For as long as there have been people aspiring to change the world, there have been do-gooders who, despite the best of intentions, screw up.

Schools are built in communities without teachers. High-tech medical equipment is donated to rural hospitals without a steady power supply. T-shirts are sent abroad to communities lacking not clothes but jobs.

Brena Sena, MPH ’14, saw the gap between local needs and outsider interventions firsthand in her home country this past year. A researcher and freelance reporter from Brazil, Sena was struck by the disconnect between conditions on the ground and advice from local and international officials as the Zika virus made global headlines. “Don’t get pregnant,” they urged women in Latin America. But for poor women throughout the region, affordable, reliable birth control is often out of reach. “The CDC and the WHO talked about choice,” says Sena, “but poor women here, they don’t have choice.”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization had good reason to sound the alarm: Zika infection among pregnant women has been tied to birth defects. And yet, says Sena, “they have made recommendations that are unrealistic to the context, the reality of the situation here.”

THE POLITICS OF POWER

For public health practitioners, context is king. Effective community collaboration emerges in relationships that feature a strong foundation of cross-cultural empathy, the capacity to build trust, and a deep understanding of power dynamics—skills that few students have mastered on day one of their public health training.

That’s why the Mailman School developed “Self, Social, and Global Awareness” (SSGA), a series of workshops and events designed to help students explore and discuss privilege, power, and identity; recognize their own relationship to these and related issues; and increase their cultural awareness. Every new student participates in SSGA, and by the end of 2017, every faculty member will also have done so.

One element of the program is a viewing and group discussion of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2009 TED talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” in which the Nigerian novelist warns against oversimplification. Individual identities, she notes, are more complicated than a country of origin, skin color, gender, or socio-economic background. “It is impossible,” says Adichie, “to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person.”
COMMUNITY
COLLABORATION FIRST

The danger of a single story is especially prevalent when people travel abroad with grand intentions to cure the world’s ills. The popularity of “voluntourism” has led increasing numbers of civic-minded travelers to low-income communities, laden with high-tech supplies but minimal training for fieldwork. After a few weeks—or just days—they head home feeling good but having failed to make a long-lasting impact.

Bucking this trend, the field of public health aims to put community partnerships first. Local organizations furnish a deep knowledge of the target area’s history and culture, as well as the people’s health needs and goals, while public health professionals supply technical expertise. The synergy fuels sustainable change.

“In the field, it’s not, What can we do for you? it’s, What can we do with you?” says Vice Dean for Education Julie Kornfeld, PhD, MPH. “The most critical component for our students is the partnership with organizations on the ground, where they see what community stakeholders are trying to accomplish and work alongside them.”
Fieldwork is required by the U.S. Council on Education for Public Health for all MPH degrees. At the Mailman School, most students complete a three-month practicum between their first and second years of study; those in the global health track spend six months abroad. The projects vary, depending on students’ interests and the technical skills they can offer, but each develops in response to the leadership of local partners.

“A student’s practicum project must not only benefit our partners in the community but really be defined by the needs and priorities of the host organizations and agencies,” says Linda F. Cushman, PhD, associate dean for Field Practice.

It’s a philosophy—and a responsibility—central to the field of global health. Anaise Williams, MPH ’17, spent her practicum in a Sudanese refugee camp in eastern Ethiopia, helping the International Rescue Committee evaluate a program designed to empower adolescent girls and prevent gender-based violence. “A Mailman professor told us that

WHEN YOU GO INTO THE FIELD YOU SHOULD ALWAYS THINK OF YOURSELF AS A STUDENT—NOT AN AID WORKER, RESEARCHER, OR DONOR—NO MATTER HOW OLD YOU ARE,”

says Williams, who learned about cultural norms and context through friendships with her locally based co-workers. “You are a student ready to learn from the people you want to work with,” she says, “to learn what they see as their greatest needs, and to learn how you can best use your resources to help them get to where they want to be.”

The Office of Field Practice manages field sites around the world, working with agencies large and small to identify projects where public health students can speed progress toward the host organization’s vision. Alongside their partners, Cushman and her team help supervisors and students set project goals and objectives; they also coach students on professional conduct in a community setting and evaluate projects after students return home.

“Students may come here because they want to change the world, and that’s good—we want to bottle that passion—but we also want to train them to do it in ways that create sustainable change,” says Kornfeld. “It’s not enough to want to do good: It’s about building the skill set to do good in meaningful ways and, in collaboration with local leaders and organizations, bring the science of what works in public health to communities.” 📍
To raise awareness of food insecurity issues in New York City, this past winter a coalition of student groups organized the Mailman School’s first SNAP Challenge. For four days in March, participating students and faculty stuck to the same budget as someone relying on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps.

For Janice Desmangles, MPH ’17, a crucial component of the event was to spur action: “We weren’t just ‘trying out poverty,’” says the historian for the Black and Latino Student Caucus, who notes that several of the organizers grew up on SNAP. “A lot of us know what it’s like to live on this budget every day, to deal with food insecurity, to come from and live in a food desert. We want to challenge ourselves to go beyond this experience and get involved with these issues in the community.”

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Ashley Gripper, MPH ’17 (pictured below, left), president of Food Policy and Obesity Prevention (FPPO), worked at a nutrition-education organization in her hometown before enrolling at the Mailman School. In her coursework—including her practicum helping to develop a housing project in an area of Brooklyn hard-hit by Hurricane Sandy—Gripper is exploring connections among healthy eating, public health, and urban planning. “As public health professionals, a lot of us will work in low-income communities ‘teaching’ people how to be healthy,” she says. “But if we don’t have any insights into how hard that is on food stamps, how can we effectively help them learn how to change?”

Students shared online support as they posted advice, photos of meals, and thoughts about their experience on Facebook. Some lamented the repetition in their diets, others discussed the difficulty of strategic menu-planning, and nearly all acknowledged how much harder it would be to prepare healthy meals on $4.16 a day if they worked multiple jobs or had children to feed.

At the end of the challenge, participants gathered to reflect on their experiences and brainstorm about future actions with local hunger organizations. As Gripper has learned by organizing events in Washington Heights, community work starts with trust. “It has to be mutually beneficial—you learn from the community, they learn from you—you exchange knowledge, skills, experiences, wisdom,” she says. “It all boils down to building relationships with commitment, consistency, and hard work. That’s so fundamental for public health, no matter where you work.”

Staff writer Meril Cullinan manages the Mailman School’s social media channels; she has also worked at Oxfam America and the United Nations Foundation.