

# *Photographing Shawi Food Insecurity*



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## Project Overview

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 Student Name: Matthew King  
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 Organization: Nuevo Progreso Community  
 Location: Loreto Region, Perú  
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## About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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# *Photographing Shawi Food Insecurity*

## **Fellowship Rational**

This project falls within the larger work of the Indigenous Health Adaptation and Climate Change research group at McGill. Inspiration for this project stems from the research of Dr. Zavaleta on the food systems that exist within Shawi indigenous communities of the Peruvian Amazon. Her initial findings indicate that food insecurity is prevalent at much higher rates in Shawi communities as compared to the Peruvian average. The findings are especially concerning surrounding the health of children in the community. In addition to the existing insecurity, Dr. Zavaleta's thesis explores the different categories of food the communities receive. Her thesis categorizes their food system into three parts: cultivated food, hunted food, and external food. All three of these are being impacted and changed by the shifting world around the community. With external food becoming a larger part of the daily diet, the cultural and preferential importance of the other two groups shines defiantly. How the community balances the three is the story of their food system, one that will continue to evolve.

With these results surfacing after five years of research, it is important that they reach the appropriate ears. Community lifestyle and opinions on their food are an important part of the message as well. With this in mind, this project was developed to transmit the knowledge and opinions of both Dr. Zavaleta and Nuevo Progreso through photography. Images can express the emotions and details of life behind the numbers of Dr. Zavaleta's report. In this sense, more people than solely those willing to read a PhD thesis can experience, to some degree, the process of eating in a Shawi community.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of this project are dissemination oriented. Within this, three subjects have been highlighted by the photography: 1) Food itself within the community 2) The process of obtaining food and 3) The people behind the food.

From these themes, multiple avenues of dissemination are being explored. Primarily, there is the local level. In this respect a local independent radio/television program has been contacted to present the final story. Additionally, all photographs of the community members have been printed locally and distributed to the respective families. A community presentation was held in which many photos were displayed and presented, explaining further the final products to appear elsewhere.

Continuing one scale higher, Peruvian museums, cultural centers, and regional aid groups have also been presented the project for dissemination. At the international scale, a website is being created to display the photos and stories of the community. Additionally, anthropological museums in Canada and international aid organizations are being sent products.

## Activities

During the fieldwork, days followed a regular pattern:

5:00- Wakeup, breakfast

6:30 ~ 8:30 - Take portraits of scheduled families while the light is optimal

9:00 ~ 11:00 - Follow a family to their farm and observe/photograph activities

12:00 ~ 2:00 - Rest while the sun is extreme and eat lunch

2:00 ~ 4:00 - Observe another community activity such as farming, fishing, or hunting, taking photos all the while

4:00 ~ 7:00 - Rest, talk with families about their lives, watch the local soccer game, eat dinner

7:00 ~ 8:00 - Plan the coming day then fall asleep

While this is a general outline, days themselves varied greatly. Plans would often change on a dime, people would be sick or need to attend to a family matter. Living exactly according to schedule was not a realistic expectation. When participating on farm activities, the work consisted of a mixture of helping and photographing. In this sense, I was able to better appreciate the subject matter I was documenting. This aided in respectful photos, but also in descriptions that accompany the photos in their final products.

During portrait sessions, I would arrive slightly early, giving the family time to dress accordingly. Many of the families had traditional clothes that they preferred to dress in for their photos. Additionally,

makeup and traditional body paint were often applied. As in other parts of the project, asking the community members how they wished to be represented was crucial. The goal of this project was not to highlight the community's poverty, but to present them as they wished. The diversity in the ways they presented themselves was also large, highlighting the need to not make assumptions.



Collecting consent was also a large and important part of the daily activity. When travelling to someone's house or farm, we were accompanied by a guide/translator who made sure that the full breadth of the form was translated into the local language.

Finally, an important finishing element of the project involved printing all of the family photos in the local town of Yurimaguas, and returning them to the community. With over 20 different individuals photographed, this marked a significant service to the community. Additionally, a large banner was printed with photos of the community during their communal work day and displayed in the community center. It highlighted the different foods important to the community members and people dressed in their traditional clothes.

### Challenges and Successes

In reflection, the project was a success, with elements added along the way.

Primarily, the community and many individuals accepted the project. This was not guaranteed going in, but after much translating from Spanish to Shawi (also the name of the local language) the community consented to the project. Not only did they consent, but ideas were added that made the project better as a whole. For instance, the community wishes to use the photographic product as a way to communicate desires and messages to the outside world. For this, a page on the final website is dedicated to these messages. Another community idea is the display of the local jewelry that many women make in a photographic product. This has been given back to them and will be used to promote the sale of their work.



