

DOREEN MASHU: OK. My name Doreen. I just graduated as a Sloan Fellow 2018. I came here from Zimbabwe, and I did an independent study with Anjali Sastry. So I had 10 years work experience in accounting and finance before I came to Sloan. And I had this passion for agriculture that stemmed from growing up in Zimbabwe with parents that were farmers.

So I had done quite a bit of research personally on agriculture everywhere that I had worked. And even though I was working in finance, I tried to make sure that I did some agriculture work, whether it was mergers and acquisitions or whatever. I tried to make sure that I infused agriculture into my work. So when I got here, I wanted to formalize this passion and do a bit more in-depth analysis, in-depth research on this sector and what I wanted to contribute to it after graduation.

So I did an independent study titled *Innovations Across the Agriculture Value Chain-- An Opportunity for Savvy Entrepreneurs*, because I want to be an entrepreneur in this sector. So the independent study involved researching the current value chain, or the traditional value chain as it is, and then interviewing different stakeholders to figure out where opportunities are for innovation. And that's what I worked on with Anjali.

So I started out with some questions that I wanted to answer, or some hypotheses, and the main one was the fact that there is a big opportunity to do value addition. And so to move farmers from the traditional farming and raw material production to actual processing of items, of consumer goods, whether it's juice or personal care items. Anything that can be produced from excess agricultural produce.

So my hypothesis was that everybody on the table would agree with the statement, that that is the only way to move farmers or rural communities from poverty to prosperity. And that's where most of the investments should be going forward. So I started with that question, and so when I interviewed stakeholders, I interviewed farmers. I interviewed business people. I interviewed development organizations. And asked questions that questioned or poked on that hypothesis, or supported it.

And the response was actually what I expected, which is it's true that that is where everybody thinks that the investment should be focused on. It's just a matter of changing some existing mental models that keep both farmers and investors in this sector stuck in and doing things as

they've always been done. I looked at all the things that I was interested in, things that I was passionate about, but that I wasn't necessarily addressing through my MBA classes at Sloan.

And so agriculture stood out. And then within agriculture I looked at what was related to my startup, which is what I'm hoping to work on now that I've graduated. And so it was easy to narrow down a topic, because I wanted something that was aligned with my startup and my interests. Managing the work and myself was probably the most difficult. I think, like I said, because I had done some research on the topic without really having any plans of using it in any formal way, I underestimated the time it would take to actually come up with something meaningful.

And I like to talk-- I'm a people person. So I enjoyed the interviewing part, and I kept gathering information and gathering information, and talking to people more than the people I had on my list. But then when it came to gathering the insight and writing, what I had done and why I had done it and what the next steps are, it was of difficult. And also I had a full course load, because I spent all of my IAP doing this research. And so I didn't take any other classes or any units that I needed towards graduation.

So in the spring, everything was due. The independent study, all the courses, and all of that. So it was difficult, but I worked with Anjali a lot in trying to figure out how I needed to craft the paper. And so we did a few iterations of that. She actually is very hands-on. So she'll take positive notes write-- this first section could be this, do you agree? What are you trying to get from that? So she pushed me a bit and ask me questions that helped me figure out the structure of the paper.

And also the time I would spend on each section, and what was more important and what was less important. And how I can show that I actually did the work, because doing the work and actually reporting the work is quite different. But in the end, it worked, definitely with Anjali's help, and working extra hours. So I think this experience was interesting for me, because I ended up using frameworks in the independent study that I think are unique to Sloan.

So for example, I used systems thinking, which is obviously a big thing here at Sloan. And also things around sustainability and sustainability-oriented innovation, which MIT is a champion in. So I think that being in this environment helped with the framework I was going to use and the way I was writing this paper. Entrepreneurship is also big at MIT, so that's why I even wanted to be an entrepreneur after a 10-year career in finance.

So I think all of those things went together to help me produce this independent study. I do think, however, it's just-- yes, for me it was MIT, but for anyone else it could be anything, right? It's just a matter of figuring out what you have in your own ecosystem, and then using that to your advantage. Also, in addition to being a Sloan Fellow, I'm a Legatum fellow, which is-- Legatum is a center here at MIT for entrepreneurship and development.

And it supports 20 Fellows per year that wants to work in the developing world after graduation. So it's everybody from PhDs in engineering to undergraduates. And so I came here through a scholarship from the Legatum foundation. So I knew coming in that I wanted to be an entrepreneur in the developing world after Sloan. And my startup idea is in agriculture, so it's another part of what created this independent study.

I knew some people that I interviewed-- some stakeholders that I interviewed through Legatum, and then approaching them as a Legatum Fellow, it made sense that I was doing this agriculture paper. So it helped me talk to people that I probably would have a hard time reaching out to. Anjali also brought in her contacts for people that I needed to interview, so that was helpful as well.

And the name MIT was helpful as well, so to link back to the ecosystem, right? So reaching out to someone and saying, hey, I'm a student at MIT and I'm studying this topic was, I think, helpful for people to open up their doors and resources and such. I just came from a conference last week after graduation.

I went straight to a conference at the World Bank, and I think everybody's questioning this idea of is technology a good solution? And if so, how should we be using it, and how do we really get these rural communities to prosper? And there's a lot actually in between farming seasons, right? So a farming season could be just three months, and then you add the preparation time, which is another couple of months. And then farmers are going from cycle to cycle, and their conditions are not really improving.

So people are questioning why that is happening, and we what we need to do more of, or less of. So I think it's an exciting sector, because I think that the whole world is worried about food security. The whole world is worried about climate change, which is linked to agriculture. So I think it's a hot topic. It's just people need to figure out-- everybody needs to be on board in terms of figuring out what needs to be done. Because on one hand, you have people that are investing in more production of food so that we have food security, but then is that food

distributed equally?

That remains to be seen. And then on the other hand, there's all this talk about climate change and what farmers should be doing or not be doing, and there are all these technologies that people are coming up with, but are they being co-created with the communities? Probably not. So uptake of those technologies is slower than people think.

So there are all of these topics, all of these loose ends that need to be figured out. And I think that's why it's exciting for me to be in, and hopefully I can figure out a small part of it.