Letter from the Editor

In this semester’s issue, we bring you stories from around the world: projects in India, Jordan, the Philippines, Cambodia, as well as right here in the United States. We’ve also had the pleasure of giving you the opportunity to hear from Ms. Priyanka Borpujari, a Bombay-based independent journalist, and an IWMF Elizabeth Neuffer’s Fellow. We hope you enjoy learning about the projects that MIT students are affiliates are pursuing each and every day – and I thank you for continuing to read.

That brings me to say that this semester’s issue will be my last on the Komaza team, as it’s time for me to graduate. It is a surprise that almost 2 years have passed since I have become editor of this magazine, and three since I joined the team! I have to say that Komaza has transformed quite a bit from when I first started working on it, and I have thoroughly enjoyed the journey.

It’s been a pleasure to work with the Komaza team, and I am excited to see what it will grow into in the years to come.

Yours truly,
Sudha
Maps give people a spatial identity. As the construction of settlements in slums is typically uncontrolled, many slum dwellers do not even exist in the eyes of the government. With maps that depict the slums, the government must acknowledge the living spaces of all people.

NGOs can also benefit from maps in their work. Without maps, it is often hard for NGOs to gain an overview of the conditions of various communities. Maps can help provide basic information such as what resources are available to a community, what kind of stores are nearby, and approximately how many families reside in the community.

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This IAP, Susanna Pho (Course 4, G) and Jie Zhang (Course 4, G), second-year Masters students in the architecture department, worked on low-cost aerial mapping with balloons in Ahmedabad, India. The hope was that the aerial maps could be used as an empowerment tool that facilitates dialogue between communities and the government. They became interested in the topic of aerial mapping after taking a class at MIT on structural low income housing in developing countries.

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Susanna and Jie have talked to many NGOs that have been using GIS and GPS mapping to facilitate work in the past. However, GIS and GPS data were too expensive to sustain as a long-term solution. Google Maps provides aerial maps as well, but for the purposes of many NGOs, the resolution of Google Maps is not detailed enough. Specifics such as water-wells, trash receptacles, and vehicles are not easily recognized. Hence, Susanna and Jie’s method of low-cost mapping fulfills a missing gap.
The key to Susanna and Jie’s aerial maps are balloons. Mapping balloons are helium-filled and have a camera attached to them. While the balloons cannot be steered in the air, they can be easily launched, retrieved, and launched again at a new location. Balloon mapping is widely utilized all over the world. Susanna and Jie also attempted to use kites, but Ahmedabad’s narrow and windy roads made it hard to find enough space to run and launch a kite.

Different NGOs have different end-goals for the maps in mind. Some are interested in documenting historical aspects of Ahmedabad. Others hope to gain an overall understanding of the area in which a community is located and how residents use space at different day times. The purposes for maps are creative—and numerous.

On the ground, apart from creating a few maps, the team’s main focus was to train NGOs on the map-making process. Through knowledge dissemination, NGOs will have the capacity to easily compile maps for themselves in the future.

One of the biggest challenges Susanna and Jie had to overcome was communicating the importance of maps to a community that hardly had experience with maps. But by consistently talking with community members and NGO staff, they were able to paint a convincing rationale. Once they began launching balloons to make maps, the NGOs and communities became very excited about the project and were very interested in continuing it.

Currently, Susanna and Jie regularly keep in touch with the NGOs they have trained to follow up on how the mapping knowledge is being used. Though the team does not have plans to return to Ahmedabad in the near future, it seems that the NGOs they have worked with are now empowered with maps and balloons.

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Sitting Down with

Priyanka Borpujari

by Sudha Guttikonda

Development, anywhere, must first start with the identification of what needs to be developed in a community. Independent journalism offers just that, acting as a lens into the conditions of a society. Priyanka Borpujari is an independent journalist based in Mumbai, India, and is a 2012-13 International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) Elizabeth Neuffer’s Fellow. The fellowship offers the opportunity for women journalists who have focused on social justice to get access to MIT’s Center for International Studies, The Boston Globe, and The New York Times.

At MIT, Borpujari displayed a powerful message through her photography exhibit at the Rotch library, “The Human Cost of India’s Race for Development,” in which she questioned the selectivity of media and highlights the stories of individuals who were downtrodden upon India’s industrialization. I had the pleasure of speaking with Borpujari to gather her thoughts on journalism and advice to students like you and me.

Tranquil moments like these may not be visible again in Assam, in the north-eastern part of India. The construction of the 2,000 MW Lower Subansiri Hydro Electric Project on the Assam-Arunachal Pradesh border has gravely affected the habitat of elephants. No wonder then they “attack” human beings after “straying” into villages.

