



Innovative Food Assistance in the Andes

Sarah Balistreri

When friends and family from the States talk about Ecuador, they often mention the beauty of the Galapagos Islands and the snow-capped volcanoes of the Andes. Very few think of the prolonged armed conflict taking place in Colombia and its impact on Ecuador. Before I began my fellowship at the UN World Food Programme (WFP) last July, I also knew little about the effects of this conflict on Colombia's smaller southern neighbor. Since 2000, approximately 175,000 people have petitioned for asylum in Ecuador, and the country currently hosts the largest refugee population in the region. WFP has been active in Ecuador since 1964 and provides emergency food aid to the Colombian refugee population and vulnerable Ecuadorian host communities.

While I had a basic understanding of the logistics of providing humanitarian assistance prior to coming to Quito, I am astonished at how much I have learned at WFP. In Ecuador WFP has taken an innovative approach to food assistance and provides beneficiaries with an electronic voucher that functions like a debit card. In order to recharge their voucher, beneficiaries participate in monthly trainings on subjects such as nutrition, safe hygiene, and gender violence prevention.

Background: Sarah graduated from Georgetown University (2012) with a bachelor's in Spanish and Italian.

As a member of the communications team, I translate and revise publications, donor reports, and fundraising documents. I have also had the opportunity to participate in monitoring and evaluation activities, which has been my favorite experience as a PiLA fellow in Quito. To measure the impact of its food assistance, WFP staff regularly conduct surveys with beneficiaries and partner organizations. In the fall, I spent a month interviewing Colombian refugees about their eating habits and their perception of tensions between Colombians and Ecuadorians in Quito. Many would relate how they most like to prepare cassava root, or about the hardships they have encountered both in Colombia and Ecuador. Hearing their stories has been by far the most rewarding and powerful part of my time in Ecuador. This fellowship has been an unparalleled learning experience, and I am very grateful for my time with WFP.



Sarah (r) and friends in Quito

Dear Friends of PiLA,

For success in 2015, we ask you to **make a tax-deductible gift to support PiLA's mission**. A nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, PiLA depends on the generosity of visionary individuals—like you—who share our commitment to positively impact life throughout the region. With your support, PiLA will continue to be able place fellows in year-long service posts across Latin America. Please join the many generous individuals and organizations that support PiLA's critical work to match talented, motivated recent college graduates with NGOs that are grappling with the myriad cultural, social, economic, and political issues that impact the lives of people around the southern hemisphere. Your help is essential to make PiLA's work possible. Please also share this newsletter with family and friends!

To make your gift today, call us, mail a check payable to Princeton in Latin America, or donate online: www.princeton.edu/~pila/support/. No gift is too small to help sustain PiLA. We thank you for your commitment and generosity of spirit!

Donate Now

Antigua International School (AIS), Guatemala

Alix Van Zandt

“Guatemala? Isn’t that dangerous?” was the most common response to the news that I would be moving to Guatemala following graduation. I had already spent three years researching poverty and education in Panama, a country with a reputation for being much safer than the rest of central America, but Guatemala? That was a whole different thing. The most common image of the country for people back home was one of narcos, high homicide rates and corruption. But like anywhere, it’s far more complex than stereotypes suggest, and after five years in the Stanford bubble I was ready for a new adventure, one that would challenge me to put both my background in political science and Latin American studies to practical use. So when the opportunity through PiLA presented itself, my gut feeling was to go for it. Two months after graduation and one week after finishing my last assignment in Panama, I moved to a country I had never been to in my life to work at Antigua International School.



It’s hard to believe I have been here six months; it sounds like so much time but feels like so little. Living and working in Guatemala has been profoundly fulfilling, both career-wise and personally, and I have grown considerably through my experiences here.

Background: Alix graduated from Stanford University (2013) with a major political science and completed a master’s in Latin American studies at Stanford (2014).

