



USOS

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Introduction

Our world is on fire. From the global pandemic to a new war in Europe, from growing polarisation to the climate crisis, political crises and shelter crises.... USOS partner countries have also been the scene of religious tensions (see India chapter), political repression (see Nicaragua) and a flare-up of armed conflicts (see DR Congo).

And yet, still I begin this annual report with glimmers of hope. Because the USOS fire is also burning. Thanks to our board members and partner leaders, our staff members and our students. Without exception, they are ardent advocates of solidarity, justice and dignity.

Board members guided us in 2022 on our search for a new form for exposures, a cornerstone of USOS for many years. We felt, and were reminded by our partners, that there needed to be more room for reciprocity. We also wanted to deepen the pathways to focus even more on quality guidance and sustainable learning experiences. This resulted in two-year, reciprocal pathways, 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. Within this model, exchange between the partners was also provided for, with, for example, a group from Morocco and a group from DR Congo staying in Antwerp at the same time. This exchange also continues at the level of the partner institutions, with the 'multilateral component' of our operation supported in 2022 by our ELP colleague Divin-Luc Bikubanya.

In 2022, we also step into a reflection process of the IgnAN network, which made us reflect on the core values of USOS and opened doors for new/renewed collaborations. The existing contacts with UCSIA were concretised in 2022 around the appointment of Divin-Luc, who joined both USOS and UCSIA.

The partner responsables are also fully committed to the partnerships in Morocco, India, Nicaragua and DR Congo in 2022. The difficult political situation, especially in Nicaragua, tests our cooperation, but at the same time proves that solidarity is needed more than ever. The Morocco partnership is currently experiencing a relaunch, with new people at UAntwerpen involved in the USOS cooperation with the Université Mohammed Premier in Oujda. In this regard, we would like to explicitly thank Luc Goossens for his more than 15 years of commitment to USOS from a voluntary engagement that he took up largely during his retirement. We would also like to thank Steven Gibens, who has helped support the partnership in recent years and who helped USOS to redefine its Moroccan partnership, about which you will learn more in the next annual report.

Staff members keep the USOS fire burning daily. Janus Verrelst has not only been committed to USOS for years, but in 2022 he also played a key role in writing UAntwerpen's new Global Minds programme. Thanks to Global Minds, USOS activities will be embedded in a university-wide strategy for global engagement, and USOS will have a solid mandate to engage in student exchange and awareness-raising within the university, and contribute to education through Debating Development. Yasmien Naciri helped keep USOS afloat during the difficult Covid period, but decided to go in a new direction in mid-2022. She was succeeded in September by Manon Coulon, who has a background in socio-cultural work and international cooperation and a passion for dance. Manon will focus mainly on campus work and Global Pen Friends.



The USOS team during autumn 2022: Manon Coulon, Janus Verrelst and Divin-Luc Bikubanya.

Nine UAntwerp students had already committed to the exposure with the Université Catholique de Bukavu since 2019. After Covid made their planned exposure impossible, and the group hosted their Congolese colleagues in Antwerp in 2021, they were finally able to go to Bukavu in the summer of 2022. I was there in Bukavu when they arrived. I saw a group of highly motivated and mature students with open and critical minds, and felt proud that these are our 'USOS ambassadors'.

More than 100 students across partner countries applied for an old-fashioned letter exchange in the form of the Global Pen Friends project. This is the first USOS initiative so explicitly committed to exchange between students from different partner countries. The exchange of ideas around sustainable development goals is perceived as enriching by the students. And the written record of this is then also immortalised in a series of blog posts. In 2023, the USOS team will reflect further on how to consolidate this initiative and ensure lasting connection between the different student groups.

At the start of the 2022-2023 academic year, 23 students again applied for the exposures to India and Morocco, for which 10 students eventually signed up for the Morocco exposure in addition to eight for the India exposure. In the renewed USOS spirit, these students are now committing for two years. I remember several preparatory talks around these two-year, reciprocal pathways. More than once, doubts were raised about this commitment. It was said that students today make more, but also more short-term commitments, and that they would be put off by the duration and commitments of the USOS pathway. But look, at the start of the academic year, all our places were already filled; and during the four-day event in February 2023, I was blown over by the commitment of every student, the depth of the discussions, and the strength that emanated from the group as a whole.

And so the USOS fire is once again being passed on to a new generation of students.

