

USOS annual report 2020

36th annual report

(Undesigned version)

Introduction.....	2
Part 1 Campus activities	4
Part 2: Partnerships	7
DR Congo	7
India	8
Morocco	12
Nicaragua.....	15

Introduction

A whole year of working on critical global citizenship without leaving your screen: USOS has proven that it can be done! In the 2019 annual report, I already wrote that USOS is a resilient organisation, then in response to the last minute postponed exposure to Congo that was hastily transformed into a "Great Lakes exposure" with great success. But of course 2019 was nothing compared to 2020: in March we went into lockdown and as a result, a lot of our plans fell through, such as the planned exposures to Morocco, Nicaragua and the Great Lakes, the masterclass weekend on sustainable development and the annual fair trade breakfast at the university.

Fortunately, the impact of the pandemic on our partner organisations remained limited and we made adjustments where necessary. For example, at the request of our partner in Congo, we made a substantial investment in the expansion of online education and the annual seminar for young researchers could continue. In Nicaragua the pandemic had little impact on the junior programme co-financed by USOS. The USOS-supported course in Social Work and Mediation in Morocco started despite a delay and, as part of our India cooperation, students were able to participate online in a summer school in Antwerp.

USOS also blew out 35 candles in 2020. Unfortunately, a "lockdown party" was out of the question, so we put our party hats back in the bag and are already dreaming of a "USOS turns 40" edition. But USOS did not remain orphaned. We spent the time usefully, primarily to continue the process of self-reflection that we had started in 2019. Thanks to the expert and selfless help of three external vetting experts, Cis Van Den Bogaert, old faithful of the University of Antwerp, Regi De Deken, emeritus of the Institute of Tropical Medicine, and Heleen Neyrinck of the NGO Federation, we set to work on the most important working points on the basis of a thorough vetting report. The report confronted us with issues we had been struggling with for some time, but had closed our eyes to for too long, due to an overly busy agenda and too little time to discuss the issues in depth.

For this reason, we have also adopted a new working method and created an additional consultative body, the Sounding Board. The various working points are tackled systematically in thematic working groups in which all members of the Board of Directors can participate. A first working point turned out to be the pressure of work, caused by an excessive fragmentation of our activities and a lack of focus. Under the motto '*less is more*', we have, on the one hand forced by the corona crisis but on the other hand very consciously, scaled down a number of our activities that we feel are not part of the core of our mission. Our guiding principle in this respect is that we want to continue to organise low-threshold, academically substantiated activities for the entire university community, but at the same time we want to remain faithful to our vision of working in an experiential and in-depth manner with students who want to make a difference on the basis of a real commitment and who can thus become real *change-makers*.

A second working point is closely related to the changes that are also taking place at the University of Antwerp in terms of global engagement and is endorsed by a vision text from our Rector, Herman Van Goethem. USOS thought it was high time to question itself about the (neo)colonial content of its activities and concluded that it was crucial to better align campus and partner cooperation by involving our partners more in all our activities and to present and discuss our agenda to them in multilateral consultations. To this end, we have established a Multilateral Advisory Board, an initiative that was enthusiastically received by our partners. This Advisory Board would like to meet twice a year. In this way, we want to ensure that the partner's voice is heard in all our activities. The first meeting was constructive and our partners came up with many ideas to expand our cooperation, which until now has mainly been bilateral, multilaterally. The USOS International Student blog

https://medium.com/@USOS_Antwerp) during the first lockdown, with multilateral reflections on the pandemic between students from our partners, and the recent Global Pen Friends initiative (see Campus work), due to its success as a spin-off, also fall within the scope of this work point.

Thirdly, we also took a critical look at the exposure effect. The audit report rightly questioned whether exposures are still possible in times of decolonisation and questioning of development cooperation practices. We held intense internal debates on this and came to the conclusion that our methodology of experience-based learning, which gives a young person the opportunity to enter into a life-changing encounter with a young person on the other side of the world, is and remains the beating heart of USOS. USOS wants to maximise this and go for quality instead of quantity. This, of course, requires a more thorough reform of the preparatory course, so that we do not fall into the trap of superficial intercultural communication, but thoroughly prepare the students for the role that each of us has to play as a world citizen in this globalised world in which the health crisis has painfully demonstrated how much we are all connected and dependent on each other. With the even greater crisis, that of the climate, now unfolding, the importance of this is more apparent than ever. This preparation must be both academically robust and embedded in a context of experiential learning and engagement, including through the social apprenticeship. We are convinced that, in this way, this preparatory pathway leading to the final exposure will become an experience that will not leave young people unattached and will lead them to continue to actively work for universal social justice and equal opportunities for all. After all, the global South is becoming more and more present in our society, with all the wonderful opportunities for encounters but also the problems that arise from it.

