

Elizabeth Ruhl  
FSD: Meera Sansthan  
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This summer I traveled to India to serve as an international intern. The Foundation for Sustainable Development, a United States based organization that promotes grassroots and local development in various developing communities worldwide, paired me with a local Jodhpur NGO called Meera Sansthan. Over eight weeks I spent time assisting my Indian coworkers in conducting a nutritional survey in surrounding villages, writing a report on the survey, and then composing a grant proposal for UNICEF based on the results of the survey.

Meera Sansthan was founded in Jodhpur in 1976 by one of the first female politicians in Rajasthan, and is now continued by her daughter. Meera Sansthan is involved in a wide range of social activities, including HIV/AIDS education, sexual education, early marriage prevention, domestic dispute counseling, and local artisan career development. Their longest running social project, though, is the education and monitoring of Aanganwadi workers in the Jodhpur District. The Indian government designed and implemented the Aanganwadi Center System in 1975. Aanganwadi centers ideally provide two free daily meals for children under six, hold monthly vaccination sessions, distribute dietary supplements to pregnant and nursing women, and give preschool education to the children who come to the center. Unfortunately, even after almost thirty-five years, the Aanganwadi Center System is not particularly effective, and around 46% of India's children remain malnourished.

The child malnutrition rates around Jodhpur were slightly less than the national average, but still hover around 40%. Meera Sansthan believes that the key to fixing the Aanganwadi Center System and eradicating child malnutrition is educating the village community. Aanganwadi Centers are tremendous resources within a village, but sometimes the rest of the

community does not know how to utilize the services offered. Also, many Aanganwadi workers do not complete all of their duties or run their center correctly. Meera Sansthan hopes that by educating the village community, local mothers and fathers will hold the Aanganwadi workers accountable for the health of their children and expect to see a well-run center.

My project this summer centered on getting funding for an extended malnutrition prevention program. In the beginning, I spent many days traveling with a social fieldworker to various Aanganwadi Centers in villages surrounding Jodhpur. Once at the center, my partner spoke with the workers and looked over their records. We then weighed 10% of the village population under three years old to get a sample of the nutritional status. We calculated the nutritional status according to WHO guidelines. Towards the end of the internship I put together a report detailing the nutritional status of the villages we had visited as well as the operating status of the centers we had visited.

None of the centers we visited were fully operational. Most centers served only one meal daily and stayed open only four or five days a week for shortened hours. I never saw one center even attempt to run any sort of preschool program, and most centers had the Government Issue toys locked up because it took too much effort to keep the older children from stealing them. Often when we interviewed mothers who happened to be at the center, they did not know about major health practices that the center was supposed to teach them. For example, many women had never heard of Oral Rehydration Salts for diarrhea recovery (a common child ailment) or knew the appropriate age to start feeding their infants solid food. To their credit, though, the centers were very good at making sure children were vaccinated.

One of the most frustrating parts of conducting the fieldwork was trying to figure out what was actually supposed to be happening at the Aanganwadi Centers. Because none of the

centers were fully functioning, at first I did not realize that they were not doing everything correctly. Only after asking my supervisors lots of questions was I able to nail down what an Aanganwadi Center is designed to provide to a community. Also, I never felt like I knew how to ask the right questions when I spoke with Aanganwadi workers, or how to interpret their answers. Not only was a lot being lost in translation from English to Hindi and back again, but also India has an incredibly high context culture. I always felt like I was supposed to understand a lot more from their answers than I did. For example, when I asked a worker how often she conducted preschool classes and she said she did it daily even though it was clear from the state of the room that this was not true, was it supposed to be understood that of course she was not expected to complete that part of her job? I also always felt like it was insulting and perhaps not my place to point out to workers where their centers were failing. I certainly do not know all the challenges they face in trying to get their center open for even four days a week. However, it was also hard to go to these centers and see the dirt, the chaos, and the scrawny children without wanting to immediately start doing something about it.

In the last two weeks I focused mainly on preparing a grant proposal to UNICEF to fund Meera Sansthan's extended malnutrition prevention project. In the proposed project, Meera Sansthan will first weigh every child under six in the project area and send every severely malnourished child to the hospital for treatment. Then fieldworkers will continue to visit Aanganwadi Centers and the families of previously malnourished children to monitor their recovery. Meera Sansthan hopes that repeated visits, parent education nights, and outside support will contribute to the health of the community's children.

In the end, I think that my presence did benefit Meera Sansthan, at least a little. I was able to prepare two English documents for them that they can use and modify to try to secure

funding from not just UNICEF but from other aid organizations as well. Because that was the project we designed at the beginning of my internship, I would say I was successful. However, at the end of my internship I learned from an outside source that Meera Sansthan had a particularly hard time getting funding because of their low English ability. I wish that I had somehow asked more questions of my supervisor or taken the initiative to write more grant proposals while I was working. My English writing ability was the main skill I could contribute that they did not already have, and it would not have been difficult for me to write one or two more.

In fact, it was extremely frustrating not to be able to contribute more. My inability to communicate with most of Meera Sansthan's staff and any of the people they served often made me feel like dead weight. This internship challenged me to spend a lot of time thinking about the Western world's role in international development and the responsibilities the West has in the world economy. It also forced me to look at my ability to commit to a longer abroad program much more realistically. I cannot say that I have come to any concrete conclusions; in fact, I am pretty sure I have a lot more questions now than I have answers. The one certainty I did learn is that the world and the people living on it are infinitely more complicated than I can hope to completely understand. For now, though, I am still curious enough to keep trying.