



USOS

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39th ANNUAL REPORT USOS 2023

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Introduction

The U of USOS stood for urgent in 2023. In a world of climate crisis, polarisation and genocide, USOS aims to make staff and students aware, think critically, and take constructive action on pressing social issues.

The partnerships have been the cornerstone of USOS for many years, while ensuring a firm embedding in the University of Antwerp. Building a long-term relationship, in solidarity and mindful of the particularities and needs of each partner: these have been the principles on which USOS has relied for many years. In the current context, where decolonisation of North-South relations is becoming increasingly urgent, these principles come to the fore again. The value of a long-term perspective and of reciprocity are increasingly recognised as necessary ingredients of an equal partnership. In this sense, the USOS vision and USOS activities certainly also inspired the Strategic Framework around Global Engagement that was adopted at the University of Antwerp back in 2022, and effectively launched in 2023. There was a reformed Global Engagement Working Group, a new staff member, and an academic committee. USOS is represented in the Bureau and the Global Engagement Working Group, and takes an active role in the implementation of Global Minds' activities. In March 2023, the Lumumba auditorium was festively inaugurated and a conference on Global Engagement took place, to which USOS also contributed.

However, taking a long-term view of our partnerships does not mean that they are not dynamic, quite the contrary! In 2023, partner responsables Devanshi Saxena, Divin-Luc Bikubanya, Pierre Merlet and Bart Van Rompaey worked on novel activities and established contacts with new organisations. Meanwhile, a new partnership was also launched with ADEKUS (Anton de Kom University of Suriname) in Suriname and UNICAP (Universidade Católica de Pernambuco) in Brazil. The ISTT (Interdisciplinary Studio for Territories in Transition) within the Faculty of Design Sciences of UAntwerp has been collaborating with these universities for many years for student exchange and joint research on public space, climate change, building cultures and urban transformations. Through a collaboration with USOS, they hope to better mentor their students and allow the partner universities to generate more social impact. We were therefore pleased to welcome Marleen Goethals of ISTT as a new member to our Board of Directors. Bart Van Rompaey from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, the new person in charge of the Morocco partnership, also joined the Board.

A new wind was also blowing in Morocco in 2023. In addition to Bart Van Rompaey, his colleague Dirk Vissers (both Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences) and Imane Bendra (PhD student Department of Sociology) gave their support to the immersion trip in Oujda which took place during the summer of 2023. Last year, we reported on the reform of the immersion trips to two-year, reciprocal learning trajectories, in which a group of UAntwerpen students travels to a partner country one year, and hosts a group of students from the partner country the next. The trajectories include not only two physical exchanges, but also a series of online learning moments, with a thematic focus on a number of socially relevant themes chosen in consultation with the partner. These online learning moments were designed by USOS staff member Manon Coulon with funding through UAntwerpen's COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) programme (Voorsprongfonds).

The Morocco exposure was a first important moment in the concretisation of these new trajectories. Themes focused on diabetes and migration, each time bringing together a group of students from different disciplines, accompanied by an academic researcher. In Morocco, thanks to the contacts of the three responsables, there was also intensive cooperation with a number of civil society organisations, making it a very instructive experience for both UAntwerpen and UMP students. However, this renewed interpretation does not mean that we are abandoning the original spirit of the immersion trips. The trips are still about living together, being open and learning on the basis of experiences.

In DRC, another group will be selected in 2024, which will then join a group from Morocco for the immersion trip in Antwerp in September 2024.

Internships were again organised in India in 2023. Eight students from the Faculty of Law and from the Faculty of Social Sciences spent a month in India, conducting research on human rights-related topics together with Indian students.

In Nicaragua, our partner university Universidad CentroAmericana (UCA) was shut down on 15 August 2023. After the bank accounts of UCA and research centre Nitlapan were frozen the previous week, UCA was formally notified that the university (and its authorities) were accused of terrorism, treason and conspiracy. A few days later, government authorities took control of the entire university campus and established a new university. The blow to USOS, and especially the colleagues directly involved in the partnership, was obviously huge. In this terrible context, we as USOS are trying to show our solidarity through close engagement with the people of UCA and Nitlapan, hoping that one day the political situation will change.

The process of multilateral cooperation initiated several years ago continued in 2023. It was followed up by our new ELP fellow, Maria Cordero, who is of Nicaraguan origin and has been working with Nitlapan. Specifically, in 2023 we launched the idea of working on a book with all partners. Following webinars organised at the beginning of the year around different themes, 'caring for our common home' was put forward as the central theme for the book. The book should be a collection of chapters written by researchers affiliated to all partner universities, reflecting on themes such as sustainability, climate, natural resource management and rights of indigenous people.

'Caring for the common home' is also one of the Jesuits' focal points or *Universal Apostolic Preferences*. Within the Ignan network, we participated in some meetings in 2023 to exchange ideas with the other organisations. Devanshi Saxena and Divin-Luc Bikubanya also gave lectures at the Lerkeveld dormitory in Leuven, around law & injustice in India and natural resources in DR Congo respectively. Another activity within the multilateral cooperation is the Pen Friends project, which has returned annually since the Covid period and in 2023 put more effort into student engagement through digital letter correspondences.

The 2023 Debating Development series focused on the question of the university's role in social transformation. This year's 191 registered students were closely involved in the topic and 250 others attended one of the nine public panel discussions. In this way, USOS hopes to contribute to a critical but constructive view of the role the university can play in society. In addition, USOS is also collaborating on a book on service learning based on its years of experience. Gerlinde Verbist is co-writing a chapter on *International Service Learning* with Janus Verrelst and others.

Finally, I am very proud of our two student representatives Hanne De Boe and Céline Vanden Abbeele. They showed tremendous drive and organised two successful activities. In December 2023, they invited Development Minister Caroline Gennez to a well-received lecture. In March 2024, they organised a panel discussion around the documentary Cobalt Rush. They thus show that USOS can continue to engage students to learn about, and contribute to, the relevant, pressing issues of today and tomorrow.