While the project was a success, there were many challenges along the way that required adaptation. With limited means of communication, often meetings would be forgotten, and need to be rescheduled. Sudden illness or family matters would also necessitate a reorganizing of the calendar. This was stressful given the limited time with the community and the variety of things to accomplish. Another challenge that existed throughout the project was the double language barrier. Having to use a second language, to communicate with a translator, who then used a third

language to convey messages resulted in much confusion. More than anything, this meant that much time was needed to convey even simple messages. On the same note, the importance of the translator cannot be overstated in this project. Although many members of the community spoke proficient Spanish, their primary language is Shawi, and as such, conversations were most comfortable for them when using it.

Another area of challenge was the pace of days. It took a while to get used to the early rise, followed by work centered around the strength of the sun. This is often not a factor considered in the 9 to 5 work day common in western countries. However, this system is crucial in the communities where maximizing energy efficiency is key to success. Patience was key during long mid-day hours spent waiting for the sun to lower in the sky.

A final challenge faced was that of gender roles in the community. As a man, I was in a privileged position in this community. It was interesting, and often challenging to operate around the cultural norms that are very different from the western world. I had to position myself careful so that I didn't enter a house alone with only another woman of the community. This is an element of life that permeated its way into the photos as well, making sure to be careful as to how the photos of women appeared. As previously mentioned, I believe that my gender in this situation was the easier of the two. It is an interesting aside to future, outsider female workers in the community to be conscious of the norms within the community. While these norms exist, I never sensed a hostility surrounding them, and am sure community members would be happy to explain what is normal for them.

In summary, there were many lessons learned surrounding what works and what doesn't when taking photos in a community. Primarily, patience is key. Patience was key in building relationships as well as with a changing schedule. As for the photos themselves, proving intentions was also crucial. Showing the



photos after they have been taken seems simple, but if forgotten can be taken as a slight. I also believe that giving copies of the photos back to those involved in them is important for the trust to be secured. While so much of photography is digital these days, large files can be cumbersome and not appropriate in the community context. As such, printing physical copies was and can be

a rewarding process for all involved. The subjects get to have lasting memories while the photographer gets to see their work in physical form, often a powerful experience.

Another key lesson learned from this experience is the nature of the written consent form. For this project, I received communal consent first, then proceeded to receive individual consent from all those who appeared in my photos. For children, I received both their assent and the consent of their father or guardian. In this project, this process worked fairly well due to the fact that many members of the community were familiar with the process from previous studies having been conducted. The signing of the forms also presented an important opportunity to talk about the benefits and risks of participation. What did not work well about the written consent was the intimidation that comes along with an official looking document. Often, women would want to participate, but hesitated to sign the form because they could not write. In instances like this, fingerprints or symbols were used to comply with the form. This example highlights the often subtler unsuitability of the written consent form in a society that revolves around verbal meetings and information sharing.

### Training and Mentoring

For this project, I did not work with an organization. Instead, my mentoring came from Dr. Zavaleta, whose PhD thesis I based this project off. Along with myself, she traveled into the community to do the more traditional dissemination of her research results. As she traveled from house to house, I followed and observed her interactions and patience. Different customs, and my place in them, I picked up from watching her. For instance, the process of eating food in separate places for males and females; this I learned from her. Additionally, she taught me how to politely decline drinks and other offerings.

In addition to maneuvering cultural norms, she also helped me craft ideas for the photographs, having been to the community many times previously. She understood the food and where it came from, exactly the theme I photographed. Beyond this, she provided context outside of the food, such as the other issues the community was facing, all to be considered for the larger picture.

Finally, Dr. Zavaleta helped with the dissemination of the work by providing contacts and meetings for outlets of the project. For example, local independent television station has been contacted to discuss the project and present the photos. From the project's origin to its completion, Dr. Zavaleta has helped significantly.

Regarding McGill mentorship, Professor Berrang-Ford was a great help from afar. Before the project, she advised me from personal experience and from the experiences of the many other students she has mentored in the past. She has worked with other students in the same community, and as such was able to give me good advice surrounding their cultural norms, expectations, and past challenges. Working in the field was different from our conversations, but she prepared me well for the mindset I needed.

With regards to the field mindset, Professor Berrang-Ford served as a great grounding point during multiple updates from the field. In talking about my struggles with the slow pace of life in the community, she provided examples from her field work that put my circumstance in perspective. This project was as much about building and continuing a relationship with the community as it was about completing my project. For that, not every moment needed to be productive in the traditional sense. Having conversations with people or helping them with small tasks went a long way toward this subtle goal.

Another element of this project was creating products for the community from their ideas. Professor Berrang-Ford provided me with multiple ideas to present to the community, making sure that they were excited about the products they were receiving.

