

Andrea Ringer
Foundation for Sustainable Development
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“One of the most important things that I can tell you is that your experience will be infinitely better if you work at keeping a positive attitude.” My program coordinator gave me this advice at the beginning of my internship with the Foundation for Sustainable Development (FSD) in Nicaragua this summer. While I can’t say that I had constant positivity over my nine weeks in Nicaragua, I’m glad that I did my best to follow this advice. My internship was a rewarding experience because I reminded myself to stay positive, since the experience wasn’t without its fair share of challenges and frustrations. However, positivity and flexibility are the key to success when doing development work in a foreign country. I am very grateful for the experience that I received through the Kellogg Institute to intern in Nicaragua. It is an experience that taught me the importance of communication across cultures, cultural understanding, microfinance, and work in a Central American country.

The structure of the program with FSD is that it pairs interns with a local host organization in the intern’s area of interest. I was interested in working with microfinance, so FSD paired me with a microfinance organization in Masaya, Nicaragua called ALTERNATIVA. Masaya was a city of about 160,000 people, and I lived with a host family in the city of Masaya, about a 20-minute walk away from ALTERNATIVA. ALTERNATIVA is a microfinance organization, but it is unique in that it contains two divisions: a financial division that provides loans to micro, small, and medium enterprises, and a community-development division that implements capacity-building initiatives to support the business success of its clients.

Since FSD promotes sustainable development, it requires that interns develop, organize, and implement a project with their host organization. Therefore, the structure of an internship with

FSD is different than a traditional internship. This is the first way in which the experience was different than I had expected, and that positivity and flexibility were important. I had expected that ALTERNATIVA would have something that they would want an intern to work on, but this was not the case. I was tasked with developing a project for ALTERNATIVA with very little information about the organization and how it worked, let alone information about where there were areas for improvement. Therefore, the first three weeks of my internship, while frustrating because at the time it felt like I was doing very little, were of great importance for learning how the organization worked and the areas available in which I could do a project. One of my favorite things from this time was going with the promoters to visit clients. The promoters were the people responsible for evaluating new clients for loans and ensuring that existing clients repaid the money that they owed. I had originally wanted to work with the financial department of ALTERNATIVA, and because of this, the director allowed me to go with the promoters to visit clients both within the city of Masaya and in rural areas outside of the city. In going with the promoters, I was able to learn about the loan process of ALTERNATIVA.

FSD provides interns with a fund of \$300 to carry out a project with their host organization, and interns also have the option of writing a grant proposal to apply for more money to fund their project. I knew that I wanted to write a grant proposal, and since the deadline for the proposal was the end of the fourth week, after three weeks with ALTERNATIVA I had to decide what my project was going to be. It was at this point that I realized that my first three weeks with ALTERNATIVA hadn't been for nothing. I had become a familiar face to the employees at ALTERNATIVA and they were more willing than they had been at the beginning to help me carry out a project. Several conversations with different ALTERNATIVA staff made it evident that the area in which a project would be most feasible would be in the community-development

division. The main project of this division was a network of shoemakers called *la Red de Calzados* that ALTERNATIVA had established by uniting 12 independent shoemakers of Masaya. I decided to build upon the work in which ALTERNATIVA was already invested by developing a project to improve the shoe designs and business skills of several of the shoemakers of the network. I decided upon this project because it had the greatest possibility of being sustainable. I thought that since ALTERNATIVA was proud of the work that it had already accomplished with this network of shoemakers, it would be motivated to continue, after I had left the organization, a project that I had helped begin.

I learned that the shoemakers had benefited from joining the network, *la Red de Calzados*, but they still faced problems in their businesses in the following areas that the shoemakers identified: lack of innovation in new shoe designs, absence of methods in which to keep track of costs, few initiatives in marketing, and problems with quality control. I developed a project to address these problems. With the help of ALTERNATIVA staff, I determined four shoemakers of the network to be the focus of the project. I wrote the grant proposal for the project, and FSD approved my proposal and provided me with the funding I requested! After receiving the funding, I was able to begin implementing my project.

The first part of my project was organizing two workshops to teach the shoemakers about the business skills that they wanted to learn. I facilitated two workshops, one on costs and pricing and the other on quality control and marketing. The second part of my project was organizing design instruction sessions held individually with each of the four shoemakers where a local shoe design instructor taught them how to make the patterns for two new shoe designs. Then, the four shoemakers, using the shoe patterns that the instructor helped them develop, determined the cost of the materials, brought those costs to ALTERNATIVA, and were loaned the money to buy the

materials necessary to make, in total, six pairs of shoes. This was the creation of a revolving fund: after the shoemakers completed and sold the six pairs of shoes, they would pay back the money to ALTERNATIVA, so ALTERNATIVA could loan that money to four new shoemakers to repeat the process. The purpose of this was to create a controlled experiment situation in which the shoemakers could learn from real-life experience the importance of staying relevant with new shoe designs, and it would provide the shoemakers with the opportunity, in making and selling the six pairs of shoes, to implement the skills they had learned in the workshops.

I would say that I was successful in my internship with FSD and with my host organization, ALTERNATIVA. In the beginning, and at several points along the way, I wasn't sure that I was going to be successful. It was difficult to take my own initiative to develop an individual project. It was difficult to adapt to communicating and working only in Spanish and to figuring out how to navigate the cultural norms of Nicaragua. It was difficult to demonstrate to ALTERNATIVA the way in which I could be of use to them. However, I slowly overcame each of these difficulties and initiated the implementation of a project in which ALTERNATIVA was invested. My presence at ALTERNATIVA worked as a catalyst to help them begin a project that they wanted had been wanting to do but needed the resources and motivation to begin.

An internship with the Foundation for Sustainable Development is a wonderful option for anyone interested in international development. I had taken classes in international development before this experience, but these classes could not have prepared me for what development looks like in practice. I realized the challenge of this kind of work, and I experienced first-hand why positivity and flexibility are important in any development project.