HECUA Reflection

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On January 3rd, 2009, twenty American HECUA (Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs) students arrived in Dhaka for a month long experiential learning opportunity in partnership with Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). We came from six different schools, and most of us had never met before the trip. We were bound solely by our shared experience of jetlag, the dense Dhaka traffic alive with rickshaws and honking, and the shocking climate change that took us from snow boots to sandals; winter coats to salwar kameez. Our lack of familiarity changed quickly, however, as we were welcomed warmly by IUB faculty and student guides. Together we shared visits to NGO offices, a garment factory, a city slum, a tea plantation in Srimangal, ancient palaces, tiny hotel rooms, and vibrant street markets. We traveled from village to village by bus, van, tempo, and rickshaw, over bumpy roads and around treacherous curves, all to absorb as much as we could about the meaning of development and community in Bangladesh.

We spent the majority of our trip in Koitta, Manikganj, for an experience modeled off of IUB's LFE program. For two weeks we divided our large team into smaller groups focusing on agriculture and the environment, education, gender, health, microcredit, and politics. Our research questions varied, but several factors tied the experience together for us all. Student-led discussions pushed us to situate our experiences within the broader context of development, while daily journals required constant reflection on and analysis of our field work. Within this relatively short time span students were exposed to novel opinions and values, and their craniums were packed full with vivid images and powerful words which continue to challenge our previously held assumptions about both community and development. Each day brought curious crowds, giggling children, and new chances for practicing Bangla. A new appreciation for the daily lives of the people living together in this country was formed as we mingled with the villagers and accepted their generous hospitality.

The power of a well-informed community and the necessity for their involvement in development has become clear to us after personally experiencing the formation of strong intercultural group bonds and seeing, smelling, and hearing the tightly knit village communities of Bangladesh. We are intimately aware of the complexities within a culture and, therefore, the importance of mutual understanding and inclusive decision making in the creation of sustainable change. Our group would like to extend many thanks to both the IUB and HECUA staff members who made this trip possible; to our three wonderful professors; and to our seven hardworking student guides for their translations, organization, and friendship (not to mention haggling)we could not have done it without you.