

Hannah Bent

Home University: University of Michigan

Program: TREE 2008

Host Organization: Germanwatch

Contact information:

Ann Arbor, MI 48104

hwbent@umich.edu

My TREE internship this past summer took place in Bonn, Germany. I was placed with the non-governmental organization Germanwatch. Germanwatch, a subsidiary of the more internationally-focused group Worldwatch, primarily works with climate policy and issues involving relationships between developing and developed countries. Having been the former German capital from the end of World War II until 1999, Bonn is the perfect place for an organization like Germanwatch. Many NGOs and political organizations are still based here and have not yet moved to Berlin. Also, Bonn is only about two hours from Brussels, the capital of the EU. It is a truly international city and hosts thirteen United Nations institutions. In fact, during my summer I was able to attend the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations held in Bonn.

While Germanwatch plays a substantial role in international climate negotiations processes, the main office where I worked only houses about twelve or thirteen employees. On any given day, only five or six of these people are actually in the office. Sometimes it is hard to believe that this small number of people can be so influential. This internship was my first experience working with an NGO, and I think that learning first-hand about how an NGO functions was one of the best things that I learned during the summer. It presented me with the possibility and idea of working for an NGO as a career. I was able to see how hard NGOs work and how dedicated these people have to be in order to get things done. One of my friends summarized the work of an NGO by saying that NGOs are like rebellious children in school and the various governments are like unfair, strict teachers. The NGOs use every resource available to them to try and break free from the teachers' control, whether it is by use of satire, embarrassment, or

pure defiance. Although I really liked working with an NGO, it wasn't prepared for it at first. At the InWEnt seminar in Freiburg, we learned about how German offices typically operate and things to expect or not to expect. Therefore, when I arrived at Germanwatch on my first day, I was anticipating an office like the one that we had talked about in Freiburg. However, in actuality, I was overdressed and unprepared for the casual-ness of the office.

My favorite part of my internship this summer was attending the UNFCCC. Even though these negotiations are not the biggest or most influential ones of the year, it was great to be able to see international politics and coalitions up close. It was amazing to see so many people from so many different places, and I really was able to realize how huge a problem climate change is. In an increasingly paperless society, where phones and the Internet span the globe, it was really cool to see people all sitting together and talking and debating. Because I was a member of an NGO, I had a pass to go into many of the different discussions. In one such discussion, the room it was being held in was very small and I ended up sitting between delegates from Norway and Mexico!

Other than this amazing opportunity, I spent most of my time at work reading about new developments in climate change and climate change policy, as well as translating and editing documents. One big project of mine was that I helped edit a study done by Germanwatch about food security and climate change that was being prepared for publication. This study was written in English, and my bosses wanted a native speaker to check and see if the arguments were clear and the grammar correct. I had a great time doing this because I got to learn so much more about this topic and I felt like I was

indispensible to Germanwatch for this task. I think that my editing greatly helped this publication, and hopefully it will gain recognition. It was one of the first studies to be done on this particular topic, and it was so cool to be able to work on something that can become really important within the realm of climate change. Other than this, I wrote newspaper articles and helped to organize busses from Bonn to protests against coal-fired power plants near Frankfurt.

Honestly, it will be interesting to see how this experience will relate to my future career plans. Before being a part of this program, I knew little about environmental policy, although I am majoring in environmental science. I think this internship taught me a lot about the current issues in international climate change policies. I also saw the complex processes and negotiations through which different policies must pass in order to become internationally accepted. Before this summer, I didn't really appreciate the amount of effort that goes into international policy-making. This information was important for me both as an environmental science major, but also as an average citizen. Climate change and global warming is such an important issue today for people everywhere, and I don't think that people really understand as much about it as they should, and until now, I would probably have included myself in that group of people. This internship taught me so much that I felt I should have known all along, and that I think everyone should know too. Despite all that I have gained from this experience, I don't think that I will pursue environmental policy as a career. It was good to gain experience in this field, but it made me realize that I still prefer working with domestic urban planning issues. However, the TREE program did show me how this particular interest of mine can fit within the bigger picture of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and mitigating and adapting to climate

change. I feel as though it has given me a more informed view of how I can become more active in environmental issues.