Sara Geenen, chairwoman USOS

Part 1: Campus activities

2022 was a transitional year for the campus activities. While we still had to contend with the latest corona restrictions during the first half, the second half provided the freedom to restart a full-fledged exposure programme and to do so according to our new reciprocal formula, spread over two years.

1) Reciprocal exposures

a. Exposure in Bukavu

Three years ago, in March 2020, the itinerary of a group of students who were going to Bukavu was aborted because of COVID. After a two-year break, this group was still able to leave, having helped support the reception of students from Bukavu in Antwerp in 2021. Most of the participants had since graduated, but were still able to complete their journeys.

During the semester before the exposure, participants worked through a literature assignment on content provided from Bukavu. The students worked in groups around the themes of migration, primary education, the "dollarisation" of the economy and the colonial past. They read up, and worked out a set of questions for their observation assignment during the exposure. In doing so, they were helped by several researchers from Bukavu.

Samera El Bakkali, assistant in Rehabilitation Sciences, accompanied the group. Two participants were forced to cancel last minute due to health reasons. In the end, it became a very rich exchange with a full programme, including a one-week stay on Idjwi, an island of Lake Kivu. See also the chapter "Partnership DR Congo" of this annual report.



Congolese and Belgian participants of the exposure in Bukavu

Philippe van Gerwen (alumnus of Commercial Engineering), combined the exposure with an internship of more than four months at Cegemi (Centre d'Expertise en Gestion Minière), a partner of USOS.

We are happy that we were able to make this reciprocal exchange work despite the difficult Covid context. From this pilot project, we were able to draw lessons for new reciprocal pathways in the future.

b. Start-up exposures India and Morocco

After a three-year break, we could call for our exposures again at the beginning of academic year 2022-23.

Eight students were selected for the India exposure from among 10 motivated candidates from the faculties of Law and Social Sciences. They are five Social Sciences students and three Law students who are taking up the exposure as part of their master's thesis. They will work during the summer of 2023 in both Delhi and Ranchi on human rights themes nominated by our partners and for which the partners provide guidance for thesis research, whether or not combined with an internship at an NGO or law firm. From UAntwerpen, the group is supervised by Devanshi Saxena, India partner responsible at USOS and mandate assistant Law, and by Nele Voorspoels, staff member of the student secretariat of Faculty of Law. The current academic year is dominated by preparation for the exposure/thesis internship. This involves taking part in the Four-Day Training during the lecture-free week and a series of three classes, with two classes taught online by individuals from India itself.

For the Morocco exposure, we launched a call for exposure in its renewed format. Our students commit here for a period of two years, working both for the stay in Morocco, and for the reception of Moroccan students in Antwerp. Unlike the pre-pandemic exposures, the students work around a substantive theme, especially one where there is a substantive interest on both the UMP side in Morocco, and on the UAntwerp side to guide students together. The programme thus takes on a more academic content, but remains extra-curricular.

The students could choose from the themes "integration of migrants in the labour market" (three selected), "integration of migrants in education" (two selected) and "prevention of diabetes" (two selected). For these themes, we can count on academic guidance from Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences. In preparation, the group participates in the Four Days Marches and students meet on a regular basis to prepare for the content assignment. Each participant also volunteers for a social project in their own country, which has a link to the projects they will visit in Morocco. For this, they will receive guidance from USOS. One student takes up volunteering as part of the *Community Service Learning* elective.

In Morocco, the seven students can count on the permanent guidance of USOS staff member Manon Coulon and teaching assistants Hannes Lenaerts and Kilian Van Looy from Faculty of Social Sciences.

The programme will be developed academically by Bart Van Rompaey and Dirk Vissers (UAntwerpen - Medicine and Health Sciences), by Imane Bendra (UAntwerpen - Social Sciences), by Driss Drouchi (UMP - Legal, Economic and Social Sciences) and Abellatif Maamri (UMP - Sciences).

2) Global Pen Friends

After a successful pilot year in 2021, another call was launched within our partnerships for participation in the Global Pen Friends. We received a lot of response for this. More than 100 students, balanced across institutions, applied.

Based on a shared interest in an overall development theme, students were matched with each other, and set in motion for correspondences. The USOS team coordinated the matching and follow-up of the pen friends. Students could choose whether their letters would finally appear on the project's blog, which so happened for [12 correspondences](#).