© Priyanka Borpujari
How did you break into the field of independent journalism?

I held several different jobs in different newspaper publications. While they were all very enriching in teaching me a lot of things, none of them were giving me the chance to write about the core issues that ailed India. At that time there was a lot of violence going on in India, in Central India especially with the land grab, and I saw that there was no publication that was covering that issue. So that’s when I realized that I’d have to venture out on my own, because I really believe that journalism has to do with duty and democracy, since I believed in that I realized that the only possible way to do that is to become an independent journalist. I started as a freelance journalist initially, and now I do work entirely independently.

About journalism in general: how do you translate raising awareness to producing alternatives and making situations better?

Well here’s the thing, if we do not have an honest and critical view of the status quo, nothing can get better. And journalism is supposed to be that critical voice of the society in portraying what should be and shouldn’t be taking place. Now, for that you definitely need a certain level of freedom of the press, which seems to be pretty absent either in the United States or definitely in India, I mean journalism seems to be something that is taking place only to appease certain types of masses.

If you look at the world around us, it’s just obvious how the mass media, continues day in and day out to affect our lives. Look at the way how the mass media is driving our consumerism. Look at the way how everyone seems to have a desperate need to own an iPhone. It’s not a need, and so on the one hand, it’s talking about a perceived need, on the other hand, it’s not talking about how these iPhones are being made, how it’s driving a war in the Democratic Republic of Congo for the need of coltan which is used to form such products. Media cannot afford to be so selective in what it is they are portraying and what it is they aren’t, and then it is up to citizens to read between the lines to understand what is being told to them and what is the truth. Journalism is the mirror to society, but often you do not get to hear the stories because the mirrors are blurred.

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On this side of the dam is the state of Gujarat; on the other side is Maharashtra. This old couple of the Vasavi tribe walks carefully, waiting through the tide, to cross to Maharashtra, after having visited their extended family on this side. They are able to do so successfully because it is winter. In monsoon, when the water levels are higher, they have to deal with 500-meter food lines - with several knapsacks and change of vehicles - which would last them a week’s earning.

What is the toughest part of your job currently, or through the development of your career?

I refrain from the word career, because what I’m doing is completely a passion, and it’s something completely out of love, so I refrain using that as career because it’s pretty much my life. But the toughest thing is sometimes to get published, to get people to understand. Well, also, in India, there are so many languages, and the issues that pertain to one area offer lessons to other areas, but there is a language gap. I think my biggest problem is sometimes getting the mainstream media to realize that what I’m writing about is important.

How do you get mainstream media to pay attention?

It’s tough, it’s really tough. I’m here on the fellowship in hopes that I will be able to get the mainstream media to understand what is happening in India and how it is connected to them, but that doesn’t quite happen easily, and it doesn’t happen in India either. I think it’s a lot of relentless work and not giving up, and realizing that what I’m doing is important for my soul as it is for the people who I’m writing about. They are never allowed to speak, they are always silent.

How would they get started?

There are two things. I definitely have faced dangers in my life because of my journalism, I have had the police attack me and all of that, I’ve had my camera being snatched away from me. All of that seems negligible when compared to the people about whom I’m writing, and what they face, before I visited them and after I visited them, so the fear isn’t that, it’s that these stories will get lost some day, and that these people will just not be heard about, because there’s just nobody who wants to talk about them.

And then there’s also the fear that just because I have said something, there are people who are passionate about doing something, they just go in there without sufficient thought process – and this you especially see from huge universities like Harvard and MIT – and so many others, they think they are the problem solvers of the world, often they go into a place and make matters worse because they don’t have any understanding of the place. And then the fear is that the people will become so apathetic that they begin to feel that “it doesn’t concern me” and that is very wrong, because everything concerns everyone.

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What advice would you give to students who want to do something meaningful in an international development setting, or in the world?

You need to go down to the people and sit and talk to them. Just listen to them with your mouth shut, and your eyes and ears open wide. That’s the only way you can understand why there is development, or why there is no development. Secondly, even if you want to go and do something good with your life, you don’t have to go far away to an African or an Indian country, look at the situation in your own country, question it.

It’s going to be a lot of personal consultation too. Before going to help out someone, it’s necessary to question your own motive and why. If you’re doing it just because it looks good on the resume and you just want to feel good about something, then you better stay out of it. I actually read a very interesting quote about this, “Come and talk to me only if you feel that your liberation is directly connected to my liberation.” Only then do it, nobody needs to save anyone else, you know? Also, sometimes helping someone means being less of a consumer yourself.