Sara Geenen, chairwoman USOS

Part 1: Campus activities

In 2023, USOS' campus activities were running at full speed. With the involvement of our partners in the Global South, with the commitment of many members of staff and students of the University of Antwerp and with financial help from the Global Minds programme, USOS was able to develop a series of impactful activities. USOS thus gave substance to the new institutionally supported framework for Global Engagement at the University of Antwerp.

1) Four-day formation and preparation of exposures

In February, 16 students and six staff members participated in our annual four-day training in preparation for our exposures to India and Morocco. Through our own workshops and with the help of guest speakers, participants were introduced to several social aspects concerning Morocco and India. There was also room for intercultural training and reflection on inequality and (international) solidarity. The programme had a strong group-building and motivating effect on the students.

The participants of the India exposure prepared themselves further afterwards through some online sessions with speakers affiliated with our partner institutions. For this, students could count on guidance from Devanshi Saxena and Nele Voorspoels, both associated with Faculty of Law.

The participants of the Morocco exposure further prepared themselves through volunteering around one of the themes they signed up for, being migration or diabetes. This track concluded with a group reflection on their volunteering. In addition, they engaged in giving presentations around migration and diabetes for the other members of the group. For this preparation, the students could count on the guidance of Manon Coulon (USOS), Kilian Van Looy (SW), Hannes Lenaerts (SW) and Imane Bendra (MIGLOBA).

2) India exposure

See "Partnership India"

3) Oujda Exposure

The 2023 Exposure programme, a collaborative effort between the University of Antwerp (UA) and Université Mohamed Premier (UMP), sought to foster intercultural learning and exchange. The programme ran in Oujda, Morocco, from August 28 to September 23, 2023, bringing together five students from University of Antwerp, two teaching assistants from the Sociology department, and one USOS staff member. Each participant stayed with a host family from UMP, allowing for deep cultural immersion.

The programme had two main goals: cultural immersion and academic exploration. The cultural immersion aspect involved students experiencing life in a different country, fostering intercultural competencies, and promoting global citizenship values. The academic exploration focused on specific topics such as "the role of nutrition and exercise in diabetes" and "access of migrants to education and the labor market." This aspect aimed to broaden the participants' understanding and provide diverse perspectives.

Throughout the programme, participants engaged in various activities. They spent time with their host families to understand daily life and local customs. They collaborated with UMP, local associations, and health centers to deepen their knowledge of the chosen topics. Social-cultural activities, such as group outings and events, offered opportunities for cultural exchange and bonding. Additionally, regular

reflection sessions encouraged discussions and analytical thinking, allowing participants to process and learn from their experiences.

However, the programme faced challenges, primarily related to communication. To address these issues, several recommendations were proposed, including clarifying roles and expectations for all facilitators and participants, hosting workshops to set expectations and foster open communication, and holding regular meetings to discuss logistics, reflections, and progress.

Despite these challenges, the programme achieved its goals, with participants gaining intercultural skills such as language proficiency, adaptability, and problem-solving. The experience sparked various reflections on global citizenship, leading to a range of outcomes among participants. While some students embraced a sense of community and trust, others faced difficulties that shaped their views on interdependence.

The academic outcomes were generally positive, with students demonstrating critical thinking in their reflections on the chosen topics. However, language barriers and unforeseen delays hindered some participants' ability to fully explore the themes.

In conclusion, the programme was successful in achieving its objectives despite communication-related challenges. For future exposures, a more structured communication plan and clearer role definitions could improve the experience. Balancing academic and cultural goals remains crucial to ensure a comprehensive and enriching programme.



Last dinner together at Hajar-Aya's house. Oujda, September 2023.



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4) Global Pen Friends

In 2023, the Global Pen Friends Project connected 88 university students from different countries through letter writing: 32 from Nicaragua, 28 from DR Congo, 12 from India, and 12 from Belgium. The goal was to promote cross-cultural communication and understanding. Each student wrote two letters, which were then posted on the project's blog. Due to safety concerns following the government seizure of UCA in Managua, the names of Nicaraguan students were replaced with pennames. Despite ample content, blog traffic was low, leading to a new promotional strategy for 2024, including "ambassadors" at each university to boost visibility.

The 2023 schedule was generally effective, with participant selection in January and February, letter exchanges in March and April, and blog postings from May through August. To streamline processes for 2024, students will send letters directly to each other, with Manon in CC for tracking. The new schedule aims to reduce administrative workload while maintaining structure.

Feedback from students was positive, highlighting the value of cross-cultural connections. Suggestions for improvement included better blog promotion, more flexible letter-writing opportunities, and additional online meetings. Ambassadors will play a key role in addressing these areas.

Overall, the Global Pen Friends Project 2023 was a success, but the planned changes for 2024 aim to enhance communication, improve visibility, and create a more engaging experience for participants.



Ananya (India) and Nabami (DRC) meeting at the University of Antwerp after several years of Pen-Friendship

We hereby take the opportunity to share a positive review of the 2023' edition:

"Esta fue una experiencia única que me permitió conocer más sobre otro país y puntos de vista de las personas. También fue un ejercicio de paciencia, tanto al momento de escribir la carta, como para recibirla, ya que actualmente queremos todo de forma inmediata y las cartas son una forma lenta y más personal de conocer a una persona. Fue una linda experiencia. " (Anonymous, Nicaragua)

5) Film screenings in collaboration with 11.11.11

We again collaborated with 11.11.11 to organize thought-provoking film screenings throughout the year. These events, held in partnership with De Cinema and other higher education institutes, serve as crucial platforms for discourse and reflection on topics shaping our world today.

In 2023, our collaboration brought forth three impactful screenings, each followed by a panel discussions featuring an array of speakers; from “artists” to policy makers, and so on.

In March, our focus turned to environmental (water) sustainability with "**Marcher Sur L'eau.**" This screening was accompanied by a panel discussion featuring Kiki Berkers from 11.11.11, Aboudlaye Souna Souley representing S-eau-S Sahel, and Joni Vanderhaeghe and Jonas Peeters from Water4Ghana. Esohe Weyden moderated the conversation, exploring solutions to pressing climate challenges.