To promote the new and third call in 2023, an interview with three former participants was published on the blog in January 2023. The piece can be read [here](#).



Kornelio Kabagale (UCB - Medicine), Naomi Nabami (UCB - Social Sciences) and Ananya Giri Upadhya (National Law University - Law). Global Pen Friends participants in 2022.

3) Debating Development - People on the move - Leaving no one behind?

The 20th edition of Debating Development brought together academics and policy practitioners for a series on the relationship between migration and sustainable development. Seven panels examined, each from a different perspective, how migration can serve social justice. In doing so, it was shown that migration can provide protection for those fleeing, be an adaptation strategy for those affected by climate change and be a lever for those seeking a better life. Several panel discussions thereby explored the conditions that need to be met for migration to also benefit communities left behind.

Despite the obvious opportunities presented by migration, the downside was discussed at length. Sufficient empirical research exists to show that welcoming migrants is often accompanied by processes of *othering*, stigmatisation and even dehumanisation. A disconcerting session on the detention of undocumented migrants convincingly demonstrated about how detention is an assault on migrants' dignity.

One of the conclusions of this series was that more attention should be paid to communities denied mobility. Political Scientist and IPCC author François Gemenne expressed concern about subsistence

farmers trapped in poverty for whom climate change threatens not only their lives but also their lifestyles. In doing so, Mary Ann Manahan, alumna of the Institute of Development Policy (IOB) pointed out the vulnerable position of indigenous communities and convincingly demonstrated how governments have the power to deprive them of their rights and marginalise them, without necessarily involving any form of migration. In this sense, this series was a plea to look at the nexus between migration and development from a broader lens, and to give special attention to the real *left behinds* of globalisation

The series was taken as an elective by 200 students, coming from all nine faculties of UAntwerpen. For each session, there was also interest from the academic staff and from the wider civil society.



Announcement of Debating Development 2022 series

4) Movie nights in collaboration with 11.11.11 and with the AUHA association

In coordination with the NGO 11.11.11 and in collaboration with the Antwerp University & Colleges Association (AUHA), USOS contributes to the organisation of three film screenings per year on current global themes. The screenings take place at the cinema De Cinema in the heart of Antwerp. A panel discussion with policy officers, researchers and activists takes place after each screening. Each time, the films can count on a full house with more than 100 visitors, including a large proportion of UAntwerp students and staff each time.

In March, the film *Bigger Than Us* was shown on youth engagement, including a speaker from African Youth Organisation (AYO). In May, the film *L'Empire du Silence* was shown, about the conflicts in eastern Congo. Here, USOS collaborator and also ELP colleague Divin-Luc Bikubanya was given a place on the panel. In November, *The Great Green Wall* was shown about the ambitious project to stop devastation in Africa. Here the panel included Catherine Windey, a researcher at the Institute of Development Policy (IOB).



Debriefing of the film "L'empire du Silence" with Elien Spillebeen (MO), Sandrine Ekofo (Broederlijk Delen), Elisabeth Msika Sekanabo (Amuka asbl) and Divin-Luc Bikubanya (UCB/USOS).*

Janus Verrelst, staff assistant USOS



Part 2: Partnerships

Democratic Republic of Congo

I. Political and economic situation

In 2022, the DRC will celebrate 62 years of independence. This event included the handover by Belgium of the relics of former prime minister Patrice Emery Lumumba. 2022 was also marked by notable economic, political and security turbulence. On the economic front, although the country is experiencing 6.1% growth (up from 5.7% in 2021) thanks to the "healthy mining sector" (according to the International Monetary Fund), rising food prices are increasingly plunging millions of Congolese into crisis or acute food insecurity. At the security level, the intensification of rebel armed conflicts, especially the M23 in North Kivu province, is leading to more massacres and displacement of the population, despite regional diplomatic and military efforts to return peace. On the political front, the climate is already tense between the opposition (with its heavyweights Martin Fayulu, Matata Ponyo and Moïse Katumbi) and the "Union Sacrée de la Nation réunie" around President Félix Tshisekedi, ahead of the 2023 elections. The opponents face a president who has announced his succession and whose mandate, which had evoked much optimism when he took office, is now more than a controversial story.

II. The partnership with the UCB

In 2022, the partnership with UCB was strengthened through three major activities: the exposure to Bukavu, the Global Pen Friends project and the short course " Research Design in Social Sciences " .