Of course, all this requires the necessary working resources. And that, too, turns out to be a working point that we have to face up to. When the unified University of Antwerp was set up, the university committed itself to a full-time position for a staff member for USOS, later supplemented by 0.3 FTE as part of the integration of the new programmes. This cost was temporarily taken over in the Global Minds programme, so the University of Antwerp was prepared to finance an additional half-time staff member. We are now on the eve of the new Global Minds programme and would like to remind the University of Antwerp of the commitment it has made. Regarding the financing of the partner cooperation, HUBEJE (Aid of the Belgian Jesuits to Developing Countries) indicated to us that we should actively look for additional alternative financing. To this end, we have set up a working group that will investigate how we can appeal to our own alumni as well as those of the broader Ignatian network, but also how we can make our exposure students even more involved in the preparation by asking a greater commitment from them financially as well, for example by launching a sponsorship campaign for the activities of our partnership.

Finally, 2020 was also the year in which we had to say goodbye to our dynamic spring-in-the-field Mitte, who first went elsewhere at IOB and then to VVOB in Uganda. Thank you for your incredible commitment, boundless energy and boundless creativity, Mitte. All the best to you!

Lieve Vangehuchten, Chairwoman

Part 1 Campus activities

The pandemic had a major impact on campus operations during 2020. The first half of the year was dedicated to remedying or cancelling the activities set up, while the second half of the year was dedicated to preparing for coronavirus activities, which would reach cruising speed mainly in 2021. Thus, 2020 became a very quiet but very important year. In the introduction, we already mentioned how we made use of this relative calm to start an internal reflection process.

First half of 2020: the pandemic strikes at the heart of campus operations

The year started promising, however. In February, 25 students and their supervisors went to Ghent to participate in a training weekend as part of the preparation for their exposure. During the summer, they would travel to Morocco, the Great Lakes or Nicaragua. Each programme would build on the formulas that had previously been successfully worked out with the partners. In preparation for those exposure stays, after a successful launch weekend in December 2019, two more weekends were planned, of which this weekend was the first. A number of students had already completed their social work placement with a poverty association, a central part of the USOS pathway.

The atmosphere at the weekend was exuberant. After a month of exams, the fledgling bonds of friendship among the students were rekindled and together they wondered what their exposure would look like. No one could suspect that the country would be locked down a few weeks later and that this would be their last physical group meeting.

The weekend was all about intercultural communication. Social worker Najima el Kasmi gave an interactive training in connecting communication, Mitte Scheldeman (USOS) and Anne Oloo (Fac. Law) gave exercises in intercultural skills and Sebastian Van Hoeck (UCOS) facilitated a debate on privileges and racism, a theme that would continue to dominate the news for the rest of the year with *Black Lives Matters*.

At the beginning of the lockdown, we immediately made it clear to the groups that the situation was unfavourable for the exposures. We held a few more online meetings, but the common goal of the group disappeared. An exchange with students from the partner country was initiated via Whatsapp, although we knew from the start that this is not the best medium for a profound intercultural exchange.

It was very frustrating for USOS not to be able to translate the intrinsic commitment and learning capacity of the students into a concrete result. We received spontaneous messages from former participants that they regretted that the students of this generation no longer had this opportunity.

In the meantime, we were thinking of a way to exchange digitally with our partners in the South. Soon after the lockdown, we set up a blog and made an appeal to our partners to collect articles about the covid situation in their country. Interesting articles by students and junior researchers soon followed. Our students also wrote a few articles about the situation in Belgium. Inspired by this good experience - and still looking for a way to have a real exchange - we took the time to think together with our partners about a system of "pen pals", where students and junior researchers would correspond with each other on a development-related topic. This resulted in 2021 in the "Global Pen Friends" project for which the University of Antwerp developed a new website.