In May, we screened "**Flee,**" a powerful documentary delving into the harrowing experiences of migrants. Following the screening, our audience engaged in discussion moderated by Tine Danckaers, senior writer at MO*, whose expertise in the Middle East and migration provided invaluable insights. Joining her were Flor Didden, a policy expert from 11.11.11, and Khatera Shamal, whose personal journey added depth to the conversation.

In November, "**Holding Up The Sky**" shed light on the Yanomami (indigenous people from the Amazon) perspective on sustainability and the future of our planet, prompting a post-screening discussion led by Pieter Van Eecke, the film's director, joined by environmental activist Dayana Corzo Joya and 11.11.11's Fay Vastenhoud. Ruby Sanders, adeptly guided the conversation, fostering insightful exchanges on activism and advocacy.

6) Debating Development

The Debating Development series continued in 2023, in collaboration with the Institute of Development Policy (IOB), the University Centre Sint-Ignatius Antwerp (UCSIA) and this time also with the Institute for Environment and Sustainable Development (IMDO). The 21st edition of Debating Development brought together academics, students and policymakers for a series on "the university as a subject of social transformation". Nine panels examined, each from a different perspective, how universities are (not) applying their principles of decolonisation, diversity and sustainability to their own institution. In doing so, the series succeeded in raising fundamental questions about the role and reason of a university and how it functions. The involvement of the university community in these debates made this edition a very lively and relevant series. The series was taken up as an elective by 190 students, from all nine faculties of the University of Antwerp. There was also interest from academic staff and the wider civil society for each session. A total of 250 people registered for one of the sessions.

For this course, the students wrote group works about their imagined new university. This resulted in a number of strong, relevant and even pressing papers, which were subsequently made public on the website and were presented by the students at a university event on ethnic-cultural diversity.

The participants' evaluation of the series revealed an appreciation from the students and attendees for the relevance of the chosen topic. From the “korfvakkencommissie”, the approach to group work, with the accompanying compulsory class for the students, was seen as inspiring for other basket courses.

7) Activities of the student representatives

The two student representatives, Hanne De Boe and Céline Vanden Abbeele, organized the event "**Belgian Development Policy in a Changing World**", which turned out to be a dynamic gathering, held on December 5th at Stadscampus. Attendees included students from various departments and universities, coming together to explore Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and advocate for solidarity and sustainable development.

Caroline Gennez, Belgian Minister of Development Cooperation, delivered an enlightening keynote address, emphasizing the pivotal role of students in addressing global challenges like the Belgian development strategy and the war in Gaza. The event featured engaging activities such as a panel discussion, a Q&A session with the minister, and a networking session, leading to increased awareness, strengthened collaborations, and actionable initiatives to promote sustainability and drive positive change within and beyond our university community.



Minister of Development Cooperation Caroline Gennez made an ardent plea for global engagement during the event 'Belgian development policy in a changing world', organized by USOS student representatives Céline Vanden Abbeele (left) and Hanne De Boe (right)

Janus Verrelst, Manon Coulon, Hanne De Boe and Céline Vanden Abbeele

Part 2: Partnerships

Democratic Republic of Congo

1. Socio-political and economic situation

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) experienced a turbulent year in 2023 as elections were organised, with the opposition (mainly led by Moïse Katumbi, Martin Fayulu and Denis Mukwege) campaigning for change and the majority in power (led by Félix Tshisekedi) defending the 'consolidation of the gains' of the last 5 years. At the same time, throughout 2023 and since the beginning of 2024, the security situation in the eastern part of the DRC has remained unstable and unpredictable. These days, fighting is intensifying between the forces of law and order and the M23 rebel group in North Kivu, with recurrent (and deadly) bombardments in the city of Goma. The presidential (and legislative) elections held on 20 December 2023 saw Félix Tshisekedi re-elected with 73% of the vote. While these elections were a demonstration of a democracy that has sought to assert itself over the years, they were nonetheless tinged with criticism, particularly in terms of the climate of chaos that, according to several observers, characterised them. Be that as it may, President Tshisekedi faces major challenges over the next 5 years, ranging from endemic corruption, which he has vigorously and repeatedly promised to combat, to the precarious security situation in the eastern part of the country, where, once again, his promises to restore security remain unfulfilled. Finally, to these ills that are eating away at the socio-political life of the Congolese people, we should add the question of poverty which, year after year, is posed with acuteness. According to the World Bank, more than 60% of Congolese (around 65 million people) will still be living on less than \$2.15 a day in 2022.

2. About the partnership

In 2023, the USOS-UCB partnership was characterised by a number of important events and activities: the presence of new managers in the management of the partnership, assistance for disaster victims studying at UCB following a natural disaster in Kalehe (in South Kivu), and growing interest in the Global Pen Friends project. We discuss this in more detail below. At the same time, 2023 served as a year of preparation for several activities that will take place in 2024, namely the Research Design in Social Sciences course (the 7th edition of which will be held in April 2024 and the 8th edition at the end of 2024) and the immersion trip to Belgium in September 2024, in which 8 carefully selected UCB students will be able to take part.

- New faces in the partnership

Since March 2023, USOS has had the pleasure of welcoming a new team to its partnership with the DRC. At the University of Antwerp, Divin-Luc Bikubanya is responsible for liaising with the Catholic University of Bukavu (UCB). Divin-Luc is currently a doctoral student at the Institute of Development Policy (IOB/University of Antwerp) and also a teaching assistant at the same institution. On the other hand, at UCB, the person in charge of the partnership is Odile Bapolisi. She is a doctoral candidate at UCB and at the same time a teaching assistant at UCB's Faculty of Law. Working in tandem, they will liaise between the USOS and its partner university in the DRC, UCB, in particular through various academic, scientific and cultural projects of social benefit.



Divin-Luc Bikubanya



Odile Bapolisi

- **Assistance Kalehe**

At the beginning of May 2024, the territory of Kalehe, along Lake Kivu, was hit by flooding and landslides due to heavy rain. The villages in question were BUSHUSHU and NYAMUKUBI, where 400 people died and thousands were displaced. Following these tragic events, USOS joined the appeal launched by the UCB to give help to the victims, in particular the families of the 12 students who were seriously affected (notably by the disappearance of their land and means of subsistence, including livestock). The solidarity campaign launched by USOS on its websites raised € 1,036 which, through the UCB Social Service, was used to help finance the tuition fees of UCB students from the above-mentioned villages.

