Interning with IDEWES

By Shannon Ericson

# Beginnings

Every good story starts with a good beginning, and that is true of my experience with IDEWES, otherwise known as the Institute for Development and Welfare Services. A professor from Carlile College, and a local expert on economics and business, Alvin Mbola, took a few of us students to visit two potential organizations for our internships. The first organization appeared very formal and geared more towards microfinance. The second organization was much smaller and focused on community service and empowerment. After some discussion amongst the students, we decided that the two of them would go to the first and I would go to the second – what is known as IDEWES.

When I first went to IDEWES to discuss my role as an intern with them, they were extremely welcoming. I was invited to eat lunch with them at a small, local restaurant, and was given some material to read to orient me to the economic empowerment program that they offer to the local community members. Upon finishing this material, I was invited to observe and help monitor some of the savings and loans groups that meet on a weekly basis just outside the IDEWES office. I was introduced, offered a seat, and allowed to observe and participate as much as I desired. From that point on, I was considered a part of their organizational family and encouraged to participate in as many activities as I could or wanted to experience. Among them have been a human rights club in a primary school, conducting a child status inventory of children with disabilities within the community, conducting a poverty analysis, writing reports and grants, discussing societal issues, and translating Spanish songs into English during our down time in the office (upon request of my coworkers). It has been a very enjoyable and enlightening experience, as I have the opportunity to actively observe IDEWES listen and respond to their community’s cries for assistance and support.

# Origins of IDEWES

IDEWES officially began in 2001 when Judy Muga, a nurse, recognized the need for extra services and care for women and children living or affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the informal settlement of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya. She began as a resource center and hub for women with HIV/AIDS and has expanded to now address a multitude of other issues. To date, her organization offers programs such as: home based care (HBC), orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) care and support, reproductive health awareness, HIV/AIDS awareness and education, economic empowerment through savings and credit schemes including group savings and loans (GS&L) and income generating activities (IGAs), human rights programs, civic engagement, peace building and advocacy. This has resulted in the need for permanent and voluntary staff to assist her as well as a number of local collaborations with likeminded organizations. According to their mission statement IDEWES works, “to enable communities in Kibera to achieve their maximum potential by enhancing their capacity and providing them with opportunities,” and they have successfully created a good name for themselves in their locale with this mission in mind.

# Economic Empowerment Methodology

As per the nature of my internship, my role was to work closely with IDEWES’s economic empowerment program. Instead of being a microenterprise like many others in their community, IDEWES espouses the methodology of self-help groups and group savings and loans. Beginning with one group of women living with HIV/AIDS, they now have a total of 46 groups that meet within the community to work towards saving and creating income generating activities (IGAs). Thirteen of these groups remain dependent on IDEWES as they continue to learn the skills and values necessary to maintain good finances and group cohesiveness while the rest meet outside of the organization and are monitored on a monthly basis.

One of the most influential aspects of their economic empowerment program is that it is completely determined by the needs and desires of the community members. If there are some individuals that wish to start their own savings and loans groups, then IDEWES will start a training for them upon their request. During the trainings, they teach the importance of good group management and cooperation, emphasizing the need to look at one’s own conduct before judging another’s. They also teach foundational skills for selecting group leadership, creating group constitutions and regulations, enforcing group standards, and resolving conflict. Additionally, they teach the importance of savings, the necessity of loans and interest, and basic table banking skills. They advise each group on best practices for group savings and loans that will result in the greatest financial gain for each member. From there, they help the group format a book for table banking and help them through the first year, monitoring their meetings and checking their financial records to ensure that everything is being done correctly and efficiently. After that, the group can decide whether or not they want to continue for the next year and if they want to continue to use IDEWES’s assistance or begin meeting on their own.

After observing a number of groups, I came to notice a certain pattern in the regulations that the groups utilize. Most groups have mandated that a certain amount of money must be saved each week. This amount varies from group to group, but each member is expected to produce this money either week by week or at least month by month. Additionally, if a member arrives late to a meeting, they are typically charged a small fee. This is to ensure timeliness and to emphasize the importance of each member equally contributing to the weekly meetings. Another commonality is the amount of interest that is charged for each loan. Most groups have determined that a 10% interest rate is fair and reasonable for each member to pay. This interest is taken from the initial loan and applies up to the date the total loan repayment is due. If a member is not able to pay the entire loan by the specified date, then an additional 10% will be added to the remaining loan balance. Some groups also try to ensure the timely repayment of loans by only allowing group members to withdraw loans as large as the amount of money they have saved within the group. Finally, to make sure that the group ends the year with a positive balance, they typically utilize the last quarter of the year as a “loan repayment period” during which no additional loans are allowed to be taken. This helps the group reach a positive balance and ensures that each group member receives their full savings along with the dividends accumulated through the collection of group fees and interests.

Perhaps the most insightful observation into the culture of Kibera was that the majority of those participating in the economic empowerment program were women. There was only one savings and loans group that was solely men, and they currently only have five members. Other groups were either completely female or contained only one or two male members. When I asked about this and conducted some of my own research, I came to understand that socially, these groups are seen as women’s groups. A man might take out a microfinance loan or join a *chama* (a Kenyan version of the ROSCA model), but he would not typically join a savings and loans group. This is partially due to the fact that so many women have joined these groups and their husbands see no reason for them both to be members of a savings group. In my own opinion, I think it also has some implications for the role of women as the primary breadwinners and housekeepers, meaning that they must also be the money managers. Another explanation is that men typically have better access to financial security measures than women in Kibera, meaning that they do not have as great a need as women to join a savings and loans group. Women often join multiple groups as a method of providing “self-insurance” for times of crisis, such as death, illness, injury, or economic downturns. In short, the underrepresentation of men in the economic empowerment program reflects a cultural gender role along with a societal lack of opportunity for women.