With the pandemic, the sustainable development masterclass was also cancelled. More than forty people, including a majority of UAntwerp students, had registered for this meeting and training

weekend that was to take place in mid-March. Two weeks before the date, we were forced to cancel the programme. Thus, the many introductions, lectures, workshops, group discussions and project visits could not take place. The theme of this year's master class would have been the global character of food production. Attention would also have been paid to the growing climate polarisation.

With great regret, we were also forced to cancel the party for 35 years of USOS, which was planned for May. We had prepared an interesting programme including lectures, a panel discussion and, of course, a USOS party with DJ and food and drink afterwards.

To compensate for the "meagre" semester, after the exams in June we made an appeal throughout the university for students to commit to a social project in Antwerp during the summer. Together with Centrum Kauwenberg, CAW Antwerpen and youth centre Fleks, we identified a number of defined summer projects such as a camp, extra training or food distribution. More than twenty students applied to work on these projects. However, as the projects approached, a new wave of covid emerged, forcing us to cancel this programme as well.

Second half of 2020: the digital breakthrough

The new academic year had the advantage that we could take the pandemic into account. No physical meetings were prepared anymore, with the result that we did not call for exposures and, for example, did not provide a breakfast as usual during Fair Trade Week.

The first semester was largely dominated by the *Debating Development* series, the annual series of debates supported by USOS and now offered as a series of webinars. This year, the series focused on the theme of decolonisation, a theme that USOS also reflects on internally. A team of six mandate assistants at IOB, headed by ZAP member Gert Van Hecken, worked out a programme of seven webinars, with Achille Mbembe as keynote speaker for the opening session. At the end of the series, UCSIA provided the livestream for the closing event with Nadia Nsayi, among others.

More than 90 students from six faculties took *Debating Development as part of* their curriculum. They generally obtained good results and gave the course a very positive rating in an online survey. Due to the low-threshold nature of webinars and probably because of the topical theme, we reached a particularly large audience this year. More than a thousand people attended at least one of the webinars.

This year, there was another call for the buddy project, the programme that puts students from the "global South" in touch with students who already know the university well. In 2019, we had an application developed that facilitates matching and contact between participants. This came in handy during the pandemic. As this project began to outstrip us in terms of scale and objective, we handed over its management to a collaboration between three agencies of the university responsible for international cooperation, namely MONDO (international staff), International Students Office (diploma students) and the International Cooperation Office (exchange students). This year, they managed to reach more than 150 people with this project, which remained digital due to the pandemic.

Finally, we took the time to prepare a series of webinars on Morocco (and later on Congo), with a strong focus on history, language and religion. The series eventually took place in February 2021 (Morocco) and May (Congo) and proved to be very successful, but you will read about that in the 2021 annual report.

Staff

During the first half of 2020 USOS could rely on a team of three employees: Mitte Scheldeman (50%), Yasmien Naciri (50%) and Janus Verrelst (100%). In August, Yasmien's temporary contract ended and there was still funding left for 1.5 FTEs. Because Mitte had the opportunity to work first for IOB and then for VVOB in Uganda, she made it possible for Yasmien to continue working for USOS.

From the campus work, we would like to thank our colleague Mitte Scheldeman for her years of commitment and input for USOS!

Janus Verrelst, Vicky Verlinden and Yasmien Naciri

Part 2: Partnerships

DR Congo

For Congo too, 2020 was the year of the pandemic, but as in many other African countries, the Covid shock in the country was financial and economic rather than health-related. At the beginning of 2021, the counter stood at about 20,000 cases and 640 Covid-related deaths. Most infections were detected in the capital. This is partly due to testing capacity, but also reflected the reality that the disease was spreading mainly among the more mobile population, through contacts with foreign countries. There is much speculation about the relatively limited spread of the coronavirus in Africa, citing the young population, lower mobility, and the efficiency of countries that often have extensive experience in containing epidemics. In the hospital of our partner university Université Catholique de Bukavu (UCB), a special Covid ward was set up in the early 2020s, but a few months later it had already opened due to a lack of patients. There were undoubtedly Covid-related deaths that went unreported, but due to the relatively low number, people in Bukavu soon went back to 'business as usual'. Indeed, the lockdown and social distancing measures had a disastrous effect on the economy, which is almost entirely dependent on foreign countries. The national economy relies on the export of raw materials, and in normal times the markets in Bukavu are supplied by imported food from neighbouring Rwanda. The closure of the borders made this impossible, and caused food prices to soar in the mid-2020s, leading to social unrest. The vast majority of the population depends on the informal economy, where staying at home is simply not an option. Academic and educational activities were halted from April to early August 2020. They were shut down again at the end of December, in response to 'the second wave'.