- **Global Pen Friends (GPF) 2023**

For the year 2023, out of a total of 88 students who participated in this interesting USOS partnership student letter exchange programme, 28 students from the DRC actively interacted with their peers from other countries (Nicaragua, India and Belgium). Among the topics discussed, the Congolese were particularly interested in technology and innovation, education, gender equality, climate, health and, more importantly, corruption and security. GPF is thus proving to be a prime platform for young students to express their opinions on the everyday life of the Congolese people. Without limiting itself to this, it creates a healthy space for discussion and exchange of knowledge between partner students by confronting or complementing contextual realities to, in the end, open up as much as possible to the world as the two testimonials below confirm¹ :

Testimonial 1: *"I loved this experience and would recommend it to anyone. It's rare to come into contact with someone who lives in a different world to us, who sees things in their own way and who is light years away from us. Global Pen Friends is the bridge between these two worlds. You make lifelong friends, you learn to socialise, to get to know the real world and that's really wonderful"* (Estelle, RDC)

Testimonial 2: *"The opportunity that Global Pen Friends gives us to communicate with students from different backgrounds is a golden opportunity to learn about life in their countries, to express ourselves freely about the problems of our society and to try to propose solutions to these problems"* (Anonymous, DRC)

¹ Taken from the Global Pen Friends Report prepared by Manon Coulon.

In the Congolese context, where access to a stable Internet remains a challenge for most people, GPF sees itself as a 'social network' for deepening knowledge of societal issues, enabling students to discover the often global nature of local issues and to hone their writing skills.

Divin-Luc Bikubanya & Odile Bapolisi



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India

A group of 8 students and 2 staff members from UAntwerp visited India in 2023, supported by USOS. This was the most significant activity of the year as it gave us a chance to physically meet our partners at National Law University, Delhi and Xavier's Institute of Social Service in Ranchi and strengthen our partnership. Another formal partnership was initiated with our hitherto informal partner St. Xavier's College, also in Ranchi. In the section below we begin with an overview of socio-political landscape of India focusing on events falling in the temporal and geographical vicinity of the visit (July-August 2023).

India, that is Bharat - An Overview

"India, that is Bharat" as stated in Article 1 of the Constitution of India, featured prominently in discussions surrounding a G20 dinner invitation, where the use of the Indian word 'Bharat' sparked a discussion on whether the government is planning a name change. Would it perhaps be in response to the new opposition alliance also creatively called [I.N.D.I.A.](#) or because the B.J.P., the ruling party considers 'India' as a colonial appendage? We're not sure.

Transitioning to [India's presidency of the G20](#) from December 1st, 2022, to November 30th, 2023, the theme of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (One Earth, One Family, One Future) set the tone for a series of high-level meetings and celebratory events in Delhi. However, amidst these diplomatic engagements, an alternative gathering known as the We20 conference was organised by 70 grassroots organisations from 18th to 20th August with a [declaration](#) titled, 'People and Nature over Profits for a Just, Inclusive, Transparent and Equitable Future'. It was abruptly halted by the [Delhi police](#) on its second day. This shutdown deprived eager attendees, including students hoping to engage with civil society figures relevant to their research, of access to the event.

Simultaneously, [reports emerged](#) of a different kind of shutdown unfolding in Manipur, where ethnic tensions led to the longest [internet shutdown](#) in India during the previous year (May to December), an example of the reduction of democratic spaces. Expressions of solidarity surfaced elsewhere, such as in Ranchi, where tribal groups stood in support of Manipur's tribal communities on World Indigenous Day (9th August), decrying the government's silence on the matter. These discussions also shed light on environmental concerns, particularly regarding the dilution of laws impacting forest-dwelling communities, exemplified by the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Bill 2023 and the Biological Diversity Amendment Bill 2023, ostensibly aimed at promoting development and national security but [criticised](#) for facilitating the exploitation of forest lands by businesses.



An information board prepared by the students of St. Xavier College in Ranchi draws attention to important issues on the eve of World Indigenous Day, 9th August 2023



Sharing a meal at the Slow Food initiative Ajam Emba run by an XISS alumna Ms. Aruna Tirkey

In the face of such challenges, international solidarity through physical and digital exchanges between higher educational institutions assumes heightened significance. Notably, India's adoption of the National Education Policy 2023, with its emphasis on areas like research promotion, teacher professional development, and internationalization, offers a promising framework for collaboration. Initiatives like the Erasmus plus mobility grant for incoming mobility in 2024 and 2025, alongside other joint projects facilitated by our partnerships, align positively with the objectives outlined in this policy.



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USOS India Internship-Exposure 2023

In the first half of the year, students and staff at UAntwerp as well as in our partner universities prepared for the visit of the students from the Faculties of Social Sciences and Law to India. USOS facilitated the preparation by organising a four-day training programme from 6th to 9th February in Antwerp. This included classes on religion and philosophy in India and the caste system in India amongst other thematic issues. It also included transferable skill-development sessions such as empathy, inclusion, resilience and connection, on self-reflection about one's metaphorical 'backpacks' when we travel in a group, as well as on privileges, stereotypes and ethical communication.

The India Internship/Exposure 2023 commenced with a visit to Agra on July 21st, where students marvelled at the Taj Mahal and had an opportunity to become better acquainted as a group. Classes began at National Law University, Delhi (NLUD) on July 24th, focusing on broad themes relevant to students' research. A subsequent three-week stay at Xavier's Institute of Social Service (XISS), Ranchi, allowed for individual research, internships, and mentorship focusing on Adivasi rights. Feedback from the partners at NLUD highlighted the need for advanced planning, practical classes, and broader interaction with NGOs and civil society.

In Week 1, between Dwarka and central Delhi, students balanced classes at NLUD, meetings with professors with sightseeing. Being in Delhi made them grapple with stark class divides and societal realities. Valuable feedback emphasised the importance of pre-visit communication, practical classes, and incorporating NGO perspectives into the curriculum.



