One of the first classes I attended during my summer study abroad on Sustainable Community Development in Tanzania was held at MS-TCDC, a Dutch training center for volunteerism in suburban Arusha. We woke up in bungalows after a night of torrential downpour like I had never heard before, complemented by animal sounds foreign to me, ate a breakfast consisting of new foods, and ran across a still-rainy campus to class, carrying a cup of *chai masala* (tea) that I had learned was the standard beverage for Tanzanian. Upon arriving in class, we watched a TED Talk starring Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story”, discussing the problematic stereotyping of Africa and Africans.

The discussion made me second-guess the way I had been describing my experiences to friends and family back home: I had emailed my parents and a core friend group on a fairly regular basis, discussing only the things I found unusual, rather than experiences that were comparable to those I would have at home. For instance, I wrote about my experiences with “squatty potties,” and the monkeys that roam MS-TCDC’s campus. I did not write about the “western” toilets I had come across; nor did I acknowledge that MSU’s squirrel population is more rampant, and more comfortable with people, than the monkeys at TCDC.

These things seemed unusual to me because they were different. But by focusing on the differences, I had begun to ostracize Tanzania and Tanzanians. By thinking “this would never happen in the U.S.,” I was making an elitist comparison claiming that the United States is better. For the duration of my stay at TCDC, I was
very careful not to fall into the trap of judging; rather, I asked questions (why might this be the norm here?) and made comparisons (what similar things do we do in America that might be considered weird here?). I challenged myself to stretch my comfort and embrace and learn from the differences.

This became most difficult a couple of weeks into my trip, when my group began our research and fieldwork at Naitolia Primary School. This was the purpose of the trip – to work with the Tanzania Partnership Program (TPP, the NGO that funded and organized development projects in two Maasai villages in Tanzania) and Maasai villagers to bring positive change. When I first entered the village, I was startled to see the struggles villagers faced.

On a tour led by the headmistress, I learned that the school’s contract with World Food Program had ended, and that the school no longer offered lunches (because the Program had only provided food for four years, rather than help the school implement a plan of action to provide school lunches for years to come). While the school bounced around some ideas, such as a community garden, the absence of water was another hurdle they had to face: after years of planning, and seven months after the donated money reached the district office, the TPP Water Project that was supposed to pipe water to certain points in the village remained stagnant, so students and teachers attended school without food or water.

Still, for the next three and a half weeks, I worked with my colleagues to complete school betterment projects that were sustainable – finishing classrooms; building a model volcano to teach about Mount Kilimanjaro, only an hour’s drive away from the small village; creating teachers’ aides to help teach about difficult
topics; building netball hoops and tetherball courts so the students had an athletic outlet; and investigating the bureaucratic stopper on the Water Project. With my team, I interviewed village officials, schoolteachers, students, and district officials.

We accomplished a lot, but when I left, I could not help but think of all the things we had not done: the Standard 4 room had a solid floor, new chalkboards, and a fresh coat of paint, but no windowpanes. The netball court did not have lines. There were many more posters teachers wanted that we did not have the time or knowledge to make. Even worse, there was still no school lunch program, and no water. Students still walked very far to school, without water, many of whom have not even had breakfast, only to stay all day, learning and playing with friends, without any food or water there either. While I understood the complexities of the situation they were in, I was still frustrated, and felt like I was leaving the school in almost the same situation I found it in.

I was inspired to think about minor victories—we did not change the world, but how can we expect to in such a short amount of time? The point of the trip was not to fix everything, and it should not have been. Instead, I focused on what we did accomplish: we promoted change, encouraged activism, empowered people to stand up for themselves and their rights, and motivated these actions to occur even after we left. Naitolia villagers are still struggling. When depicted in the media, they are shown starving, with flies on their faces, herding cattle, alienated from modernity. What is not shown is the power, the positivity, the embrace of progress – women have taken to selling homemade jewelry, and men operate a cattle dip to keep their livestock healthy; kids go to school, and some even pursue higher
education. People stand up for their rights, demand water and food at school and village officer meetings. And things have started to change!

I've kept in touch with two of the teachers at Naitolia Primary. The pipes have finally been installed, and the school now has water. The students use the netball court and tetherball courts, and have enjoyed the help provided by the teachers’ aides. The teachers found the volcano model extremely beneficial, and have started to build other models on their own. This is what the point of sustainable community development is – grassroots changes that continue and expand, even without direct donor involvement.

I went to Tanzania this summer to see if I have what it takes to change the world. I now realize that expectation was naïve. My trip was exhausting, frustrating, saddening, and at times I felt helpless. What I learned is that development is messy. You cannot work to balance competing viewpoints, ideas, and desires, and come out of it completely clean. There is no true win-win situation, but that does not mean it has to be a lose-lose. Development is about compromise, about relationships, about understanding a culture and helping it to thrive, rather than to westernize it. It is a dialogue between modern and traditional, “West” and “rest,” but it does not have to be a competition. The strength and resiliency I see among people who, from an American perspective, have nothing, is remarkable, and I would love to learn from them and work with them so that we can empower each other. And as long as I approach these projects in a non-biased way, and portray our work positively, I learned that I can effect social change.