

## **Learning from PROLINNOVA**

*Taylor Barry, Student, Global Studies Program, University of Virginia, USA*

My time spent in Senegal at the PROLINNOVA International Workshop (IPW) and thereafter with Agrecol Afrique, Prolinnova's host organisation in Senegal, in May 2016 was an experience that brought me out of my comfort zone and exposed me to the realities of development work. I first learned about PROLINNOVA from my professor, David Edmunds, and other students of the Global Development Studies program at The University of Virginia (UVA). Growing up in a food desert in the United States, I developed an interest in the availability of sustainable food sources throughout the country. While I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to study development in college, my experiences in Senegal taught me things that would not be possible to learn in a classroom. As my professor and advisor, David is privy to my interests and passions and graciously proposed the opportunity for me to attend the PROLINNOVA IPW in 2016.

I initially accepted without hesitation and jumped at the opportunity to visit Senegal and experience development work first-hand. After doing preliminary research on PROLINNOVA and agriculture in Senegal, my initial excitement was only strengthened. I have always wanted to visit Western Africa, specifically Senegal, because of its rich culture and my fascination with francophone African nations. Having the opportunity to glimpse into a region of the world where my family has roots is something that I will always value. I did not know what to expect or how to prepare for the trip from various perspectives – I was nervous to travel internationally on my own for the first time for many reasons. First, I struggled with validating my presence – who was I to believe I had a right to take part in “development” in a subject where I had no previous experience? I also struggled with how I would be perceived. As a Black American woman, I was unsure how my Senegalese counterparts would receive me. I initially felt as though I had to dispel any preconceived notions about Black Americans in an effort to create connections between myself and any Senegalese people I met on the trip. It took some time for me to get over this belief. Upon my arrival, and throughout my stay, I experienced a level of hospitality that I have never encountered.

The workshop contextualized many of the realities of development work that we discuss in the classroom. I enjoyed witnessing intellectual debates on the trajectory of the organisation and listening to and participating in interactive activities that dealt with the structure of many country platforms. It was surreal to be exposed to decisive conversations held by extremely intelligent and well-versed individuals from diverse schools of thought and backgrounds. The workshop also provided me with an appreciation for the Global Development Studies program at UVA because there were many similarities between the curriculum and the “real thing.” I enjoyed the interactive aspect of the workshop and most importantly I gained insight from a lot of the break-off groups throughout the days.

My favorite part of the workshop was the field visit. During that time, I witnessed some of the issues many participants discussed in relation to local farmers. I was impressed by the partnership between Agrecol Afrique and local farmers. I was particularly impressed by the innovative lending system created with the use of *la calebasse*. Overall, PROLINNOVA and the IPW has opened my eyes to the hardships and successes of participatory development work and I am thankful for the opportunity and experiences.