### Lessons Learned

Having completed the project, there are many small things I would have done differently and many I wouldn't change. First, I would have brought more books. I've already mentioned this a few times within this report, but patience was a crucial element in working with this community. Everyone has their schedule and there is no way to communicate other than face to face. In dealing with organizing and reorganizing time, I realized truly how much I could improve my patience. Coming from a world of stimulation, this alternative lifestyle struck me hard.

From a photography aspect, I learned much about portraiture. It is a finely balanced game between candid expression and proper consent. To point a camera in someone's face is an intimate, and sometimes aggressive action. This is only magnified with subjects not used to having their picture taken. This resulted in a wide variety of expressions in the portraits. I tried to lighten the mood at times with laughter, but other times accepted the stern expressions for themselves. I also learned the mixing in other subject during a photoshoot can help lighten the mood, and that many people are proud of their dogs, cats, or pigs! This experience was extremely eye opening for me as I have not done much portrait work before this project.

The other photos were documentary in their style. The three primary food gathering activities: farming, fishing, and hunting, were all witnessed and followed. Seeing these activities in real time was humbling and awe inspiring. The work is hard and necessary for survival. I felt awkward at times, standing back with my camera while they sweated through the day. However, with a mix of helping out and showing the photos, I didn't feel any animosity. Despite the hard work, I still tried to take flattering photos. This was important throughout the whole project. The community members certainly didn't want photos highlighting their poverty or struggle, and neither did I. I believe, and worked on taking, photos that highlight the people behind circumstance. So whether someone was sweating in their farm, or a kid playing in the mud, the photos focus on the person, not their hardship.

## Community Implications and Further Work

The products of this project are targeted at both the local and international scales. Due to its photographic nature, the project can be applied in many forms. This wide spread will hopefully present the themes discussed in Dr. Zavaleta's thesis to a diverse range of stakeholders, maximizing their impact.

First, at the community level, the individual and family portraits were printed out and distributed to the participants. Simply enough, this is a service hard to come by in the communities and was greatly appreciated by many. Laminated for preservation, these portraits will serve as memories for a significant time to come. Second, many women in the community make jewelry and traditional ceramic drinking bowls. They have expressed a desire to sell these artisanal goods with greater success in the past, but not much has changed. For this, I took photos of their artisanal wares displayed in a professional manner. These were also printed and given to some of the women to more easily display their goods when traveling to the city. Finally, at the request of the community leader, a large banner was printed for the community center. On the banner are different figures in their traditional clothes, representative photos of their various foods, and welcome words for visitors. This was displayed on the final day in the community.



Outside the community, the photos are being used differently, but with similar goals in mind. As identified in Dr. Zavaleta's thesis, there are three food systems that exist in the community: 1) those grown, 2) those hunted/gathered, and 3) those procured externally (i.e. from the city). The photos taken during this project highlight the first two forms. They are being put together in a

website aimed at highlighting the community's traditional food, manners of food production, and the people behind the story. This website will serve as an example for other venues that wish to hold a gallery of such work. Additionally, Peruvian television/radio stations have been contacted to present the work as well. The goal of such presentation is to give a candid representation of the community's life to those authorities that have means to provide aid. However, by presenting the community's traditional life, hopefully the aid given will more closely respect their way of life, as some current aid does not.

Finally, the website will serve as a platform for the community to express its desires directly to the outside world. As of now, their two wishes are to have someone skilled in sewing and/or carpentry to come teach them these respective skills so they need not rely on external sources. Additionally, they ask for the tools of the trade to allow them to do these tasks within their community.

### Program Evaluation

This project has helped further my career in a multitude of ways. The experience was a dynamic one that included elements of photography, health geography, and anthropology.

First, this was an incredible opportunity to explore the complex world of portrait photography. Working closely with a marginalized community is a delicate process. This, combined with the already intimate expression of portraits, was eye opening for me. In this sense, the work is more about the interaction with the people than the technical details of the photo. Experience in this regard is invaluable and will be used again in my photography career. Additionally, this album of work will serve as a unique, respectfully done example of my art and documentary capabilities.

Beyond the photography, this was another powerful field work experience for myself. It was a continuation of my ongoing Spanish learning process. After this trip I feel more confident than ever in my language abilities. I also have now lived with another culture far different from my own. Experiences like this go a long way towards being more open minded and understanding different ways of life. This is a hard thing to quantify, but I believe that this humbling sort of knowledge is one of the most powerful take-aways from travel such as this.

In conclusion, I believe this project has helped the Shawi community of Nuevo Progreso, and I know it has helped me. The most valuable aspect of this project for me has been the ability to take an idea and turn it into something concrete. Having the sense of completion and contribution that the McBurney Fellowship has awarded me is invaluable. While no more work will be done in the field for this project, I will continue to develop avenues for its dissemination to relevant audience in relevant spaces. In all presentations, I will keep with the theme of respectful representation. I believe that this piece of work will show people outside the community the ways in which the Shawi practice their traditional lives in a modernizing world.