Students along with the teaching team for the one-week study programme at NLUD

Week 2 in Ranchi featured immersive experiences, including visits to NGOs, villages, and mines, fostering critical reflections on cultural sensitivity and ethical engagements. Feedback underscored the significance of structured reflection moments and expanded partnerships. Week 3 saw students settling into their research rhythm in Ranchi, engaging with mentors at XISS and external experts like

Jacinta Kerketta, Prof Jean Dreze, Dr Brototi Roy and Dr Anju Helen Bara. The student's activities coincided with World Indigenous Day, offering insights into indigenous rights issues. In the final week, students navigated health concerns and farewells, concluding with an evaluation meeting at XISS, where commendations were met with suggestions for enhanced planning, communication, and student support.



Director Dr Joseph Marianus Kujur speaking to the students at XISS, Ranchi



USOS student representative Celine Vanden Abbeele giving a note of thanks to the faculty at XISS Ranchi



Students meeting our partners at St. Xavier's College

The exposure culminated with students participating in the Law and Development Conference at NLUD before departing from Delhi. Key next steps included formalising partnerships through MoUs with St. Xavier's college Ranchi and inter-institutional agreements with XISS and NLUD, ensuring continued collaboration and enriching future iterations of the India Internship/Exposure programme.

Some more pictures from the programme can be found here: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/centra/usos/exposures/verslagindiaexposure/>

Next Steps

The year 2024 is a promising one as several activities are taking place. Students from all partner institutions are participating in the Global Pen Friends Project and we look forward to insightful contributions from them. Two students from XISS will be participating in an internship course under the Master of Political Science at UAntwerp with Belgian NGOs such as 11.11.11 and IPIS funded by the Erasmus plus credit mobility grant. USOS will also be welcoming one student each from the three partner institutions to participate in the summer schools organised by the UAntwerp summer university. Finally, we hope to have more engaging sessions within the multilateral network to enrich our collaboration.

Devanshi Saxena & Anant Kumar

ISTT: Suriname and Brazil

1. Introduction context and country

In 2023, USOS added Anton de Kom University of Suriname (AdeKUS) and Universidade Católica de Pernambuco (UNICAP) as new partners. The interdisciplinary Studio for Territories in Transition (ISTT) at the University of Antwerp's Faculty of Design Sciences has collaborated with AdeKUS' Faculty of Technological Sciences since 2006 and with UNICAP's Department of Architecture and Urbanism since 2018. AdeKUS, Suriname's sole public university, boasts nearly 3,800 students and has strong ties to local organisations due to its faculty largely comprising alumni. UNICAP, one of Recife's two universities in Brazil, is a small private Catholic institution with 15,000 students, situated in the historic city centre and also committed to community service.

In Suriname, despite being a higher middle-income country, 26% of the population lives in poverty, concentrated mainly in the interior. Economic challenges stemming from unfavourable commodity prices (mining and gold) since 2020, coupled with high inflation, have led to increasing unemployment and poverty (Worldbank 2024). There is optimism surrounding offshore oil exploration since 2020, though climate change effects, such as more frequent flooding exacerbated by aging urban infrastructure, persist. The country's current coalition government, led by VHP and ABOP since 2020, saw Marciano Dasai, local promoter of ISTT, appointed as Minister of Spatial Planning and Environment in May 2023.

Meanwhile, Brazil, also classified as a higher middle-income country, faces similar issues, with 21.3% living in poverty, particularly affecting Afro-Brazilian and indigenous populations, as well as regions like Pernambuco in the North and Northeast (Worldbank 2024). Recife, its capital, suffers from significant poverty, homelessness, and vulnerability to climate change due to its low-lying terrain. Despite past economic downturns, Brazil has seen a modest recovery since President Lula Da Silva's re-election in October 2022, with social programmes reinstated, including an updated version of the Minha Casa Minha Vida initiative focusing on repurposing vacant buildings for social housing in urban areas.

2. Partnerships with AdeKUS and UNICAP

2.1 UNICAP Students in Antwerp

From late September '23 to February '24, three students from UNICAP Brazil studied at the Faculty of Design Sciences at the University of Antwerp (with Erasmus+ Credit Mobility scholarships). In addition to taking courses in the Master's in Heritage Studies and Architecture, they conducted design research within the ISTT studio (led by Johan De Walsche and Nathan De Feyter). Their research aligned with Nathan De Feyter's doctoral research, examining how transformations of Conforta homes on Ten Eekhovellei in Deurne-Noord and the renewal of the adjacent "Ringpark Schijn" could mitigate displacement due to gentrification. Many of these homes are now abandoned after being purchased by the urban real estate company VESPA due to the unlivable conditions caused by construction on the Antwerp ring road in their backyard.



Brazilian students in dialogue with residents in the Ten Eekhoelei

2.2 UAntwerp Students Prepare for Research in Suriname and Brazil

Meanwhile, in the ISTT studio, 11 master's students (one from Heritage Studies, five from Urban and Spatial Planning, and five from Architecture) prepared for fieldwork for their master's thesis research in Recife and Suriname, under the guidance of ISTT supervisors Johan De Walsche, Nathan De Feyter, Thomas Vanoutrive, and Marleen Goethals. On the agenda: Design-driven participatory action research on potential future scenarios for the Central Market in Paramaribo (Suriname); on community-based revitalization of the Beatrix Theater in Moengo (Suriname); on potential for a blue-green (bike) network in Paramaribo-Zuid (Latour); on community-based inclusive renewal of the neglected district of Santo Antônio in Recife (Brazil). See for more information <https://istt.be/en>

For the three students preparing research in Recife, the presence of Brazilian students (see 2.1) was highly beneficial, fostering knowledge exchange and the development of friendships.

2.3 UNICAP and AdeKUS Lecturers Online and On Campus at UAntwerp

In April '23, Marciano Dasai, local ISTT-promoter at AdeKUS, spent a month at the Faculty of Design Sciences at UAntwerp (with Erasmus+ funding). During his stay, he engaged in discussions with various stakeholders, participated in the AESOP Young Academics Conference, worked on revamping the Bachelor of "Architecture" programme at AdeKUS, and collaborated on research proposals. He also briefed ISTT students enrolled for master's thesis research in Suriname in 2023-24 and explained the AdeKUS-ISTT collaboration at a USOS board meeting on 20/04/23.