1. The Bukavu exposure

Since 2020, it has been two years since a group of eight Belgian students prepared for their exposure to Bukavu. Their trip was postponed because of the pandemic that forced us to meet rather in the virtual world. However, the face-to-face encounter remains much richer, and the physical learning experience is a key pillar of the methodology developed by USOS.

The students from the University of Antwerp had started their studies in 2020, but had to wait until the end of 2022 to finally arrive in Bukavu. In November 2021, they met their homologues from UCB during their exposures in Antwerp. The experience of these two groups was thus a pilot project of mutual learning. In the future, the groups will meet more virtually.

During an online meeting, students presented, among other things, the progress of their research on one of their chosen observation themes, notably primary education, the "dollarization" of the economy, regional migration or colonial history.

On 3 August 2022, eight students from the University of Antwerp (two students could not leave due to health problems) arrived in Bukavu and were received by a UCB delegation. For a month, they followed a programme drawn up by the Congolese students in consultation with the UCB social service manager. The programme consisted of activities in the city of Bukavu, including a tour of the city, a visit to the brewery, attendance at a wedding, a visit to the hospital and the Fondation Panzi and an exhibition on colonial history; as well as a six-day stay in a rural setting on the island of Idjwi.

At the end, there was a sharing moment about the good experiences, as well as moments of friction. According to the philosophy of USOS, the two cases are learning experiences.



The group during the visit to Alfajiri College. Photo: Toussaint BACISHOGA Bahiga

2. The "Global Pen Friends" project

The "Global Pen Friends" project enables students to start a correspondence between students from different participating countries. This exchange is based on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and promotes opinions and interactions between students.

As with the first edition, this initiative once again generated a lot of interest among UCB students. Fifteen UCB students therefore interacted with other students from USOS partner universities, exchanging letters on education, climate and environment, gender, health, human rights and social justice. Climate change in particular aroused attention. This translated into the students' desire to stop shying away from the environmental problems threatening the city of Bukavu. Other issues include the right to a healthy environment, the prevention of floods that are often the result of anarchic constructions, and the fertilisation and management of soil nutrients for sustainable agriculture in South Kivu. In addition, the questions on gender are of particular interest to the students who, through this programme, demonstrate their activism in the fight against gender-based violence, a major social problem in the city of Bukavu. Overall, the idea of Global Pen Friends is expected to be an enriching experience for these students. Two students expressed their appreciation in the following words:

"I enjoyed discussing issues that concern me and discovering what reality is like in another country. And also to share these issues from my country's perspective" (Naomi Nabami).

"Global Pen Friends enables students to get away from their seats, to experience the reality of life of other students from other countries through exchanges" (Corneille Kabagale).

3. Training in "Research Design in the Social Sciences"

In December 2022, UCB and IOB, with financial support from USOS, organised the sixth edition of the seminar on Research Design in the Social Sciences. The lecturers were Prof Tom de Herdt, Prof Marie-Rose Bashwira and Prof Christian Kamala Kaghoma.

33 participants with diversified and carefully selected academic profiles gained a good understanding of the design of a scientific study, be it quantitative, qualitative or mixed. Different paradigms were introduced; different ethical aspects were discussed; and students were also introduced to some specific methods. The aim is that, by the end of this course, students will be able to apply the basic principles (including reliability and validity) of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods and, more importantly, design their own research project.

Depending on the budget, each year the lecturers choose the best research proposals that will receive a small financial support. During the 2021 edition, the proposals of Christian Byaombe and Rebecca Lingombe were selected. Rebecca Lingombe from the University of Kisangani conducted research on the theory "Persistence de Conflit foncier inter et intra-communautaire dans le secteur de Bamanga, territoire de Banalia en province de la Tshopo". The research aims to explain the conflicts between "natives" and "immigrants" in Managa and document the consequences of these conflicts. In 2022, she conducted individual and collective interviews and prepared a draft article on this relevant issue. Christian Byaombe, a researcher at the Centre d'Expertise en Gestion Minière (CEGEMI), has been working on the analysis of group insurance as a remedy for miners' social security. On the basis of his research, he tries to establish an attractive model of group insurance based on the perceptions of the actors involved. In an informal sector without social protection, the relevance of this research is high. Christian's article has been accepted for publication in *Conjonctures de l'Afrique centrale 2023*, a book published by IOB, UCL and the Royal Museum of Central Africa.