AIS is in Antigua, about an hour outside of Guatemala City. Dating to the colonial era, Antigua attracts quite a range of humanity, with a mix of expats and locals. AIS staff also reflects that, as a very talented, passionate, and engaged group of people from around the world. Everyone has a story, some unique journey that brought them to this former Spanish colonial town. I am extremely fortunate to have the opportunity to collaborate with both Guatemalans and foreigners working toward the goal of developing critically-thinking, empathetic, service-oriented leaders who will contribute to Guatemala and the world.



Antigua International School

Dedicated to equity, diversity, and quality in childhood education.

At school there is always a lot going on and every day is different. The kids keep you on your toes, as kids do around the world, but I love the challenge, and seeing them grow into thinking young adults who will, ideally, push to change things for the better.

AIS is not a typical international school, in that the student demographic includes all social classes and backgrounds and aims to provide students from all walks of life with an opportunity for quality education. My work includes developing the College Prep Program, the English Language Support program, and Student Leadership. Additionally, I have been developing the curriculum for the 10th-grade World History class I teach (probably my favorite part of my fellowship), and coaching soccer.

Beyond professional, work-related opportunities, in that last seven months I’ve kayaked one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, hiked two volcanoes, joined a local *fútbol* team, had *cascarones* — confetti-filled eggs — cracked on my head during *Carnavales*, adopted various *guatemalismos* into my Spanish, become a daily consumer of some of the best coffee in the world picked from *fincas* visible from my window, bargained my way through *el mercado*, seen the giant kites at the *Dia de los Muertos* kite festival unique to Guatemala, been covered in volcanic ash when an eruption blanketed the town, ridden sketchy ferris wheels at *ferias*, found hundreds of beautiful terraces, fought my way through crowds at *Procesiones* during *Cuaresma*, helped recently-hatched baby turtles reach the ocean, and immersed myself in a mixed community of locals, expats, backpackers, hippies, successful business owners, entrepreneurs, and everything in between. *Hay de todo en Antigua*.

I look forward to building on my fellowship year by continuing at AIS in 2015–16. I am excited to continue exploring Guatemala, to support my students as they grow into leaders and the school as it continues to actualize its potential. *Buena onda*.



World Food Programme, Panama City

Emergency Response Analysis & Mapping, Mai Yer Xiong

Last August I didn't quite know what to expect from my PiLA experience; I didn't know what it would be like to live in Panama City or work for the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). I didn't expect to work across the street from the Canal, one of the major driving forces of the Panamanian economy. I didn't expect to work in an ex-military base that has been converted into an international NGO hub. I didn't expect to feel so at home here. But during my first six months in Panama, all of these things have become manifest.



As the Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping (VAM) Fellow at the WFP, I've assisted in the creation of post-emergency evaluations and household surveys in order to identify vulnerable or affected populations and calculate food security indicators. VAM is the organization's unit responsible for

Background: Mai Yer graduated from Wellesley College (2014) with a major in economics and Spanish.

collecting, analyzing, and mapping vital information that supports project implementation and emergency responses. VAM helps to ensure that the WFP's initiatives meets the needs of those who

require it most. As part of the team, I have had the opportunity to participate in trainings related to food security analysis and geographic information system that were conducted completely in Spanish. Since my long-term career goal is to work with poverty alleviation efforts that target marginalized communities, being a part of the VAM unit has been a superb learning experience.

However, working with the WFP also has shown me that international development work can be complicated given the many stakeholders. The organization has to consider corporate policies and goals, government and political interests, donors and the needs of beneficiaries. The goal is to serve our beneficiaries and achieve zero hunger on a global scale. However, that goal will entail overcoming many challenges, including the need to balance multiple interests. As someone who aims to work in international development, this has been an especially valuable lesson.

It sometimes feels like I'm still in the US, given the influence of US culture on Panama City, reflecting its history with the US and the high number of ex-pats. In fact, I use "Spanglish" pretty often. Yet the city has its unique charms and I still experienced culture shock to some degree. I have become accustomed to what I semi-jokingly call the "gringa" tax, as taxi drivers try to charge me a few dollars more than they would a local customer. Public pay phones are abundantly available throughout the city. The biodiversity in the country is amazing; I've seen hummingbirds and vultures by my office. I've hiked Cerro Ancon, gone to numerous beaches and islands, and visited the Gamboa rainforest.