In November '23, ISTT students met Mucio Jucá, local ISTT promoter at UNICAP. During his visit to Antwerp from 8/11/23 to 15/11/23, he supervised research in the ISTT studio and delivered a TAXI lecture. USOS hosted Mucio on 11/11/23 for discussions with Sara Geenen, Janus Verrelst, Manon Coulon, Maria José Cordero, Marleen Goethals, Alina Kiel & Daniela Linkevicius De Andrade.



MÚCIO JUCÁ
A VIEW ON (SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE)
ARCHITECTURE

Thursday November 09 2023 13:00
Mutsaardsstraat 31, 2000 Antwerp
Aula Diepenik K1.6

MO
DU
LOR



Mucio Jucá in the ISTT studio November '23

In November, we also virtually met Sun Kishoen Misier, the new local ISTT promoter at AdeKUS, who replaces Marciano Dasai during his tenure as Suriname's Minister of Spatial Planning and Environment. Sun is assisted by a team of three co-promoters-Amy Cotino (Architect), Jonathan Imang (Mobility Expert), and Suraj Kishoen Misier (Mobility Expert)-to guide ISTT students during their fieldwork in Suriname. The co-promoters will maintain contact with stakeholders of the research projects during quieter periods between successive fieldwork actions. The new AdeKUS promoter team was immediately engaged online during the fieldwork preparation (see 2.2), which was highly beneficial for the new ISTT students (23-24).

2.4 Intensive USOS Three-Day Training, February 5-7, 2024

Prior to their departure for Suriname and Brazil, the 11 ISTT students underwent intensive training on research in a post-colonial and intercultural context. Janus Verrelst and Manon Coulon (USOS) organised the programme, which included lectures, discussions on positionalities, power dynamics, ethical considerations during research, sessions on effective communication, a movement workshop with a dance educator, and a culture shock session. Along with shared meals, these training activities not only prepared students for their research but also facilitated better understanding among them.



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2.5 Collaboration with other faculties at the University of Antwerp

In September 2023, ISTT partnered with Janus Verrelst to involve master's programmes from various faculties at the University of Antwerp in collaborative master's thesis research in Suriname and Recife. This aims to foster interdisciplinary research and fill knowledge gaps identified in prior ISTT projects. Master's programmes were selected based on these gaps. Programmes in Environmental Science, Law, Bioscience Engineering, Maritime and Logistics Management, and Social Work have shown interest. Professor Joris Beckers (Maritime and Logistics Management) proposed research topics on bicycle mobility and logistics in Brazil and Suriname. A student from Maritime and Logistics Management will conduct research in Paramaribo-Zuid in the second semester of 2024-25, supervised by Beckers and alongside ISTT students.

2.6 Fieldwork in Suriname and Brazil, February-May 2024

From mid-February to early May 2024, ISTT students collaborated with UNICAP peers in Santo Antônio, Recife, conducting participatory action research. Local promoter Mucio Juca organised a series of lectures with stakeholders in Urban Renewal and Housing from both municipal and state governments, as well as representatives from NGOs. He also facilitated connections with occupation movements, NGOs, and the urban renewal department, Recentro. A design week was also held with Recentro for temporary revitalization of public space in a district of Santo Antônio.

In Suriname, student teams worked on urban projects, supported by AdeKUS co-promoters. Workshops, participatory analysis methods, focus groups, presentations, and exhibitions were utilised here to collaborate with interested citizens, local community development foundations, a market traders' organisation, and local and national governments.

ISTT promoters Johan De Walsche, Marleen Goethals and Nathan De Feyter visited the projects in Suriname and Brazil from February 27 to March 18, 2024, guiding the student teams, establishing new research agendas, and enhancing ties between academia and stakeholders.

3. Outlook for 24-25

3.1 Four two-month research stays at the University of Antwerp for UNICAP and AdeKUS students

In the first semester of 24-25, with Global Minds funding from the University of Antwerp, we can invite two students from AdeKUS and two students from UNICAP for a two-month research stay at ISTT.

3.2 Eleven students again for ISTT 24-25

In March '24, eleven students of the University of Antwerp have completed their subsidy application dossier for research with ISTT in Suriname and Brazil in 24-25 on Mobility Online: six students from the Master of Architecture, three students from the Master of Urban Planning, one student from the Master of Heritage Studies, and one student from the Master of Maritime and Logistics Management. In the first semester, these students will conduct - in an intercultural team with UNICAP and AdeKUS students (see 3.1) - design-driven participatory action research in a socially vulnerable research area in Antwerp, facing demographic, climatic, and/or economic shifts. Additionally, they will prepare for their research in socially vulnerable areas in Suriname and Brazil. We expect the interaction within these

intercultural teams to not only foster global education and mutual learning but also to prepare University of Antwerp students for research in a post-colonial context with different cultures.



The Beatrix team (Regonia Pina, Amy Cotino, Jonathan Imang, Eline Delanghe, Aaron Schuerman and Marie Stalpaert) in front of the theatre Moengo April '24



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The Latour team (Marien Spetz, Lars Vermeulen, Jhelisa Wielkens and Latour co-researchers) at the community building of STIBULA (Latour Neighbourhood Work Foundation) April '24



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The market team (Emelie Mason, Floor Arnouts, Jonathan Imang, Amy Cotino and Suraj Kishoen Misier) at work at the Central Market in Paramaribo April '24.