In Congo, the year 2020 was also dominated by the power struggle between current President Tshisekedi and former President Kabila. Until recently, the latter continued to pull the strings behind the scenes, thanks to a majority in parliament. Tshisekedi, however, is gradually trying to become more independent and to steer his own course. The removal of the Speaker of Parliament, from the Kabila camp, in December 2020 was an important step in this direction.

Partner activities

Since the start of the partnership with UCB in 2016, USOS organised two immersion trips to Bukavu, and one immersion trip to Rwanda. The latter trip came after a last-minute ban on travelling to Bukavu, but ultimately gave both student groups the chance to meet in Rwanda. The unexpected 'opening' to the Great Lakes region in 2019 created new and inspiring opportunities for exchange, but was again put on hold in 2020 due to the Covid crisis. In terms of unexpected twists and new opportunities, 2019 ultimately proved to be just an exercise for what awaited us in 2020.

It soon became clear that the familiarisation trip to Bukavu planned for the summer of 2020 would not be able to take place. USOS reacted quickly by asking the partners in the spring of 2020 how this budget could be better spent in the current situation. At that time, a transition to digital teaching was being considered at UCB level, as lockdown measures were also introduced in Bukavu in April. However, at that time, digital platforms were not being used at UCB and neither teachers nor students had experience with online teaching/learning or the provision of digital content. A technical-educational team rolled out the new infrastructure in a very short time and organised training sessions for UCB lecturers. USOS financed these activities. UCB thus became the first university in DRC to switch to digital teaching, and the academic year could thus continue. The transition required major adjustments from both staff and students, such as stable access to the internet, the costs involved and the pedagogical changes. Despite these challenges, several UCB staff members evaluated the initiative positively and hope that in the medium term it will continue to strengthen education at UCB.

In 2020, the idea of the Antwerp immersion trip also gained momentum. This idea was initially launched by the students themselves, and had been maturing for several years. It fits in with the principle of reciprocity that is central to USOS, in particular the emphasis on exchanges and encounters. As an organisation, we not only want to give students from the 'North' the opportunity to gain a 'South' experience, but also give Congolese students the opportunity to gain an experience in Antwerp. Under the mandate of the current rector, Prof. Dr. Kanigula Mubagwa, UCB showed great support for this initiative, and a task force was set up to prepare it. In concrete terms, 10 students from UCB will be hosted in Antwerp by USOS in the autumn of 2021 - provided that Covid allows it. The trip would include a 'social part' and an 'academic part', whereby for the latter the UCB candidates have each defined a research topic. For some, this trip would be assessed as an academic internship; for others as a contribution to their bachelor or master thesis.

Meanwhile, USOS, with this year also funding from VLIR-UOS through the Going Global programme, continued the Research design course. The fourth edition of this course, which consists of one week of intensive training in qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research techniques, was orchestrated at the Amani Centre in Bukavu in November 2020. The course was attended by a total of 28 researchers involved in research and teaching at UCB, as well as in other academic and higher institutions and research centres in the region. Lecturers were Prof Tom De Herdt and Sara Geenen from IOB, and Prof Kamala Kaghoma from UCB.

At UCB, these activities are increasingly integrated and taken up by different faculties, as well as by the central level, such as the Social Service, the Communication Service and the Service for Cooperation and External Relations. The cooperation between the two universities was further highlighted by a meeting between Rector Van Goethem and Rector Mubagwa in Antwerp in early 2021.

Perspectives for the future

The partnership with the UCB was set up almost 15 years ago. It relies heavily on synergies with other projects, such as the ten-year programme for inter-university cooperation (2011-2021) and a programme for internationalisation of education (2017-2021), both financed by VLIR-UOS and implemented in cooperation with IOB. Since 2016, the USOS partner cooperation has mainly focused on strengthening the academic environment, in particular through the organisation of the Research Design course and the awarding of modest research grants to individual researchers. The long-standing collaboration has also created trust and space to respond flexibly to needs of the partner institution, and to support initiatives that have grown bottom-up, such as the transformation to digital teaching and demonstrating the Antwerp exposure. Since the current rector took up office, UCB has also paid more attention to international partnerships, which translates into a great willingness to set up initiatives together.