There are many things that can be done and have to be done, it all depends on where the person is from, and which lessons play a personal role.

What has been your most rewarding experience?

Oh, there have been so many, I can’t explain! As much as the troubles have been huge, the rewards have been great, and the rewards are ones that I cannot put into tangible terms. There have been so many times when I’ve gone into villages and people have just embraced me openly, you know? And it’s amazing that in Indian villages when you travel, they are just ready to open up their hearts and souls up to you, and let you stay with them and eat with them. That is absolutely amazing.

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In developing countries, there is a clear shortage of formal savings accounts for low-income earners. With no commercial bank willing to save their money, individuals from poor households often resort to paying others to hold their money to avoid the temptation of spending it. The obvious alternative to savings is to purchase on credit. However, credit can be extremely costly and can potentially put poor households in debt.

**Bluelight in Jordan**

by Naina Mehta

MIT Ph.D. candidate in EECS, Hoda Eydgahi, sees this as an opportunity for change. With a team of MIT Sloan and Harvard students, she launched Bluelight, a social enterprise. Bluelight aims to use the power of micro-layaway and micro-franchising to provide low-income earners in developing countries with alternatives to expensive credit.

A layaway is an agreement between a retailer and a consumer in which the consumer pays a deposit to reserve the goods, which are held until the consumer pays the full amount. The consumer fulfills the payment in installments over a given period of time. If the consumer fails to complete the payment, the goods are returned to stock and the consumer’s money is refunded.

Big retailers like Kmart and Sears have their own layaway programs for customers. Bluelight introduces this model in developing countries with the hopes of offering more flexible payment options for low-income earners.

**Bluelight aims to use the power of micro-layaway and micro-franchising to provide low-income earners with alternatives to expensive credit.**

This IAP, the team was in Jordan to launch its pilot program of Bluelight. Ikeda says, “It’s been an amazingly productive time for us… We now have our first five customers.” He adds that, “Getting our first customer has been a very memorable moment. It’s the culmination of a lot of hard work by everyone on the team.”

The idea of this innovative consumer finance platform was first conceived when team member John Ikeda, a Harvard Kennedy School student, was leading a micro-savings project for the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Recognizing that lack of collateral puts low-income consumers at a disadvantage for commercial savings products, he wondered if the concept of layaway, successful in the US, could provide access to savings for the bottom of the pyramid in developing countries.

With no commercial bank willing to save their money, individuals from poor households often resort to paying others to hold their money to avoid the temptation of spending it.

Over the summer, the team will make another trip to Jordan to plan the next stage in the development of the pilot. The team will meet multiple grant making organizations and investors to source resources and funding to take Bluelight to the next level.
Four weeks for America
by Kali Xu

Do you worry about the education of kids in America these days? Have you ever thought about how you can make a difference without becoming a teacher yourself?

The MIT Public Service Center and Teach for America (TFA) joined forces for the sixth time to offer MIT students the opportunity to teach for Teach for America (TFA) joined forces for the sixth time to offer MIT students the opportunity to teach for six weeks of IAP. Teach for America for six weeks, to offer teachers solve educational problems over IAP 2013 through the Four Weeks for America program. Development starts at Teach for America (TFA) joined forces for the sixth time to offer MIT students a chance to help teachers solve educational problems over IAP 2013 through the Four Weeks for America Challenge. Development starts at home, and the Four Weeks program allows just that by handling education in low-income settings.

During this year’s program, thirteen students traveled to six different states: California, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Washington D.C., and Massachusetts. The Four Weeks for America Challenge was founded in 2008 and has since sent 55 MIT students across the country to work in a variety of schools. The program’s success has inspired similar models at Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and several other universities.

During the program, the students are fully immersed in the teaching experience: they live with their host teacher, go to school every day with their host, and participate in their host’s after-school activities. The students have the challenge of working with a Teach for America science or math teacher to develop a unique classroom project that will sustain an impact beyond their four weeks of IAP.

This IAP, Shilpa Agrawal (’14) worked in the rural town of Anthony in New Mexico. In Anthony, a major concern is community safety: the town is located on the New Mexico-Texas border, by Mexico’s Ciudad Juarez, one of the world’s most dangerous cities due to drug cartel activity and violence.