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Mucio Jucá (UNICAP), Pedro Guedes and Alissi (Recentro) and UNICAP and UAntwerpen students (Manon Goedefroo, Cédric Delbeke and Sarah van der Bijl) during fieldwork in Recife-Santo Antônio April '24

Marleen Goethals, Johan De Walsche & Nathan De Feyter



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Morocco

Women and diabetes management

In Oujda, the Moroccan region next to the Algeria border, a prevalence of 10% of type 2 diabetes (T2D) was reported. Regional barriers and facilitators towards the T2D treatment were identified in a joint project of the Université Mohammed Premier and the University of Antwerp. Increasing urbanisation was found to be a risk factor for sedentary lifestyle. Half of the participants were illiterate, 84% had no occupation, 71% were obese or overweight and 57% were physically inactive. Besides medication, appropriate healthy eating habits and physical activity are needed to tackle T2D. However, current health care service is not equally accessible for all layers of the population. According to the WHO the accumulated number of nurses, midwives and physicians (2.12, <https://idea.usaid.gov/cd/morocco/health>) does not meet the minimum of 2.5 proposed. More health care providers work in private practices increasing the out-of-pocket health expenditure for Moroccan families. In Oujda, these exceed global and regional averages. The poorer part of the community has no financial means to visit the private practices or to receive more specialised care (<https://idea.usaid.gov/cd/morocco/health>).



The local health centres, centres de santé (LHCs) work free of charge enabling the poorest citizens to cope with the basic needs of personal health. Diabetes patients are structurally serviced by nurses providing free medication and counselling. Dieticians or physiotherapists are not available in LHCs and moreover, they are very rare in the region. Hence,

adequate health care professionals are not always present. The adherence to a specific food plan or to a low-carb diet is mostly absent. Targeted activities to increase patient activity are non-existent due to lack of knowledge, staff and time. As for the female patients, going to the local sports centres is culturally limited. Gender-sensitive sports facilities are too expensive or missing. To leave no one behind we focus on women visiting LHCs, since they are an essential but vulnerable cornerstone of Moroccan society. Moroccan women's roles in the household and societal expectations may affect their ability to prioritize their own health, to adhere to treatment plans or to access healthcare resources.

In close cooperation with the Moroccan government, management of the health care centres, local health care officers and patients a specific intervention is developed. At the end of the intervention, women adopting a healthy lifestyle are involved to coach other women. Due to the lack of specific skills, Moroccan partners will corroborate with Flemish health care and higher education institutes partners, specialised in dietary adjustments and coaching of physical activity for the development of the intervention.



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In order to stimulate sustainable development, USOS participated in the preparation of the intervention through a bilateral exchange of academics and health professionals from Oujda and Antwerp. The latter participate in the exchange with a learning attitude to learn about gender and culturally sensitive approaches in T2D management. By focusing on women with less access to appropriate health care, health and gender inequalities for women will be addressed (SDG 5, SDG 3).



Cooperation with the Moroccan Association of Family Planning

Based on the experience of the project on disadvantaged women and diabetes, a close collaboration has been established with Prof Dr Abdellatif Maamri, Executive Director of the Association Marocaine de Planification Famille and academic at the Université Mohammed Premier. As part of the USOS objectives, the University of Antwerp partners have recently started to collaborate on sexual and reproductive health education. For the time being, Prof. Maamri is involved in the preparation of the upcoming student exchange. At the request of the AMPF, the Antwerp partners are also facilitating contacts between primary schools in Antwerp and the AMPF to develop a sexual hygiene education programme in primary schools in Morocco. So far, no additional USOS budget has been used to support these activities. A possible colloquium with Antwerp and Moroccan partners is to be organised in the future.



Bart Van Rompaey

Nicaragua

1. Arbitrary closure and confiscation of our partner institute

On August 15th 2023 the Universidad Centro Americana of Managua-Nicaragua (UCA), USOS' main partner in Nicaragua, was accused and convicted (without trial) by the Nicaraguan judiciary for "terrorism". This nonsensical decision was the result of a longer and ongoing extremely harsh authoritarian turn in Nicaragua which has been silencing any kind of critical voices in the country, arbitrary closing and confiscating the assets of non-aligned NGOs (several thousands) and universities (26 in total) which fit into the Nicaraguan government's policy of banning all places of independent and critical thought and action and transforming Nicaragua into a centrally controlled totalitarian unitary state. Even if these processes have been presented by the government as "legal", it is obvious and internationally recognised that the legal system lost its autonomy and is completely aligned with the arbitrary actions of the authoritarian regime. Subsequently, the Nicaraguan government confiscated UCA and took control of the university infrastructure, its bank accounts and its assets. It also announced the creation of a new university (Universidad Nacional Casimiro Sotelo) which would use UCA's infrastructure. It designated new authorities and some new staff, depriving previous staff members of their salaries and pushing them into economically precarious situations. These new authorities have argued that the continuity of the education of the students would be ensured, but, until now there is no clarity on how this will be implemented concretely. In past confiscations of universities, we have witnessed a purge of students identified as opponents. There is no clarity either on the continuation of (part) of UCA's former staff and to what extent this new institution will take over previous research and outreach activities. It is obvious that that the objective of this action was to silence the only remaining of free and critical teaching and research and to punish UCA for its support to the students protesting against the regime in 2018 and that the newly created University will become, as all existing Nicaraguan public universities, another place for the indoctrination of the Nicaraguan Youth.

For several decades USOS mainly worked with Nitlapan, UCA's research and development institute. After the arbitrary closure of the university, some specific activities of Nitlapan, in particular the technical assistance services delivered in the scope of the partnership between Nitlapan and the microfinance institution, Fondo de Desarrollo Local, were taken by a limited-liability private company created by Nitlapan a few years ago for its service-delivery activities. But these do not cover the entire range of Nitlapan activities, particularly the community work which was implemented in several local territories and the related (action) research processes which had been supported by USOS for several decades. USOS support was indeed directed in the past towards the strengthening of research capacities through the training of young researchers and the consolidation of Nitlapan's research-action agenda on territorial rural development (see for instance the edited book 'Rutas de Desarrollo en territorios humanos - Las dinámicas de la vía láctea en Nicaragua').

2. Partner activities 2023

Despite the closure of UCA, we have continued our partner cooperation along several lines.