One of the few critiques that I have for IDEWES’s economic empowerment program is to improve their form of analysis. While they keep track of monthly figures regarding cumulative group savings and loans, they do not analyze these things on an individual level. I think it would benefit them greatly to see the progress that individuals are achieving as a result of their program and the decrease in poverty level as a result of the group work. I tried to start them off in this manner by creating a tool they could use to analyze their groups and members, however, their data from previous years was so poor, that I was unable to create a quality example to demonstrate with.

# Collaboration with Class Materials and Discussions

As I have observed IDEWES’s organizational structure and program methodology, I have seen many consistencies and applications of theory that have been discussed during class. One of the most striking applications is the focus on saving as the primary form of economic empowerment. What many microfinance organizations do is focus on credit as the force of poverty alleviation, but this is not actually a biblical theory. Throughout the Bible, people are told not to owe anything to their brother or neighbor and are encouraged to repay their debts. Even in Jubilee, all debts are canceled, because it is not good to be in debt in God’s eyes. Therefore, savings is a much more biblical point of reference. In Alvin Mbola’s small business manuals, he encourages his students to only take out loans for what is needed – if you know of a friend or family member that has a piece of equipment or some material that you need for your business, first approach them before taking out a loan to buy the same thing brand new. Grigg also talks of only taking loans for activities that will generate income, and not just taking out loans for personal use. There is a specific place for loans and they can be beneficial, but only when they are used wisely. Thus, with the group savings and loans model, IDEWES is promoting biblical principles of savings while also providing opportunities for loans as needed.

Additionally, IDEWES focuses on group collaboration rather than individual achievement. While they do conduct individual home visits and sessions, they work to empower groups of people to help each other, rather than simply providing for everyone’s every need. This is a very biblical principle, as it is acknowledging the dignity of every human being and their God-given skills and responsibility for stewardship and working creatively. They promote this both through their programs and through their work together, as a team of staff that aim for a common goal.

In the past, IDEWES also had a small microfinance enterprise working from their office. For some reason or another, the project was disbanded. However, they still maintain the manuals that they utilized for that program. For their community, they mobilized microfinance loans through a group format, giving one large loan to a group of people who would then determine the size and amount of loans giving to each member. This encouraged greater loan repayment rates, as they group could not take out another loan until each member had paid their portion of the loan. This takes Grameen’s format and contextualizes it to the communal nature of Kibera and Kenyan lifestyles.

Overall, I have been very encouraged and inspired by the work that IDEWES is doing within their community. As they focus on empowerment of the community and its members, there is evidence that they are actually making a positive impact. The local people know that IDEWES is a resource for them to use and they feel both valued and important as a result.

# Internship Hours & Activity

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| **DATE** | **HOURS** | **ACTIVITY** |
| 5.6.2014 | 6 | Introduction to organization, group savings and loans, staff, etc. |
| 5.8.2014 | 2 | Attended and met a savings and loans group |
| 5.12.2014 | 2 | Attended and met a savings and loans group |
| 5.16.2014 | 2 | Attended and met a savings and loans group, visited a school group for Human Rights and Health Education and distributed books and pencils |
| 5.20.2014 | 2 | Discussed and signed student learning contract with organization and supervisor |
| 5.22.2014 | 2 | Discussed evaluation and microfinance program (future project) |
| 5.29.2014 | 2.5 | Discussed plans for the CSI (Child Status Inventory) for tomorrow, attended a savings and loans group |
| 5.30.2014 | 5 | Participated in the local CSI and poverty analysis of women with children with disabilities (visited homes, conducted interviews) |
| 6.6.2014 | 2.5 | Created Excel spreadsheet for GSL Data from 2006-2007 for Erick Omondi |
| 6.9.2014 | 1 | Updated a data analysis tool on GSL groups for this year for Paul |
| 6.11.2014 | 1 | Gathered data from the CSI and helped create graphs to demonstrate the data |
| 6.16.2014 | 2.75 | Began working on a project to compare the first year of each GSL group with the last year to determine improvement and effectiveness of the program; assisted writing a report on the human rights program |
| 6.17.2014 | 3 | Continued work on my comparison project |
| 6.24.2014 | 1.5 | Helped draft a letter to send out to potential funders; attempted to work more on my project |
| 6.25.2014 | 1.5 | Edited funding letter with coworkers; was unable to continue my project due to lack of information and data – left early |
| 6.26.2014 | 1.5 | Confirmed edits for funding letter; began working on grant proposal |
| 6.27.2014 | 2 | Attempted further work on my project via researching potential funding organizations |
| 7.1.2014 | 2 | Worked on and edited a report for a coworker |
| 7.2.2014 | 2 | Practiced patience while I waited for my coworker so that we could begin a rough draft of the grant proposal and helped address a case of child abuse in the school |

# Course Resources Referred To:

Cohen, M. & Sebstad, J. (2005). Reducing vulnerability: the demand for microinsurance.

Journal of International Development, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Grigg, V. (2010). Conversations on kingdom economics (draft). Auckland, New

Zealand: Urban Leadership Foundation.

Mbola, A. (2009). Small business training manual: introduction to business.

Mbola, A. (2009). Small business training manual: business leadership and

management.

Osborn, P. (unknown date). MicroStart: a guide for planning, starting and managing

a microfinance programme.

\*Various course power points and classmate presentations.

\*Course discussions via Skype and V-See.