Focus group in the village of Bapkeme Photo: Rebecca Lingombe

Sara Geenen and Divin-Luc Bikubanya

India

The year 2022 was mostly positive for the India partnership as student exchanges could resume. USOS welcomed a group of five students from XISS and NLU, Delhi and also launched a call for a new exposure/internship which resulted in the selection of eight students to be hosted by our partners in July-August 2023. While India experienced a high number of COVID infections (a third wave) in the first half of 2022, caused by the Omicron variant, the situation was better in the second half of the year, allowing students to participate in a summer school at UAntwerpen.

The text box on the right shows selected statements from the [USOS Global Pen Friends blogs](#) by Indian students who reflected on broad themes of global inequality, democracy and human rights, among other topics, in conversations with peers from other USOS partner countries. I encourage readers to consult the blog to read the full blogs.

The following text details the various activities USOS organised/supported in 2022.

Summer school "Europe: Diversity and Migration"



The interdisciplinary [summer school](#) was organised from 27 June to 8 July 2022 by the University of Antwerp. From XISS, Purvaa Ghosh, Pankhuri Priyam and Muskan Aggarwal participated and at NLUD, Pranali Tayade and Waleed Nazir Latoo were selected to participate. Worth mentioning is the coordinated efforts of all organisations involved (UAntwerpen, NLUD and XISS) as well as the embassy of Belgium to support the visa process for the students. The opening up of travel opportunities after two years of lockdown led to a long wait for visa applications in Belgium.

... "The government's unequal treatment of the protesters clearly reflects the bias of the ruling government. The religious minorities have suffered badly."

... "I feel that my country is still in a developing stage to be able to say anything about democracy, as there have been incidents in the past where the country was on the verge of collapse, but survived and I hope the current situation will get better. Regarding your second question, yes, I consider it a democratic country, with all its potential."

Shreya Sahu, [USOS student blog](#)

... "The parliamentary system we follow makes us a democracy, but due to a huge political and cultural divide between the parties, most health care problems take a huge turn on a religious basis, so delivering good health care in India is a huge task."

Harsh Garodia, [USOS student blog](#)

Strong participation in Global Pen Friends

Students from XISS and NLUD also participated in a cross-cultural exchange with students from Nicaragua, Morocco, Congo and Belgium through the Global Pen Friends project. USOS selected six correspondences that were published on the blog. The topics of discussion were rich and diverse, notably global inequality, status of democracy in their respective countries, sexual violence, feminism and their countries' response to climate change to name a few. There was particularly strong interest from XISS with 22 applications of which 11 students were selected to participate.

"The name of the piece is the Portrait Monument and was created by Adelaide Johnson. It features the individual busts of 3 important feminists from the American feminist movement and has a fourth uncarved plate. The meaning of this is much debated, but a generally accepted interpretation is that it was left blank on purpose to show that the struggle for feminism has not ended and never will."

Manasvinei Manoj, [https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/sexual-violence-against-women/USOS Student Blog](https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/sexual-violence-against-women/USOS-Student-Blog)



(Image of the Portrait Monument by Adelaide Johnson. [Source: https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/portrait-monument-mott-stanton-anthony](https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/portrait-monument-mott-stanton-anthony))

Launch of USOS India exposure/stage 2023



The call for the USOS India thesis internship was launched in September 2022. USOS organised an information session on September 29. Eight students were selected to participate: five from the Faculty of Social Sciences (Elise Geukens, Siham Ghazaoui, Eva Verschueren, Céline Vanden Abbeele, Luca Verhaege) and three from the Faculty of Law (Elena Butaye, Valentina Garcia Delgado, Luísa Rodrigues Rocha). They are accompanied by Nele Voorspoels and

Devanshi Saxena from the Law Faculty. In preparation for their visit to India, they will attend a training programme organised by USOS.

In November 2022, the group went to Aahaar, Antwerp for an introductory dinner to get to know each other. In December, the students were already introduced to our partners through a webinar in which Prof Sophy Joseph of NLUD and Prof Anant Kumar of XISS participated. In 2023, they will attend a four-day training along with the student group going to Morocco. They will also participate in two thematic sessions. First, an online lecture by a former XISS faculty member and also forest rights activist Prof Samar Basu Mullick. Second, an online



training workshop on positionality and intersectionality by Ariël Decoster, PhD student, Faculty of Law and former participant of the USOS exposure programme to Morocco.