I do think that this internship helped me in my future career plans by giving me the experience of working in a foreign country. I feel confident in applying for another job or internship abroad in the future, and I think that working abroad will be something that I would love to do again. Before this internship I had a hard time predicting the things I would like or not like about living abroad, and what struggles I would have to overcome. Should I have the opportunity to work abroad in the future, I will be better prepared because of this experience.

During my stay in Germany, I lived in a Studentenwohnheim, or student dormitory. Truthfully, I have mixed feelings about the experience, and if I were to do it over, I think I would have not chosen to live there. Although it was relatively cheap and centrally-located, many of the students were international as well. And although many spoke German, many more spoke English and so I ended up speaking English more than I had wanted to. Also, I think that talking with a native speaker is the best way to better your own speaking skills, and that was really not the case here. Also, being in a foreign country for an extended period of time for the first time is exhausting. Thinking and speaking mostly in German wore me out at times, and I never felt like I had anywhere to just relax. My room was too small, and although we had a shared living room, it was not a great place to unwind.

I was able to meet a few native Germans through my internship. Germanwatch operates largely on the help of several unpaid interns like me, almost all of whom were

German. It was great to be able to talk with other native Germans both about environmental issues that we were working on and more casually on lunch and coffee breaks. I think that these informal chats were some of the most helpful experiences in terms of learning more about German culture and customs. It was great meeting other Germans peers through Germanwatch, but it was also good to have contact with older Germans as well. I feel like I gained more of a perspective on the “typical” German lifestyle by talking with older people, some of whom had young families and other who were nearing retirement.

I spent a lot of my free time in Germany traveling. I was able to visit friends living in other parts of Germany on the weekends, and I even was able to travel internationally a few times. The train system in Germany was so easy to use and a great resource for traveling. I really enjoyed seeing so many different places and am glad that I had the opportunity to do so. When I stayed in Bonn, I spent a lot of time walking and biking around the city. My Studentenwohnheim was a two minute walk to the Rhine, and I spent much of my time going on scenic walks along the river and through neighboring Rheinau Park. I also spent a lot of time cooking and going grocery shopping. Bonn had an outdoor market everyday for fresh food, and I loved walking around and looking at all of the fresh produce. Also, because I had many international friends from Cameroon, I learned how to cook various African dishes and spent time discovering different ethnic grocery stores in my neighborhood.

Obviously, everyday life in Western Europe is not as different from life in America as, say, somewhere in Southeast Asia or Latin America. But I found that during my stay in

Germany, there are (surprisingly) many, albeit subtle, differences between life in Germany and life in the US. I think that these differences are what make living in foreign countries so fun and exciting. One cultural difference that I really had to get used to was how honest and blunt Germans are. For example, towards the end of my internship, I was speaking with the top person at Germanwatch, my boss' boss. He asked me what I thought about Germanwatch and my time there. I started telling him about what a good experience this was for me and how much I learned, and then he cut me off and said that he also wanted to know what negative things Germanwatch had done. I was taken aback. I felt really weird telling my superior about the negative aspects of his organization. I couldn't imagine the same thing happening in an American office. Although I was aware of this famed German directness, I wasn't really prepared for it until I was thrown into this kind of situation.

All in all, I had a great summer and am so glad that I could be a part of the TREE program. I learned many valuable things- both about renewable energy and just about life in general. If I had to give a future TREE participant any advice, I would tell him or her to be confident and have a sense of humor. I think that in stressful situations people become so consumed by not making mistakes and by keeping everything under control. Sometimes people forget that funny things happen; you might say something totally wrong, or you might not understand how particular things here work, and that's ok. Sometimes it is just better to laugh at yourself. Germans realize that you are trying, and coming here to Germany at all is a huge triumph in itself.