As an organisation, it is fascinating to experience these developments within a changing international and national context, in which existing power relations ('north-south' relations) and the prevailing 'development model' are increasingly and rightly questioned, debates about the colonial past are taking over the public space, and (new) voices from Congo and the Congolese diaspora are finally taking their place.

Sara Geenen

India

The impact of the pandemic in India

In India, the pandemic mainly affects migrant workers, among others.

The group includes contract labourers (not having permanent employment), daily wage labourers who have to think on a daily basis if they will be able to earn something or go without any money, piece rate workers who get paid depending on the number of products worked on and not on daily or hourly basis (such as the number of bangles made or garments stitched), self-employed people with a very small scale business such as tea-sellers, rickshaw pullers, etc. Characteristics running through the group include direct dependency on daily operation of factories, shops and offices, insecurity of employment and income, lack of social security, health benefits, paid leave, and other assistance. Quite ironically, such people who were clearly not in focus when the initial lockdown measures were designed, constitute at least two-thirds of the total workforce in India as per various [surveys](#). See [The Indian migrant worker: victim of a pandemic or much more? | by USOS international student blog | Medium](#)

By Saumya, PhD student from National Law University, Delhi and Visiting Research Student at the University of Antwerp



Migrant workers in India who at the first lockdown still try to travel to their village of origin.

USOS International Student Blog

USOS organises an international student blog where the students of the partner organisations post information about the impact of the pandemic in their countries.

On the USOS International Student Blog, as far as India is concerned, the contributions from National Law University Delhi students stand out:

- **The Indian migrant worker: victim of a pandemic or much more?**
By Saumya, PhD student from National Law University, Delhi and Visiting Research Student at the University of Antwerp
- [India's response to COVID19 and migrantworkers' crisis](#)

By Preetam Bharti, Alumnus National Law University Delhi (NLUD)

- **The crisis behind closed doors in a lockdown - Domestic Violence in India**

By Devanshi Saxena, PhD student at University of Antwerp and alumnus of National Law University Delhi

Comparative law research on gender equality India-Belgium

In early March 2020, Saumya (PhD student NLUD) will start her research on 'Gender equality in Belgium'. The project is part of a research on SDG 4 and SDG 5 of the Centre for Law, Justice and Development at NLUD. Despite the first lockdown, we (Saumya and Dominique) managed to see each other live and discuss the progress of the research.



Saumya, Noeveren Boom during lockdown 1, at a safe distance in open air.

Summer School: Europe Diversity and Migration

In 2020, USOS invites 5 students from NLUD and Xaviers Institute for Social Service Jharkhand (XIJS) for the above Summer School 'Europe Diversity and Migration' at UAntwerpen. The Summer School could not take place live and the NLUD students choose to participate in the Summer School in 2021, hoping that it will take place live.

Two XIJS students are participating in the Digital Summer School 'Europe Diversity and Migration' in 2020. Pawan Bharti participated in the summer school itself and not in the group work programme. He therefore received a certificate of attendance. Ankita Choudhary successfully completed the group work programme and received a score of 16/20, good for 4 ECTS. She wrote a paper together with a Belgian and Spanish student on the colonial impact on the educational culture of India and Belgium.

Right to organise and trade unionism in the Global Value Chain (GWK)

In 2019, 5 délégués worked on the right to unionise and the rights of workers in the GWK. Syuzanna worked on the right to organise of homeworkers in India and Fabien on trade unionism in the GWK the case of IKEA Belgium to India.

Khadija Hyati, President of the cleaners' parliament Federatie Nederlands Vakverbond invites Syuzanna (home worker) in January 2020. Syuzanna will make agreements with the FNV about the Right to Unite and Home Labour in India.

On 19 October 2020, Fabien will lecture to 50 students of social and socio-economic sciences at the UAntwerpen on union work in the GWK, the case study IKEA Belgium-India. Fabien will mainly explain the progress of the Belgium-India case in the Works Council of IKEA.



Vandersteen, W. De Hellegathonden in SUSKE en WISKE, first edition nr 208, November 1986, p 19

This is one of the slides from Fabien's presentation with the aim of giving students in Antwerp a feel for the working conditions and terms and conditions under which multinationals employ workers in the GWK today.