Multilateral partnership and mutual commitment

The multilateral partnership was also strengthened this year by the organisation of meetings of the USOS Advisory Group, which includes all partners, including representatives from NLUD and XISS. We hope this will continue in 2023 and lead to deepening engagement between partners. USOS has also applied for Erasmus plus Credit Mobility in collaboration with the partners and the faculties of Law and Social Sciences to initiate a mutual engagement on exposure/internship visits for Indian students to Belgium.

Plans for 2023

In 2023, we will continue to prepare for the India student visit from 20 July to 22 August 2023. The students will also attend a conference organised by the International Law and Development Network at NLUD towards the end of their visit. With an enthusiastic and engaged group of students and hospitable and committed partners, we are optimistic about USOS partnering in 2023.

Devanshi Saxena



Nicaragua

1. An ongoing political crisis

Overall, the socio-political situation in Nicaragua remains very difficult. After Ortega's "re-election" in 2021, the space for criticism was further curtailed during 2022. In 2022, we witnessed the continuation of the regime's attacks on a whole range of NGOs, private universities, media institutions and other organisations that were dissolved and seized, as well as further detentions of political opponents of the Ortega-Murillo regime, silencing any form of dissidence. Besides the continuation of these trials, 2022 also saw intensified attacks on the Catholic Church, new attacks on artists, mainly musicians (<https://www.divergentes.com/juan-carlos-ortega-mecenas-rock-dictadura/>) and repression against Nicaraguan citizens living abroad who are considered opponents (denial of passport renewal, ban on entering Nicaragua). On the international stage, however, all this comes at a price in terms of increasing isolation, US and EU sanctions and the threat of exclusion from the Organisation of American States (OAS). Repression continues to lead to a mass exodus of people to Costa Rica, the US and other countries.

2. Our partners remain in survival mode

The situation for our partner university UCA has remained extremely difficult. Particularly during the wave of closures and confiscations of NGOs and private universities in 2021 and 2022, fears were high that UCA could also be affected. The UCA remains in a vulnerable position in the face of the government's strategies to exert control and stifle the university. While the UCA received significant government subsidies used for scholarships before the crisis, these subsidies have been radically reduced since the socio-political crisis of 2018 and almost completely abolished by 2022¹. Together with the large emigration of Nicaraguan youth, this has led to a huge drop in the number of students. There are also significant reductions in the number of staff, both in the many temporary contracts and permanent staff, and in the internal funding of research activities. Moreover, the government gives different/unclear signals regarding the legal status of the UCA. On the one hand, the body responsible for non-profit organisations has so far blocked all steps by the UCA to obtain a licence certifying that the university complies with all applicable regulations; nor does it allow the UCA to register as a foreign agent. On the other hand, the 'General Directorate of Revenue' has released tax records and issued a document showing that the university is fulfilling its financial/tax responsibilities. While this allows UCA to continue functioning, it also leaves UCA in a context of uncertainty and fear. Moreover, although UCA was removed from the National Council of Universities (CNU)-the umbrella organisation of universities-in March 2022, there is still basic communication with the CNU at its request. Despite all these mixed messages and extreme uncertainties, the UCA has managed to continue to survive in these precarious circumstances for now.

As we have reported in previous years, **Nitlapan-UCA** - which is largely self-financing - is not directly affected by these measures, although there are concerns that it continues to receive foreign funding. As part of enhanced political control, the Foreign Agents Act requires any organisation to be registered as a foreign agent if it receives funds from abroad. Participation in this foreign registry is used as leverage to silence dissident voices, as organisations risk losing their legal status if they express opinions related to political issues in the country with the excuse that they are considered "agents of a foreign country". Despite these difficulties, ongoing social and research programmes could continue

¹ In 2018, UCA received 250.9 million Cordobas (i.e. about USD 7 million); in 2022, it received 1 million Cordobas (i.e. about USD 30,000) - <https://confidencial.digital/nacion/cnu-asesta-el-golpe-final-al-presupuesto-de-uca-y-ucats-e-en-2022/>

with some adjustments (see also below). Concrete work in the rural communities where Nitlapan operates is still possible, even under the increasing control and supervision of all types of activities and community meetings.

