Interview with Natalia Leigh, Class of 2016, on her capstone Finance Mechanisms for Managing Donor Aid in the Liberian Ministry of Education

What did you work on for your capstone project?
I worked with Liberia’s Ministry of Education (MOE) to help them identify alternative finance mechanisms for managing donor aid. The MOE has limited access to resources from the central government and relies heavily on donor funding. However, the majority of these funds bypass government systems because donors perceive them to be weak. That’s why for my capstone I analysed the current capacity within the MOE, evaluated existing pool funds in the country, and researched other possible mechanisms that the MOE could use to manage donor funds.

Why did you choose this particular client and project?
I worked with Liberia’s Ministry of Education over the summer so I already had good working relations set up and understood some of the key issues the client was facing. I realized that the Ministry’s inability to control the majority of education financing in Liberia was one of the greatest impediments to reforming the system, and the Minister of Education agreed that the MOE would benefit from additional support analysing and solving this particular issue. I am also more generally interested in aid effectiveness in fragile states. Aid plays an important role in these economies but the government systems tend to be weaker than other countries and they struggle to manage the inflows. Recipient governments across fragile states are doing some really interesting work to build capacity, strengthen systems and pilot innovative mechanisms to manage aid, and I wanted to learn more about this important topic.

What new skills or knowledge did you gain from the endeavor?
I read pretty much everything out there on aid financing mechanisms: pool funds, multi donor trust funds, delivery units, and reimbursement agreements. More importantly though, I improved my skills working with government leaders, collecting evidence in a country with limited data, and identifying overarching trends and key bottlenecks to very broad problems. Finally, I recognized the importance of being able to communicate across different groups: government, civil society, donors, and academics. The purpose of the capstone was to identify mechanisms for these parties to work together, which means understanding each groups’ motivations.

What was the greatest challenge for you?
Working remotely is always challenging, but it helped that I had already worked with the Ministry over the summer and had good relationships there, so I was able to keep in regular contact with key people and travelled to Liberia during the winter and spring breaks to undertake research. The main challenge was that the Ministry is always facing competing priorities, and new projects and policies came up over the four months I was working on the capstone. Any finance mechanism that I suggested had to be appropriate for as many of the MOE’s policies as possible, so I had to make the research plan flexible and consider new alternatives over the course of the project.
How has this shaped your academic and professional interests?
The current grant-based system of donor governments financing development projects abroad through third parties is not working. Donors and recipient governments in many countries have made improvements in how they work together but there are still issues, particularly in fragile states. I am interested in using my experiences from Georgetown to help governments and donors work better together, and strengthen governance systems so that donors won’t have to play such an important role in the future. The focus today is on ‘delivering results,’ but this doesn’t have to be separate from building capacity. If results are delivered through government systems then those systems should strengthen over time, and that’s key.

What would you like to do next?
First I want to complete this project with the MOE. The capstone was only the first part of the wider project: I am now working with the MOE to implement some of the recommendations and seek external partners to invest in capacity building within the MOE. After graduation, I hope to continue working with government leaders and ministries to identify and overcome issues which impede development.