Dominique Kiekens

Morocco

The traditional Morocco operation for 2020 (exposure and AUHA¹ -UMP² lectures) was thwarted almost entirely by the Covid 19 context in Belgium and in Morocco. Corona also threw a spanner in the works for the first steps in the development of Antwerp's cooperation with Morocco under the heading "Exchange to change". Together with the City of Antwerp, an exchange event with all partners within the City of Antwerp who are active in the Oriental region of Morocco was planned for 10 September 2020 (which has since been postponed by a year). The intention is to:

- Get to know each other's operations and projects better
- Peer-to-Peer *Good practices* exchange
- Exploring possible synergies and concrete cooperation

The Corona crisis had a less fundamental impact on the planned evaluation of partner cooperation with Morocco as part of the 35th anniversary of the USOS. We will elaborate on both elements in the attached report.

Since 2019, Steven Gibens and Luc Goossens have been jointly responsible for coordinating the Morocco operation. the Morocco operation.

Also worth mentioning is the departure of Mitte Scheldeman as USOS staff member at the end of 2020. Yasmien Naciri has replaced her since then in the context of the Morocco operation.

Not without significance for the history of our activities is the retirement of UMP professors El Hocein Belhassani and Mohamed Choukri at the end of 2020. As vice-rector and secretary-general of the Université Mohamed I in Oujda respectively, they, supported by rector Mohammed El Farissi (†), guaranteed an optimal start of our activities in Morocco and they ensured the steady development of a very valuable local network. Not without importance in this context is their contribution in their succession as partners within the Faculté des Sciences Juridiques , Économiques et Sociales, in the person of UMP professors Driss Driouchi and Taïb Berkane.



Professor El Hocein Belhassani Rector

Mohammed El Farissi

& Prof. Mohamed Choukri

This academic year, thanks to Fauzaya Talhaoui, we have met the new management team led by Prof. Yassine Zarhloule (président de l'Université Mohamed Premier) and Prof. Khalid Jaafar (Vice-président de l'Université chargé de la recherche scientifique et de la coopération), Prof. Rachid Hajbi (Vice-président de l'Université chargé des affaires académiques et pédagogiques).

THE CORONA VIRUS IN MOROCCO

¹ AUHA: Association of Universities of Applied Sciences in Antwerp

² UMP: Université Mohammed I in Oujda

Morocco declared a state of medical emergency until 10 January 2021. Everyone is requested to limit their movements and respect the safety measures (wear a mouth mask, respect safety distances...). Since 31 December 2020, a curfew has also been imposed between 20:00 and 06:00.

Several Moroccan cities have stricter security measures of their own, which can make travelling to, from and within these cities more difficult. The spread of the Corona virus varies greatly depending on the region and degree of urbanisation. Tourism in particular has been hit hard by the crisis.

Land borders with the Spanish enclaves (Ceuta and Melilla) remained closed

The borders have been partially reopened for Moroccan nationals and foreigners residing in Morocco since 15 July 2020. Since 6 September 2020, visa-free foreigners can also travel to Morocco if they have an invitation from a Moroccan company or a confirmation of a hotel reservation in Morocco.

It is worth mentioning that Morocco started using the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine at the beginning of 2021 and has now also approved the AstraZeneca vaccine.

THE MOROCCO EXPOSURE

The candidate participants in the Morocco exposure of summer 2020 will start their preparation from the beginning of the academic year 2019-2020 for their induction period in July 2019 under the supervision of Mitte Scheldeman. At the beginning of March 2020, the Morocco exposure was cancelled and the corresponding preparation suspended due to the declared Corona lockdown.

THE PROJECT 'LICENCE PROFESSIONNELLE GESTION & MEDIATION SOCIALE'.

During the 2017-2018 academic year, the one-year 'Licence Professionnelle *Gestion & Médiation Sociale*' (LP-G&MS) course started at the Université Mohammed I (UMP) in Oujda. It is a joint initiative of the UMP on the one hand and the UA³ and the KdG⁴ and AP on the other. The training, recognised by the Moroccan Ministry of Higher Education, aims to prepare a generation of trained social workers, specialised in social project construction and management as well as in social mediation, for the professional approach to social problems in Morocco in general and in the Oriental region in particular.