Shilpa worked at Gadsden High School, where she noticed a severe lack of college culture. Some students had never heard of colleges outside of New Mexico, most did not know how to apply to college, and many did not even care about graduating high school. Students at Gadsden were not well aware of opportunities for higher education, so the goal of Shilpa’s project was to increase college awareness and improve college resources through a series of workshops.

Many of the seniors expect to go to college after graduating, but do not know anything about the application process so they never apply.

One day after school, Shilpa met with a student, a senior with a two-year-old child, who had said she was planning to attend New Mexico State University (NMSU) to study nursing after graduating high school. However, when asked if she was already accepted, the student replied that she had not even applied yet, though it was already at the end of January. Shilpa observed this as a common situation at Gadsden: many of the seniors expect to go to college after graduating, but do not know anything about the application process so they never apply.

Shilpa sat down with this particular senior and helped her traverse the entire NMSU application, as well as made plans to register for the ACT and to fill out the FAFSA financial aid forms. In such a situation, just one hour of guidance can change a student’s life, yet many students do not ever get this hour of individual attention. And in a place where there is no college culture, most of those students will never head to college.

Matthew Kasenga, a Leaders for Global Operations dual degree engineering and MBA student (’13, G), spent his Four Weeks working at the Lilla G. Frederick Pilot Middle School. Located in the Boston neighborhood of Dorchester, the school is in the heart of an underprivileged urban community that is very ethnically and socioeconomically diverse. Working with TFA teacher Rayneed Grewal, Matthew created and taught a science curriculum focused on experimental design, centered on a plant growth project. Students learned the scientific method, plant biology, and basic data collection skills. After school each day, Matthew also tutored small groups of students for extra enrichment.

Matthew’s experience working with ELL (English language learner) and SIPE (Students with Interrupted Formal Education) students showed him that the problems with education, especially in low-income areas, are larger than those that any one teacher can solve. Students who barely speak English and are still adjusting to the classroom environment face the challenge of culture shock in addition to academic hardship. Matthew saw that some of these students put in an amazing amount of effort, coming to tutoring sessions after school, continually trying to answer questions in class, and turning in homework covered in eraser marks proving multiple attempts to find the correct answer. Most students, however, do not understand the importance of education because they are constantly surrounded by serious distractions outside of the classroom—drugs, guns, and prostitution, to name a few.

The importance of having passionate, inspiring teachers who understand the importance of education has never been more prominent as the U.S. slips in worldwide education rankings. The negative effect of income inequality on education is becoming very clear, but education reform is a tough process. Programs like Teach for America are beginning to tackle this problem by sending motivated recent college graduates to low-income communities to promote academic achievement and cultivate potential in all students, but to truly reform education in America, both teaching and education administration have much to improve.

For more information about Shilpa’s Four Weeks experience, visit her blog at http://iapinnewmexico.wordpress.com/.

Map of American colleges for informing Gadsden students
Photo Credit: Shilpa Agrawal

komaza | spring 2013
SEALNet
at MIT
by Amita Gupta

“They told us it was the first time regular Cambodians came to help them,” said SEALNet co-president Ivana Polim (Course 18C, ’15) and Hikaru Miyazaki (Course 20, ’15). It is bound to be a life-changing experience, as it was for Park last year. Being immersed in a different culture, Park saw the difference in conditions as well as values. When it was possible, Park would take left over food after team dinners to a mall where homeless children congregated. “They smiled so much more with the food than when we gave them money,” she noticed.

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Excited children from Project Cambodia 2012

Since then, SEALNet has enacted over 35 projects in many Southeast Asian countries including Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. MIT—one of three officially recognized SEALNet chapters—is currently working in Cambodia and the Philippines.

SEALNet’s projects require dedicated commitment and planning from its global member base. For example, 7 months before she traveled, Polim worked with 14 other SEALNet members to create 3 separate curriculums to teach at a school for Cambodian disabled youth. In Cambodia’s Kandal province, the disabled youth face many significant challenges, including using “wheelchairs made out of plastic chairs with an aluminum bar with the wheels attached,” Polim said. In the disabled youth shelter, Polim emphasized English language skills and computer usage to create new employment opportunities for disabled youth.

Knocking on doors, the high school students distributed pamphlets and touted lemongrass as a natural mosquito repellent to many families. Mosquito-related illnesses such as Dengue Fever were present in Leyte, but few knew how these diseases were transmitted. An awareness event held at their school attracted over 50 community members.

A year later, Phil Kamtue (Course 18, ’15) and Ranjini Menon, a Malaysian SEALNet member, are expanding the chapter’s Cambodia project for summer 2013. They are hoping to recruit local businesspeople to offer internships to disabled youth—as an important step for future employment. So far, their team includes 5 MIT members and undergraduates from other American colleges, such as Harvard, UPenn and Wesleyan.