Our **education cooperation** with Nitlapan-UCA has continued in 2023 in the scope of the VLIR ICP Connect programme, implemented by a network of partners including IOB, Nitlapan-UCA, Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar in Ecuador, and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Colombia and consisting in the design of a pilot version of a digital-blended 'master in globalisation and development' to be implemented in 2025-2027. Even if the programme was initially deeply centred on the long-term

institutional partnership between IOB-UA and Nitlapan, we have managed to exceed the formality of this bilateral partnership only through:

- i) the consolidation of a group of local academics active not only in Nicaragua but also engaged in joint education and research/outreach activities, and connected with diverse non-academic actors in other central American countries. This group has been differently affected by the closure because it is composed of only two persons who were hired full time by Nitlapan (one academic and one support staff) while four other researcher-lecturer were only associate-researchers with Nitlapan, meaning that they were also affiliated to other institutions, in other central American countries.
- ii) the integration of this group within the IOB-UA network through shared publications, shared research projects, co-teaching processes within IOB-UA Master programmes in Antwerp and important contributions into the debate about decolonial perspectives currently taking place at IOB-UA.
- iii) the implementation of a strategy in which we embedded our longer-term partnership with Nitlapan into a broader academic regional network including partners in Colombia and Ecuador built on principles of solidarity and cooperation and providing more flexibility to adapt the project strategy and activities to possible (political) crises

Research cooperation has also continued in 2023. As a follow up of the Belmont project, we continued working on a final collective publication for a special issue in the journal *Global Environmental Change* and IOB maintained the support for the network of citizen science weather stations developed within the project. Several former UCA and/or Nitlapan researchers kept working at UA, whether as IOB-UA doctoral students (**Alder Contreras, René Rodríguez, Milagros Romero**), as a postdoctoral researcher at IOB-UA (**Pierre Merlet**, partly within a project investigating social-ecological challenges in Nicaragua, Mexico and Canada and partly on the 'digital master' project of IOB, and as coordinator of the VLIR ICP Connect initiative), or, as an ELP fellow within USOS and UCSIA (Maria Jose Cordero).

The **USOS junior researcher programme** continued with seven researchers until its forced cancellation due to UCA's closure. After the end of the programme we maintained the communication with the young researchers enrolled through the creation of a Whatsapp group and several meetings in which we supported them in their endeavour to find study and scholarship opportunities abroad.

Several students from our partner institute UCA also participated in the **USOS Global Pen Friends** initiative (for security reasons the names of Nicaraguan participants have been anonymised): C. from Nicaragua and Amani Bahiga Theogene from DR Congo co-wrote the blog text on 'Technology and innovation for a quality education'; Y. from Nicaragua and Benjamin Safari from DR Congo co-wrote the blog text 'The true meaning of quality education'; L. from Nicaragua and A.N. O'Nymes (pen name) from DR Congo co-wrote the blog text 'Education as a basis for the development of society'; Myrthe Vanderzeypen from Belgium and A. from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text 'Female participation in local politics'; H. from Nicaragua and Srijoni Chaki from India co-wrote the blog text 'Feminist action: current and future perspectives'; G. from Nicaragua and Shreya Gupta from India co-wrote the blog text 'Gender mainstreaming in academia: including female and queer perspectives'; C. from Nicaragua and Daniella Muyangayanga from DR Congo co-wrote the blog text 'Decent and dignified work for all men and women'; Kornelio Kabagale from DR Congo and J from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text 'The fight against infectious diseases and access to primary healthcare for vulnerable populations'; Daniel Nyegezi from DR Congo and Luna co-wrote the blog text 'The impact of war and corruption on mental health'; M. from Nicaragua and Néhémie Kapalata from DR Congo co-wrote the blog text 'The impact of a high-speed and high-technological society on our mental health'; Hans Murangaza from the DR Congo and M from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text 'Climate adaptation in rural and urban areas'; Laura C. Zamora from Nicaragua and Amey Prakash from India co-wrote the blog text 'Climate change: consciousness and impact'; Gracia Mano from DR Congo and M. from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text 'Climate change: focusing on causes or solutions?'; R from Nicaragua and Estelle Mulinganya from DR

Congo co-wrote the blog text '[Conservation of water bodies](#)'; D from Nicaragua and Magloire Cikuru Fahari from DR Congo co-wrote the blog text '[Governing natural resources](#)'; Benoit L'Africain Isia from DR Congo and Celestefrom Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Social inequality and human rights: raising awareness among the population](#)'; SOS (pen name) from Managua and Nabami (Naomi) from DR Congo co-wrote the blog text '[Juvenile ageism: recognising children's voices and needs](#)'; J from Managua and Janne from Belgium co-wrote the blog text '[Xenophobia and racism: questioning motives and traditions](#)'; Shreya Samui from India and Emma from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Civic space and democracy: creating peaceful and just societies](#)'; Mayank Bhaskar from in India and N from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Environmental education from a young age](#)'; Balolage Gloire from DR Congo and Ma from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Education as a lever of change](#)'; Patricia Bisimwa Ansmi from DR Congo and V from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Equal opportunities for all genders - a perspective for the future](#)'; Shweta Hansda from India and Crishh (pen name) from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Battling discrimination over gender and sexual orientation](#)'; D. from Nicaragua and Timothee Mulemandeko Buhendwa from DR Congo co-wrote the blog text '[Our physical and psychological relation to food: malnutrition and dietary disorders](#)'; Marie Baeten from the Belgium and Ali (pen name) from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Breaking taboos about sexual health, reproductive health and sexual violence](#)'; Sakshi Singh from India and A from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Creating sustainable workplaces](#)'; Arnth J from DR Congo and L from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Climate change : A need for action](#)'; Diana Ntabaza from DR Congo and C. from Nicaragua co-wrote the blog text '[Becoming responsible in the face of climate change](#)'.

Finally, we organised a fundraising campaign to support UCA's researchers who lose their jobs as a consequence of the closure of the University. In total 1.285 Euros were raised. We also supported the efforts implemented by some of Nitlapan's historical allies, especially IOB-UA and the Jesuit NGO ALBOAN, and former Nitlapan's staff members to explore alternatives to maintain the work of the institute alive until the time comes for a legal reborn. In particular we worked on a common strategy to request to USOS's the possibility to use the funds that were budgeted in 2023 and 2024 for the support of UCA's Young Researcher programme to support the implementation of a collective process of critical thinking and strategic planning that should lead to Nitlapan's organisational restructuring in the current context of crisis, the reformulation of its mission and vision, and for the collective definition of the "Nitlapanian thought" that we consider should be maintained alive.

Pierre Merlet