

Report to the Spirit of Life Foundation Trustees
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Trip to Ethiopia (September 2015)

A graduate student in the audience asked a question. It wasn't just one of those softball questions that come up in place of awkward silences when a presenter doesn't connect with the audience. Instead, he asked me something that we should have thought of months ago. I was completely stunned because a key piece of insight didn't come from any of my esteemed colleagues here but from a talented student in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

When I landed at Bole airport, thanks to the Spirit of Life scholarship, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had initially planned to primarily check on participants of and solicit new applications for Seeding Labs' non-profit instrumental access program that distributes laboratory equipment to third world countries. However, I decided to at least convey the broad outlines of work in our laboratory despite being apprehensive of the audience's ability to grasp the material. Wonderfully, the enthusiasm and lively discussion that followed my talk meant that I was able to go into much greater detail and depth than I ever have outside lab meeting. I realized that I had grossly underestimated them.

I traveled to two universities and one infectious disease research institution. Everywhere I went, I was amazed by how bright and excited students and faculty are. However, I was dismayed to find that despite having a great deal of theoretical knowledge, most students had very little practical experience through no fault of their own. There is an acute lack of laboratory equipment. In rare cases of when there is a piece of equipment available, it is almost impossible to obtain consumables to perform even simple experiments.

It is certainly challenging to do rigorous science in a third world country. Importantly, the many researchers that collaborate with Seeding Labs are proof that it is not impossible. Thanks to the Spirit of Life Foundation, I have been able to learn a great deal about not only the challenges but also the enormous untapped potential of these parts of the world. This is especially relevant for me as I intend to return to my country of birth and citizenship upon completing my graduate and postdoctoral training. Hopefully, I can one day look back at this trip as the start of a productive life in Ethiopian academia.