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**“Microfinance for Economic Empowerment”
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Over the past few years, I started to hear a lot about microfinance and its great potential as a tool of sustainable development. Microfinance is a source of financial services for entrepreneurs and small businesses lacking access to banking and related services; it has become particularly popular in developing countries in Southeast Asia and Africa. I read what I could about this new exciting innovation, but I wanted to see its success firsthand, so I applied for an Experiencing the World Fellowship through the Kellogg Institute. Thanks to this fellowship, I was able to spend three weeks in Ghana volunteering at a microfinance agency. Throughout those three weeks, I faced a lot of challenges in my work, but I came to understand microfinance and the Accra region in a way I never would have been able to otherwise.

Through Kaya Responsible Travel and Volunteer Partnerships for West Africa, I was connected with MicroQuips, my employer for my time spent in Ghana. MicroQuips is a social enterprise dedicated to providing financial services to women entrepreneurs in the informal economy in the Accra Region of Ghana. MicroQuips was founded in 2009 with a three-prong approach: cash loans, equipment leasing, and savings accounts. Today, they are phasing out the savings accounts service and replacing it with skill-set training programs. The majority of my work while in Ghana was focused on this transition.

On my first day of work, I was presented with a report on a successful MicroQuips beneficiary who runs a soap business. Comfort, the sole full-time employee at MicroQuips, informed me that she wished to develop a training for the woman to teach her skill to other women and a general curriculum for future skill-set based training programs. Comfort emphasized that MicroQuips has a strong desire to prioritize funding skills-based businesses over the re-selling of products. She thought working together to develop a training program would be a great way to start. We needed to meet with the woman to talk over the plan, but she would not be home for a couple days. This was the first of many barriers to our productivity. The two days in the office before meeting passed by very slowly, as there was not more than an hour's work for me to do in preparation of our visit (preparing a list of questions). The meeting itself also posed a major barrier—communication. The woman could not speak English, so Comfort had to translate. I was disappointed that I was not able to speak directly with her, as well as many of the other locals who I interviewed during my time abroad. Although Ghana is officially an English-speaking country, most of the people living in the Greater Accra Region with whom I interacted only spoke their tribal language Twi, as they did not have much formal English education.

Talking about the next steps in developing the training program was an overall positive experience, but proved to be difficult at times. For instance, since the woman could not read or write, she did not have any formal steps written down on how to make the soap. She also had no bookkeeping records for her own

business that others could model theirs after. Without these basic materials needed for the training program, we realized we would to start from scratch.

After our meeting on the fourth day of my stay, I was confident that the training program curriculum would not only be developed by the end of my stay, but that we would have hosted at least one training session before it was time for me to leave. I soon learned I was wrong as the delays added up.

The biggest barrier to productivity during my time in Ghana was lack of consistent electricity. The power went out almost everyday for at least six hours, sometimes up to twelve. The locals who I was working with reassured me that this was a regular issue; at times they have even lost power for weeks at a time. Without power, it is generally difficult to get work done. For that reason, the workday typically ends when the power goes out. With workdays constantly being shortened, it is obvious how a lack of consistent electricity poses a major challenge to productivity. Electricity is most consistent in Ghana's major cities and gets worse as you travel outward. Many other developing countries suffer from this distribution of electricity, and I personally think electricity should be a top priority in future development initiatives.

While it was the lack of electricity that delayed the computer side of my project, it was ability to pay that delayed the fruition. We wanted to train women outside the woman's village to prevent direct competition, so we travelled to Darmang, a village about an hour away from Pokuase by tro-tro. We wanted to interview women in the Darmang and see if they would be interested in participating in the training program and what they would be willing to pay for it.

She had originally requested 80 Ghanaian cedis per person, but knowing that was too high a price for the women we wanted to target, we negotiated. The final deal she gave us was 50 Ghanaian cedis, which was still higher than desired, but nearer to our target. The second week of my work was spent recording the women's responses and I honestly was disappointed with the results. We needed to find at least 20 women who were willing to spend 50 Ghanaian cedis on the program for the training to actually happen. By the end of the week, we had only found four. Even if the women found the value in obtaining this skill, they could not necessarily front the money.

We had to regroup. We negotiated again with the woman and found that the lowest we could go was 30 Ghanaian cedis per person. Instead of going back to each individual and asking her if they would pay this, we decided to proceed with the registration process, as we were entering the last week of my stay. The village had a communication service we used to make the announcement that registration was now open and if one wished to sign up they should meet us at the youth center. This announcement was made twice a day for five days. By the end of my stay, we had only gotten two sign-ups...and surprisingly, they were men! This certainly had not gone as planned.

I left Ghana with a feeling of defeat in the sense that I had not accomplished the goal that was set for me by MicroQuips, but with a feeling of accomplishment and hope in the sense that I had learned a lot about the difficulties of working in a developing country and think that there is still great potential for skill-set training programs and microfinance in general. All in all, I found that what makes

microfinance such a great development tool is that the loans are not determined by ability to pay, but rather, by need. I support MicroQuip's innovation in wanting to add another division to their social enterprise model, but I remain confident in the sustainability of cash loans. Our client's success with three cash loans of increasing size is what brought us to our story today. Micro loans provide the basis for future growth. Maybe with subsidization, skill-set training programs could do the same.