The **Fondo de Desarrollo Local** (microfinance organisation) remains active in green microfinance, although it has suffered from the high emigration rate that Nicaragua has been experimenting with since 2022, especially to the United States. Demand for credit has declined. Both Nitlapan and FDL have also suffered from the loss of numerous employees of both institutions and high staff turnover. Under the European Microfinance Platform's Green, Climate-Smart and Inclusive Finance Action Group, it has even taken the lead in a learning network on "Green Heroes".

3. Partner activities 2022

Despite the difficult context, we remain and can continue our partner cooperation. Solidarity, including through partner support from USOS, is paramount in this grim period more than ever.

Our **education cooperation with Nitlapan-UCA** (through an expanded **Latin American Task Force**) took important new steps within the newly approved VLIR ICP Connect programme (coordinated by a network of partners including IOB, Nitlapan-UCA, Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar in Ecuador and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Colombia). A continuation of the previous 'Going Global' programme, but with important new links with partners in Colombia and Ecuador, this programme offers new ways of international cooperation and solidarity between organisations in Latin America. Through the digital channel, lecturers from the Central American Task Force (including Fernanda Soto, Selmira Flores and Jennifer Casolo) again provided several **guest lectures** in IOB's masters. Two Nitlapan staff moved to Belgium in 2022: Milagros Romero to complete her PhD and Pierre Merlet working as a postdoctoral researcher. At the same time, the **digital research course** "*Emancipatory Horizons: Theories and Research Methods for Rethinking 'Development'*" was co-organised by Nitlapan-UCA and IOB. 12 young researchers and development professionals participated and eight of them were able to complete the full course.

In the new VLIR ICP programme, and with the institutional support of the IOB, the promising pilot experiences in Central America have now inspired a new initiative to design and test a **digitally blended 'master in globalisation'**. The digital version would build on an earlier idea of a joint IOB-UCA master's programme. However, the scope was expanded by involving several other partners in Latin America (Colombia, Ecuador), and by establishing several "Communities of Practice" (COP) (combining research, teaching and actions for social engagement) focusing on "Participatory Action Research" and "Political Ecology" as two central themes/approaches to be integrated into the design of the master's programme. Again, the intention is to embed the joint digital programme in a number of local hubs with IOB partners where the digital lessons can be combined with live classes, workshops, fieldwork, etc. The support of additional partners in Latin America makes this initiative more robust, as it creates new networks of solidarity and exchange, not limited to education initiatives alone. In this way, collaborative experiences with Nicaragua (and beyond) also play a further role in renewing education at IOB, and in expanding research and civic engagement in new directions. A first meeting with the renewed task force was organised in Antwerp (September 2022), followed by the first COP activity visit to Ecuador and Colombia in October 2022. Nicaraguan members of the Latin American *task force* also continued to participate in several cross-cutting partner consultations organised by IOB and USOS, as well as in a number of internal discussions, notably on North-South partnerships and decolonisation.

Research cooperation also continued. The **Belmont** project was completed in 2022, and members of Nitlapan and IOB participated in the final meeting of the Transformation to Sustainability Programme in Paris in November (<https://t2sresearch.org/meeting2022/>). A final collective publication is pending for a special issue in the journal *Global Environmental Change*; Nitlapan and IOB are working together to maintain support for the network of citizen science weather stations developed in the project.

The following are still working on their PhDs: **Alder Contreras, René Rodriguez, Milagros Romero and Carmen Collado**. Finally, **Pierre Merlet** works 40% as a postdoctoral researcher at IOB (within a project investigating socio-ecological challenges in Nicaragua, Mexico and Canada) and also temporarily 60% on IOB's 'digital master' project, and as coordinator of the VLIR ICP Connect initiative.

The interest of young people at the university in research topics remains. The UCA's interest in research remains relevant and is included in the strategic plan currently being drafted, but the ability to conduct research is made more difficult by the political crisis and the level of strong polarisation that still exists and is accentuated. This means that investigations are conducted in a very cautious manner, taking into account the risk of being accused of undermining national sovereignty and attacking the homeland. Despite this difficult context, the **USOS programme for young researchers** continued with eight researchers, in Managua, Siuna (RACCN), Jinotega, Matagalpa and other departments of Nicaragua. USOS co-financed their local research grant and some additional training costs.

