institution constraints, innovative ways of marketing and quality control and food safety." Read more from Mexford Mulumpa

Infrastructure, Traffic, Sanitation are Market Challenges

"One thing that contributes to poor food quality is the lack of proper infrastructure for these food entrepreneurs. For example fish is sold in open spaces without coverings and this attracts a lot of flies. The problem is also aggravated due to poor waste management. So I think it will require a very unique holistic approach to curb the issues of food safety/quality because the causes are diverse in nature." Read more from Edgar Binali

Mzungu in the Markets

"The Central and Tsoka markets within the city lacked proper sanitation and infrastructure. The supermarkets were cleaner and organized. The central market was the most crowded with small pathways and no storage units. However it had a variety of food commodities as compared to Tsoka market." Read more from Vinjeru Nyirenda

The Visit to the Markets of Lilongwe

"I observed that planning in terms of allocating sellers of similar products is much better at central market than Tsoka Market. At the central market it was seen that people selling horticultural produce such as vegetables, fruits, fresh peas, tomato etc. were at the same segment and this was the same for those selling other products. This is an indication that buyers do not have difficulties in accessing the
items when they want to purchase the products. The problem was congestion of people that signifies the market is a busy one which needs extension of the infrastructure." Read more from Maxwell Makanda

Preventing for the Unknown

"That's the cool thing about going across the globe to a place you've never been; there's no way to really prepare yourself completely. Sure, you hear stories from people or look stuff up online, but none of that compares to actually being there. You're going to experience culture shock and you're going to be surprised by things you never would have considered, like no toilet paper or silverware, or so I've been told." Read more from Alyssa Cleland

Market Assignment

"During this visit we tried to do resource and market mapping of which key actors (customers, producers, city council and fellow sellers) and their vision within the next five years were captured together with the sellers. On top of this we also came up with a sketch map of the market." Read more from Joel Phiri

Market Visits in Lilongwe

"Market visits were made on the 10th and 11th of August 2015 with the aim of familiarizing ourselves with the market situations in Malawi.

Thus four markets were visited: Tsoka, Central, Area 25A and Area 47 markets. Each visit was preceded by a power point discussion (facilitated by a faculty member) that equipped us with tools to be used to capture information at the markets." Read more from Joel Phiri

I'm a Change Agent, Not a Tourist

"I do not want to be a tourist. I do not want the LUANAR students or the vendors in the market to look at me and just think that I am another white person that comes in to ask what problems they have, snap some pictures for Facebook, and leave their lives unchanged. I do not want this experience to pass by aimlessly and not learn anything substantive during the process." Read more from Kevin Mills
A Visit to Markets in Areas 47 and 25 A

"Lilongwe city is located in the central of Malawi with a population that is increasing at a rapid rate. The city is demarcated into different residential areas and the vast population has contributed to the existence of markets at different locations within the Lilongwe urban. During the visitation of the markets in areas 25A and 47, a number of things were noted which seemed continuously affect the day to day business life of vendors."  

Read more from Maxwell Makanda

Transparency, Sanitation, High Interest among Central Market Challenges

"The sanitation was generally poor in the markets as it was communicated that the health department in the city council is not as vibrant as it used to be with very few monitoring patrols made to the small restaurants in the market. The market committee reported that in the past the health department was more functional than now. They could close down all unhygienic restaurants and confiscate and destroy fresh fish when they went bad to protect the health of consumers."  

Read more from Mexford Mulumpwa

Communication Needed Before Market Innovation Can Work

"As I was telling my new LUANAR friend that we should group together if we could. the instructor assigned us to different groups, me to the busiest and largest Central Market at Old Town. Then I turned around and told the new friend that I was worried about my group. It turns out that my worry was valid."  

Read more from Jodie Zhu

Photo Challenges

"Ndinika kumamba laiya ko? In Chichewa that means, "Can I take your picture?" (I'm 100% sure I bombed the spelling on that). I knew my experience as a videographer would be different here, but I had no idea the extent of how difficult it would be."  

Read more from Alyssa Cleland
Capturing an Immersive Experience

"Being here for only one day has already brought so many surprises. I told myself I was going into this with completely open mind; no expectations and no judgements, adjusting [to the best of my ability] to life here in Malawi for two weeks. Adjusting to life here is not as simple as I thought it would be. After all, the reason we adjust is because we are not used to certain conditions." Read more from Alyssa Cleland

Lack of Start-Up Capital Hinders Vendors

"Many of the vendors are hesitant to form a cooperative as a result. Additionally, since profit margins are so low in comparison for some, the initial investment into a cooperative - say to buy a truck to ease transportation costs - does not appeal to others that are better off. The problem, according to the vendors within our last focus group, is not the vendors' unwillingness to form public associations, but it is the lack of initial start-up capital that hinders them." Read more from Kevin Mills

Contemplating My Arrival

"While laying beneath a mosquito net, listening to bats chirp through my walls and hyenas laugh in the distance has a way of inducing a sense of stirring adventure. It has also repetitively led to a contemplation of why and how I've ended up here. In just a few short days, I have experienced feelings of inadequacy, immense joy, apprehensiveness, easy laughter, and some very real fear. It has made me question a great number of things regarding the value of my Americanized perspective, the likelihood of exchanging useful information in bustling market settings, and the potential for long-term or noticeable change resulting from this work. Yet, every new day poses the potential for progress and increased confidence in our group's goals." Read More from Lauren Lucas

Asking the Big Questions

"The demands and stresses of day-to-day life often leave no room to ponder life's big questions. We find ourselves so caught up in classes, work, household chores, and so on, that we lack the time to reflect. In contrast, during this practicum, we are constantly grappling with the big questions." Read more from Christine Sauer
Chicago and Malawi Market Speculators Have Much in Common

"Given our context of study here in Malawi, I have thought a lot about the farmers market movement in the U.S. over the past decade and how it has, I believe, driven growth in the number of regional farmers and overall awareness of local culinary specialties reappearing on American menus.

Why it has been on the forefront of my mind might be that the Malawian markets are as nearly opposite as the American or European model of fresh markets which are highly regulated, and as a result see a much greater level of oversight and functionality except for the occasional neighborhood or rural market." Read more from Devin Foote

Moving Forward with This Practicum

"The trip has finally come to an end. It was funny when one of my group members said that she would choose the same group members if she could. We laughed at it, because we all know that our group is not the most harmonious." Read more from Jodie Zhu