In September 2020, the one-year LP course was supposed to start for the third academic year in a row. The corona crisis made it impossible to select 34 students from the more than 300 enrolments from all over Morocco until the end of December 2020. How the new academic year will proceed is not really clear for the time being. Traditionally, Antwerp lecturers provide a module in the course on location, each for about ten days: Steven Gibens, (UA & KdG) (*Médiation sociale*); Luc Goossens (UA) (*Sociology*) and Jos Mertens (ex KdG) (*Psychology*) and Fauzaya Talhaoui (UA) (*European Institutions*).

³ UA: University of Antwerp

⁴ KdG: Charlemagne University of Applied Sciences

ON THE WAY TO A MASTER PROJECT

The experience with the LP-G&MS led the UMP colleagues to propose to jointly investigate scaling up the initiative to a master level. The corona context made it necessary to postpone the preparation of the project. The initiators hope to start the programme during the 2021-2022 academic year.

ON THE WAY TO AN AUHA ANCHORAGE

Following the evaluation of the Morocco operation as a result of 35 years of USOS, talks were started at the end of 2020 with a view to a possible structural embedding within the AUHA in general and within the UA in particular.

Luc Goossens and Steven Gibens

Nicaragua

General context

Nicaragua in crisis

In Nicaragua, too, the context was largely determined by the coronavirus. The Ortega regime did its best to ignore it (among other things by organising mass events later rationalised as 'Swedish group immunity strategy'), but the population went into self-quarantine while neighbouring countries and airlines closed the country's borders. On top of this came two, rapidly succeeding, devastating hurricanes in the Caribbean. Thus, the economy slid further into a deep depression with GDP per capita at the end of 2020 about a quarter lower than at the beginning of 2018 (before the start of the political crisis). While much of the economic growth of the past decades has been wiped out, the internal political crisis remains acute. A provisionally divided and politically ambiguous opposition hopes for free elections at the end of 2021, but continues to groan under heavy repression and violence, internal competition and individual ambitions, and fragmentation due to the lucrative lure of collaborating with the regime. Ortega seems to be betting on a repeat of the 1984 scenario: controlled and thus winnable elections with the participation of a few, divided opposition parties and boycotts by others, preferably after a reform of the electoral system validated by the OAS. Only, will history repeat itself? Today, his regime certainly does not have the internal and external legitimacy that it did in 1984.

Our partners in survival mode

For our partner organisation, this context obviously has consequences as well. The UCA combined digital education with on-campus classes as much as possible, and also remained a place of open protest against Ortega within the walls of the campus from time to time. The latter was punished by a 60% reduction in government funding since 2018; largely at the expense of UCA scholarships for less fortunate students. Nitlapan was not directly affected by government measures, but internal travel and rural activities were made more difficult and scaled back by corona. Here too, home-based work, often in difficult conditions (children, heat, etc.), became the norm. Some employees also had to deal directly with the pressure of the tense political situation. The economic crisis also had a major impact on the portfolio of the Fondo de Desarrollo Local (more than -50%) and thus indirectly also on the budget for technical assistance by Nitlapan, leading to dozens of redundancies among Nitlapan technicians and even more at FDL. Despite a solid capital structure, the survival of FDL is gradually becoming a problem, certainly if the severe crisis were to continue for a few more years. After all, Peter and Jennifer, two members of the Task Force, saw their house in Honduras flooded twice by the two hurricanes and spent a total of three weeks in a shelter. So 2020 was a year of trying to keep as many activities afloat as possible with great effort, hoping that 2021 will bring improvement.

... and Nicaragua a little longer on the VLIR country list.

For a long time, 2020 did not seem to bring positive news from VLIR either. Nicaragua would be cancelled and no longer eligible for VLIR funding. However, thanks to the intensive efforts of the International Cooperation Department and the UAntwerp representative in the Bureau, Prof. Peter Bols, it was possible to obtain, at the last minute, that the cooperation programmes will not be abruptly stopped and that limited transitional funding will therefore still be possible. This probably implies that scholarships and activities of the Global Minds and Incremental Funding programmes will remain fundable as of 2022. However, this transition will not last longer than five years, and it is not yet clear exactly what will or will not be possible. In the longer term, USOS exposures and IOB Going Global, etc. will therefore have to find alternative funding or will no longer be able to continue.