Several students from our partner institute UCA also took part in the USOS **Global Pen Friends** initiative: Ligia Judith Garcias Loaisiga, together with Congolese student Ruhanga Lami Ndam (<https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/climate-change-and-renewable-energy-sources/>) wrote the blog text "Climate change and renewable energy sources", Nicaraguan student Aesin and Indian student Shreya Sahu wrote a piece on "Democracy and Human Rights" (<https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/promoting-democracy-and-human-rights/>), José M, and Ruby Vaishali Minz (Xavier Institute of Social Service, India) wrote a piece on "Pollution and deforestation" (<https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/pollution-and-deforestation-climate-action-in-relation-to-sdg13/>), Sol and Kornelio Kabagale (Catholic University of Bukavu) co-wrote a blog on "Taking mental health seriously" (<https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/taking-mental-health-seriously/>), Daniel Alejandro Bonilla Gutierrez and Yousra Kaddouri (UAntwerpen) wrote a blog on "Women's economic agency for empowerment" (<https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/womens-economic-agency-for-empowerment/>), Margareth Dimou and Harsh Garodia (Xavier Institute of Social Science, India) wrote a blog on "Cervical cancer and challenges within the health sector in India and Nicaragua" (<https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/challenges-within-the-health-sector-in-india-and-nicaragua/>), while Jovan Yensid Guerrero Marengo and Chaymae Khatiri (Université Mohamed Premier Oujda) wrote a blog on "Inclusive education for children with disabilities" (<https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/autism-causes-and-symptoms/>). The new call for Global Pen Friends was received with great enthusiasm (45 UCA students applied, of which 33 were selected to participate). This shows the interest of Nicaraguan students in interacting with students from other universities.

Pierre Merlet and Gert Van Hecken

Morocco

1. The project "Licence professionnelle Gestion & Mediation Sociale"

In September 2021, the one-year course Licence Professionnelle Gestion & Mediation Sociale began for the fifth consecutive academic year. The course was taught for the last time. The intention is to evolve the Licence Professionnelle into a master's programme (see infra).

The course was taught by Antwerp lecturers in spring 2022 instead of autumn 2021 each for ten days a module: Steven Gibens, (UA & KdG) (Social Mediation); Luc Goossens (UA) (Sociology) and Didier Lorent (replacing Jos Mertens (ex KdG) (Psychology) and Fauzaya Talhaoui (UA) (European Institutions).

2. Global Pen Friends

Within the Gestion & Mediation Sociale course, 24 students applied to participate in the Global Pen Friends. Two students managed to complete the course, with correspondence appearing on the blog. Chaymae Khatiri wrote about [inclusive education](#) with Jovan Yensid Guerrero Marengo from Nicaragua and Ben Ahmed Nabil wrote about [global warming](#) with BAHIGE KOKO Rachel from Bukavu.

3. Towards a Master's in Social Work in Oujda?

As early as 2021, it was clear that the Université Mohammed Premier (UMP) in Oujda wants to convert the Licence Professionnelle into a master's degree in social work.

As part of this, the vice-rector of UMP I Professor Rachid Hajbi visited UAntwerpen and USOS from 16 December '22 to 22 December '22. The visit was prepared by Luc Goossens, Fauzaya Talhoui, Steven Gibens and Janus Verrelst.

These are the spearheads set by UMP I:

- The establishment of a Social Dynamics Observatory (regulatory and institutional aspects) in the Oriental region;
- Strengthening the professional training "Management and Social Mediation" with a master's degree (at the request of the Ministry of National Education, Vocational Training, Higher Education and Scientific Research of the Kingdom of Morocco);
- The establishment by the UMP of a faculty of social sciences in Berkane as part of the strategy to support social professions.

The following conversations were held:

- Woe 21 December: consultation with USOS (Janus Verrelst, Manon Coulon and Steven Gibens) representatives of CeMIS (Imane Bendra and Amal Miri) in the presence of Fauzaya Talhaoui.
- Do 22 December: visit to Brussels (Odisee) in the presence of Steven Gibens and Fauzaya Talhaoui
- Fri 23 December: consultation with Master of Social Work in the presence of AP and KDG representatives (Kristel Driessens and Pieter Cools), also present Janus Verrelst and Steven Gibens (online).

Based on the talks, the hope arises to further strengthen cooperation and share and use each other's expertise. In the course of 2023, more will become clear about the further development of the new programme and cooperation both institutionally and around student exchange.

Steven Gibens