Elizabeth O’Brien - Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

This summer I volunteered for 10 weeks in Dar Es Salaam Tanzania as director of the Cambridge Development initiative (CDI). Cambridge Development Initiative is a student run NGO that implements community centred development projects in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania for two months every summer. CDI works collaboratively with our student run locally based partner Kite Dar Es Salaam in the co-creation and implementation of our projects. CDI runs development programmes in four areas; Education, Entrepreneurship, Health and WaSH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene), engaging local organisations, government officials and members of the community in all areas.

As director, my role in CDI this summer was to oversee the implementation of CDI’s projects, volunteer engagement and overall organisational efforts. On the side of implementation oversight I worked directly with both the UK and Tanzanian project directors acting as a strategic consultant. Major decisions were brought to myself and my Tanzanian counterpart to discuss and resolve. Examples of this include the decision of whether or not CDI should continue investing resources into exploring the possibility of a simplified-sewerage biogas model in which sewage flows into a biodigester and is anaerobically converted to natural gas which is sold back to the community. After considering arguments for and against the executive team and I decided to postpone investing in a new biodigester until we have gathered more information in support of the model.

Another major project discussion facilitated by myself and the Tanzanian director was the decision to press ahead with filming short educational TV episodes providing information on the risks of non-communicable diseases. Although there were concerns about whether CDI would be pressing ahead too soon by getting filming completed this summer, the executive committee and I agreed that having physical content produced would put CDI and Kite Dar es Salaam’s Health project in a strong position for the following year.

Another key element of my role was ensuring that both the UK and Tanzanian volunteers remained engaged throughout the summer and had a clear understanding and enthusiasm surrounding CDI and Kite Dar es Salaam. I facilitated engagement through hosting open meetings for volunteers to allow wide discussions
surrounding the CDI model and the future of the organisation. Myself and the executive team also ran bi-weekly briefings to allow volunteers to engage in all four projects and wider CDI affairs. Efforts in volunteer engagement proved successful as the new CDI director along with many other committee positions were recruited from the volunteer cohort.

Alongside my roles in oversight and volunteer engagement I also had my own responsibilities focusing on ways to strengthen CDI as an organisation. Alongside my deputy directors we focused on three main areas; fundraising, personal development and handover. On the side of fundraising, we conducted an investigation into the relative successes of different fundraising strategies CDI has used in the past to generate recommendations for the coming year. Within the area of personal development we introduced a series of teamwork and communication workshops to facilitate productivity alongside one-two-one meetings targeting specific personal goals and an expanded volunteer training programme. On the side of handover myself and the executive team worked to compile a series of documents detailing the history of the organisation alongside a guidebook for the role of director. Physical handover documents will be accompanies by an apprenticeship programme until mid-Michaelmas.

CDI provided me with the opportunity to co-lead a team of over 70 UK and Tanzanian students as well as providing me with exposure to what it is like working in international development. This experience was pivotal in shaping my career ambitions moving forward.