



Ms Janice Chiang with some Kenyan and Singaporean interns during her time with Coastal Bamboo & Coir Development Company.
PHOTO: COURTESY OF JANICE CHIANG

Kenya

SMU student learns how way of life affects way of thinking

She spends two months helping villagers set up bamboo furniture business to be self-sufficient

Cheryl Tee

When Ms Janice Chiang was in a village near Mombasa, Kenya, for her summer internship, she was taken aback by how much her thinking differed from the locals'.

A Kenyan university student in her team was tagged as a spy by the other village boys and, to stay safe, had to move into his mother's home. "They didn't understand that we

brought him on board for his skills because he studied tourism," said the third-year accountancy and business management student at Singapore Management University. "It's because of the (lack of) development of their village. If it was more advanced, they wouldn't have this kind of mindset."

That thought spurred her on during the two-month internship last year at Coastal Bamboo & Coir Development Company, a start-up

that helps African villages become self-sufficient by working with them to produce goods which are sold in other markets. The social enterprise helps villagers in starting a bamboo furniture business.

Ms Chiang's job was to visit three villages to suss out their resources. Based on her data, the company brought in agriculture experts to identify fertile land plots, as well as trainers who taught villagers to make furniture from raw bamboo.

"When companies want to help Third World countries, they usually come in with their own materials and manpower, and work together with local villagers. The problem is

when they leave, these villagers are not trained with the necessary skills and resources to keep the business sustainable," the 23-year-old said.

"Now because we have trained them, they can train others."

As a Ngee Ann Polytechnic student, Ms Chiang was offered an internship in Africa by her lecturer, but had to turn it down as she had secured a spot at a "Big Four" firm.

But another chance came knocking in her second year of university. She found out that the same lecturer was again looking for interns to go to Africa. This time, she signed up.

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