In Summber 2012, the Philippines-Leyte project was implemented, which aims to instill richer scientific inquiry and “can-do” attitudes into science and engineering high school students. At the Philippine Science High School, students participated in various problem-solving activities for one week, such as a miniature roller coaster building competition to sharpen their creative approach. During the second week, participants worked outside the high school with their fifteen SEALNet mentors in the community to combat needs they were unaware of just a month earlier. For example, well water typically contained bacteria and worms rendering it unsafe for household activities. After students designed a low-cost water filter, the well water could now be used to rinse clothes or dishes.

Finally, the mentees began tutoring themselves after noticing students at a local elementary school did not have notebooks. The SEALNet participants began a notebook-recycling program at their own school and decorated the notebook covers with the younger children. On the covers, the younger children drew their future goals—with many aspiring to be doctors or teachers.

In the Philippines, attending high school is a privilege. Traditionally, the talents of Filipino scientists are only utilized in the classroom and the laboratory, not in service-oriented ventures. “There is a huge gap in using scientific skills in society,” Park explains. Francis Plaza (Course 6, ’13) wanted to return to his native Philippines and change this, and this August, the Leyte project will be continued under the direction of Carmela Lao (Course 18C, ’15) and Hikaru Miyazaki (Course 20, ’15).

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SEALNet provides the spark for locally-led international development projects. It couples international service with local leadership of high school students.
And the SEALNet experience doesn’t end when the trip ends. As Polim explains, SEALNet is the “perfect platform for people who are passionate.” Having a disabled family member herself, Polim shares a personal connection with her project. She was able to coordinate Project Cambodia 2012 all year long by serving as a project lead.

This summer, SEALNet will see the first 2013 Youth Leadership Summit for its past and present participants. High school and university students who have ever participated as mentees in SEALNet programs, across the world, will finally be able to meet.

Back at MIT, Polim describes SEALnet as her family. After their weekly Friday meeting ends at 6:30, members stay to chat and joke around with each other.

“SEALNet is one level up from friends—it’s a support system,” she says.

Students interested in learning more about SEALnet can check out http://www.projectscambodia.org or http://pp12leyte.tumblr.com/ to view daily blogs about its projects. They may also contact SEALnet directly at sealnet-exec@mit.edu.

The Service Learning Program (SLP) is a one-week flagship initiative of the MIT China Development Initiative. It brings 6 to 7 MIT undergraduates who are interested in the development of China to either Beijing or Shenzhen every summer. These MIT mentors design their own curriculum, which focuses on community service and leadership training for a selected group of motivated high school students. I was one of the MIT mentors for SLP 2011 in Shenzhen, a prosperous coastal city in the very south of China.

Out of hundreds of applications from ambitious high-schoolers, only 50 are selected through interviews conducted by MIT mentors. The participants in the program come from some of the best high schools in the city. At the same time, they are a very diverse group of students who have a range of interests, always curious and passionate about making their community a better place.

Designing the curriculum is the unique aspect of the SLP program. The MIT mentors have the flexibility to introduce their own creativity into the workshops they hold throughout the school week. I remember six of us holding late night meetings at the hotel and having lively discussions about the activities for the next day. The objective of the workshops is to foster teamwork, collaboration, leadership, and social awareness among the students.

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Besides coming up with our own workshops, the most fun part of SLP is the day-to-day interactions with students. From fun games, class discussions, to informal lunches and late-night karaoke, the mentors and the students can forge a strong bond that lasts beyond the one-week program. My favorite game was the Prisoner’s Dilemma, in which the participants had to think about their own collaboration and competition strategies to win more candies. Of course, it brought the students a lot of laughter as well. While mentors fulfill their passion for teaching and influencing youth, students can hone their communication and presentation skills through the experiential form of education that is not common in China.

The highlight of the program is a visit to a neighborhood school for the children of migrant workers. Migrant workers are individuals who come from the rural parts of China seeking employment in the city. They work low-paying jobs and therefore live below the poverty line, ending up in a disadvantaged position in the community. The students of the SLP program design their own activities to engage the local students, helping them with their English as well. This is a true testament to the newly learned leadership and communication skills of the SLP students. At the end of the one-week training, the program participants are challenged to design their own community service project that is sustainable and will have a long-lasting impact on the community.

You can find out more about SLP at http://cdi.mit.edu/, and can contact CDI at mailto:mit-cdi@mit.edu.
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