Panama has been an adventure of personal and professional growth.



The United Nations World Food Programme is the largest humanitarian agency fighting hunger worldwide, providing food for over 80 million people in 75 countries.

Global Partnerships, Nicaragua

Working for the Double Bottom Line in Managua, Agnes Cho

Almost every single day living in Managua, I am asked, “*China, que haces aqui?*” Even though there are several thousand other Koreans who work in the city’s sewing and auto industries, the sight of an Asian or “Chinese” face still sparks some curiosity. This question leaves me deciding how to explain what I am doing in Managua, a city that backpack-toting tourists tend to avoid. One of my options is to delve into a lengthy explanation of impact investment, a relatively new field that most North Americans haven’t heard of. But mostly I answer with a now-familiar response, “*Tengo un trabajo que tiene que ver con microfinanza.*” (I have a job that has to do with microfinance.)

I suppose my answer has a degree of truth because I do work with microfinance institutions, as well as other social businesses and agricultural cooperatives that promote market-sustained models of development at the base of the economic pyramid. But the general unfamiliarity with impact investment continuously reminds me of how unique and exciting my PILA position with Global Partnerships is.

Global Partnerships is a Seattle-based nonprofit that provides grants and loans to organizations in Latin America that offer low-income people access to credit, education, farming assistance, green technology, and health services. Unlike traditional aid agencies, we are focused on supporting organizations that are financially sustainable and do not depend on grants and donations to continue their social impact programs.

I left Princeton last June with a degree in anthropology, a boyfriend, and a curiosity about the changing nature of international development. PILA brought me to Managua and Global Partnerships has sent me around Central America to work with a variety of their partners. Over the last six months, I’ve worked with last-mile solar light distributors, an NGO running a rural pharmacy program, and cleaner-burning cook-stove businesses. My daily activities range from researching new investment areas, to leading training workshops for solar light salespeople, to assessing the financial sustainability of an NGO health program.

My academic background in anthropology has prepared me for only a fraction of the work that I find myself doing at Global Partnerships. More than anything, my degree armed me with a curiosity and critical eye to understand the larger context of the impact investment industry.



In early March, I had a long conversation with someone from one of the larger international aid NGOs. We were at a workshop for social entrepreneurs who were, among other things, selling cost-efficient toilets, improved cook-stoves, and online vocational training classes.

One gestured around the meeting and said, “There’s more innovation in this room than there is in my office with 600 employees.” Traditional development institutions, he continued, have to evolve and harness the creative energy that is already so strong in Latin America.



Global Partnerships, Nicaragua
a nonprofit impact investor that works to expand opportunity for people of limited financial means.

Global Partnerships, Nicaragua



Part of this evolution requires socially minded investors to help develop this innovative spirit into real businesses that work for the benefit of the less well off throughout Latin America. Businesses that fulfill the “double bottom line” and achieve both financial sustainability and a social impact are garnering more and more attention. During my time with Global Partnerships, I’ve learned about the challenges confronting these social entrepreneurs. Not only do they have to overcome the hurdles of working in a country with little regulation, they also have to appeal to a customer base living in hard-to-reach areas with limited disposable income. In addition, just like any other business, they have working capital requirements but limited opportunities to get a loan from a commercial bank. Socially driven impact investors play a crucial role in providing this capital and nurturing growing social businesses.

Having been with Global Partnerships for seven months, I feel that there is much more to learn about this growing industry. So much more, in fact, that I will extend my time here for another year. I’m excited about the opportunity to remain in Managua and learn as much as I can about all that impact investment has to offer.

Background: Agnes graduated from Princeton University (2014) with a bachelors in anthropology and Latin American studies.



Calling all PiLANistas: Pay it forward! Join us by making a recurring gift to support the work of current and future PiLA fellows. Your donation will make a difference.

Gifts can be made online at www.princeton.edu/~pila/support/ or by mailing a check or calling [609.258.9200](tel:609.258.9200).



Use this link to ensure that a portion of every Amazon purchase you make will be donated to PiLA: <https://smile.amazon.com/ch/22-3658504>