Partner activities 2020.

Due to corona, the planned **research course within Going Global** (with the LIPR course module of the masters at IOB) could not take place and with that also the planned participation of the Romanian and Zimbabwean master students (they followed online lessons in Antwerp). Finally, together with the Task Force, it was decided to postpone the whole package until spring 2021 and then offer it in a fully digital version (given travel restrictions in Central America). In March 2021, 17 Central American students started this online pilot course. It is hoped that the lessons from this pilot version of the course can be incorporated into further planning, possibly even with a return to the original plans for a joint global IOB master's programme (also including hubs in other partner countries). A planned second version of the **short course on Community Based Monitoring and Evaluation** also had to be cancelled due to corona. Due to the digital education revolution, however, several members of the **Task Force** did co-teach - from Central America - **various master courses at the IOB** in Antwerp.

The joint research activities with Nitlapan and the Task Force could -with the necessary limitations- still be continued. Thus, within the **Belmont project**, the Rio Blanco diplomado was realised and research was conducted on environmental and development perceptions (and the role of microfinance). This fits within **Milagros Romero's** **doctorate** and was co-supported by Frédéric Huybrechs and Gert Van Hecken. In this context, several joint scientific articles were published and prepared. Further cooperation with FDL on green microfinance (and their search for additional resources to support those activities), including a workshop at the European Microfinance Platform conference. Also worked on their doctorate: **Pierre Merlet** (defence in 2021), **René Rodriguez** and **Carmen Collado**. In addition, the doctoral project of **Danya Nadar** (Canadian/Egyptian researcher) was started up in the FWO project of Gert Van Hecken with Jennifer Casolo in Guatemala.

Despite the difficult corona context, the USOS junior researcher programme continued with 7 fellows: Mayte de los Ángeles Molina Camacho and Bryant Horacio Mendoza Ramírez (Centro de Biología Molecular), Muriel Amparo Ríos Novo and María Elena Salgado García (Instituto Interdisciplinario de Ciencias Naturales), Kevin Jackson Cárcamo and Miguel Ángel Navarrete Rivera (Nitlapan) and Hellen Cristina Castillo Rodríguez (Instituto Interdisciplinario de Ciencias Sociales). USOS co-financed their work grants and contributed to the costs of additional training. The last fellow acquired a scholarship for master studies in Costa Rica starting in 2021. Marlon Howking (former fellow at Nitlapan) will study at IOB starting in September 2020.

In response to the devastating hurricanes on the Caribbean coast, a solidarity campaign was launched among USOS sympathisers that raised 3089 Euros to support the Nitlapan reactivation programme (this will be used to distribute agricultural materials, seeds, etc. to affected households).

Perspectives for the future

The package of joint (research) activities and the strong partnership, especially between the Nitlapan research team and several IOB researchers, means that the cooperation will not end immediately. On the contrary, there is a strong will and confidence that within a few years we will be able to celebrate four decades of cooperation. Several research projects, in particular the PhDs, FWO projects and BELMONT, are still running for some years and it should be possible to acquire new **research funding** together.

Nevertheless, the difficult context in Nicaragua, the partial loss of VLIR as a source of funding and the staff evolution at IOB represent a major challenge for the near future. There is a clear need to redesign the financial and possibly also the substantive strategy. With the (unexpected) retention of Nicaragua as a VLIR scholarship country, there appears to be no need in the short term for a change in the **junior scholarship programme** as far as USOS is concerned, particularly because successful juniors will continue to be able to call on VLIR scholarships if they want to follow master's studies in Flanders.

Unless funds from USOS have to be used for other activities, it will probably remain possible to maintain the USOS junior programme for the entire UCA (despite the difficult relationship between IOB and UCA). Perhaps this is a good time to take a closer look at the results of this programme for the various centres and grantees involved. As for the broader cooperation from IOB, the prospects for the **Going Global joint educational project** are not yet entirely clear. There is a lot of potential with the Central American Task Force, but also a number of serious problems, in particular due to the insecurity of UCA/Nicaragua, which, especially in the short term, jeopardises the feasibility of the specialised research courses. Finally, there is also the news that our Nicaragua coordinator, **Johan Bastiaensen**, is planning to retire in March 2023, so that the question of his succession must be asked.

Johan Bastiaensen