IT University Travel Report

The Social GIS Project

A research study on identifying user perspective, in order to create chance of successful GIS implementation

Collaborators:

The Danish department of Engineers Without Borders, the worldwide NGO Caritas as well as several local, Bolivian actors.

Study Program at IT University:

Global Business Informatics

Activity Abroad:

Field study: data collection for our bachelor project.

Research Period: Spring 2015
Your stay abroad

Project description
At the municipality of Coroico, in the South American country Bolivia, there is currently a great amount of issues concerning the environment. To counteract this, the Danish NGO Engineers Without Borders (EWB-DK), and a group of local Bolivian organizations, had started a collaboration with the end goal of making an environmental plan, that could enable the locals to solve their issues themselves. One of the initiatives taken to do so, was to implement a geographical information system (GIS), that could allow the locals to make, distribute, and use maps in order to visualize the many challenges they are facing. This however, proved to be difficult, as there are many different challenges, that besides their immediate complications have a set of social, and economic complexities bound to them. Our bachelor project wished to unpack some of these challenges, and investigate issue areas where there might be less complications present. In the end we wanted to suggest an approach that would create a chance for a successful implementation; beneficial to the locals and the organizations alike.

Our research was done from November 2014 to June 2015. In that period, a field study took place in Coroico, Bolivia from the 16th of March 2015 to the 2nd of April 2015, where we were investigating the issues first hand. During this time we spoke to the different involved organizations and actors in order to get a full understanding of the various perspectives, and challenges the implementation of a GIS could pose in Coroico. Through this data, and reflections on theory from the field of Information and Communication Technologies for Development, we made a report, suggesting an approach to dealing with the identified challenges, so that the technology could be implemented with success, while it also remained sustainable and capable of progression in the future.

What was your initial motivation for doing global research for your bachelor?
We wanted a do something different with our bachelor - that was our initial motivation. We wanted to make a project that really dealt with what we found academically interesting. This was our opportunity to do a project on exactly what we wanted. We also really wanted to do a project that mattered, meaning we really wanted to collaborate with an NGO, because these
organizations typically do not have too large a budget. This would mean that our academic expertise would really come to good use. In the end it was a crab load of work - but it was more than worth it!

Please describe what you got out of your stay, both personally and academically, and how do you expect it to contribute to your further studies?

Working in a cultural setting much different than what we were used to presented some challenges, but mostly it was an enriching experience, both personally and academically. We quickly realized that we had to alter the approaches and methods we took with us from Denmark, in order to contribute to the project. As many standards when doing projects in Bolivia were so different from what we were used to, we decided to approach the project with an open mind and learned that doing things differently can be both positive, and giving. It was a great experience that have left us both intrigued to do relatable work in a global setting.

Arranging your stay

Planning the trip to Bolivia took several hours of meetings and communication with EWB-DK, and the humanitarian organization Caritas. When we made the project agreement with EWB-DK in October 2014, our planning began. The final details of the stay were settled only a day before our travel to Bolivia. Several factors like: Language, and time difference made the communication troublesome, and resulted in many misunderstandings before a common understanding of the purpose and requirements of our stay were defined. Furthermore, since the general technical standard were remarkably lower in Bolivia, it could sometimes take days to get a reply on email, since they had little to none access to the internet.

Please give a short description of the process involved in arranging your stay:

Initially we wrote to several Danish organizations that we knew did projects where they involved students in the research. We looked into companies of our interests. This was our list:

- IBM
- DESIGNIT
We got proposals from both Innoaid and EWB-DK, but in the end we chose to collaborate with EWB-DK because their projects sounded more interesting. In the beginning of the project we did a lot of interviews with the organization, in order for them to size us up and make sure that we would fit into their project. This took a lot of time - but in the end it was worth it, because it really showed us that they were serious about a collaboration with us.

After we became a part of the GIS-group at EWB-DK, we started to attend all their meetings and also started to coordinate with our collaborators in Bolivia. It was a lot of emailing back and forth in order to get our stay arranged as much as possible, because we went down there. It was tough because the scarcity of internet in Bolivia and their lack of coordination skills limited us to only having the most essential stuff coordinated, because we arrived. It did though, in the end, all work out.

**How did you arrange practicalities such as accommodation?**

The organizations involved in the project helped us with getting rooms to stay in during our travel, and helped us getting around in Bolivia. We had to pay for the plane tickets ourselves, but details like local transport, and housing were taken care of for us. This was of course, as mentioned before, only possible due to months of planning.

**Expenses and Financing**

**Did you apply for scholarships and would you recommend any ones in particular?**

We did look into multiple scholarships, however the amount of scholarships dedicated for bachelor projects were quite limited, so even though we found a decent handful, we were only
eligible to apply for three of them. Two of them responded that they had received our application, but no further messages regarding scholarships have been received.

**Recommendations for other students:**
It is never too early to start planning!! Figure out what you find most interesting about your line of study - and run with it. The bachelor project is the perfect opportunity to dig into your favorite topic. It is hard work to go abroad to do research but it really did give us a lot of experience and a great bachelor project! Just do it!