



USOS

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37^e ANNUAL REPORT 2021

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Introduction

USOS is an organisation with deep roots, but also flexible branches. As you could read last year, 2020 forced us to reinvent ourselves. The transition to digital communication opened up new possibilities and led to concrete new initiatives. Several of these are now being continued, such as the *webinars*, the *global pen friends* project, and the digital exchanges between student groups. The possibilities of digital communication also opened our eyes to the potential of multilateral consultation, which led to the creation of an advisory group with members from the various partner institutions. At the same time, the pandemic confronted us with the importance of physical meeting as a necessary basis for mutual understanding and engagement. But it was not only Covid-19 that forced us to go in new directions. From our mission to pay priority attention to the fate of the less privileged in the global South, we are also at the heart of important social issues such as decolonisation, solidarity and development cooperation.

The changing global reality forces us to thoroughly rethink 'development cooperation' and 'North-South relations'. More than ever, it is clear that the major crises we face today are global crises. At the root of these are unequal power relations and an unequal distribution of the burdens and benefits of so-called 'development'. The colonial legacy still manifests itself in the dominance of Western ideas and knowledge, and an economic system based on extractivism, exploitation of human labour and nature. Against this, USOS sets the values of solidarity and human dignity. Together with an acknowledgement of the inequalities and injustices, and an acknowledgement of the decolonial struggle that has been going on for decades in the former colonies, solidarity and dignity are two important principles of a decolonial attitude. We have been promoting these principles since our inception in 1985. Partnering is an important lever for this and enables us to build lasting academic partnerships that are based on trust and mutual understanding, and that function in an open dialogue between different forms of scientific and other knowledge. For us, decolonisation is therefore not a buzzword or an obligatory addition to the programme, but part of the soul of our organisation.

In view of these sustainable academic partnerships, 2021 was a very important year. In November, the first exposure for Congolese students took place in Antwerp. As you can read further in this annual report, this pilot experience was not only very instructive and inspiring, but also extremely challenging. This experience helped lay the foundation for a new model for the *exposures*, which will be further developed in 2022. The pillars of this new model are: long-term and in-depth commitment of students and staff, reciprocal exchange, more interaction between student groups, more cooperation with faculties, and more focus on joint research.

In 2021, new opportunities for cooperation with the Jesuit network and UCSIA also emerged. The *Jesuit European Social Center* (JESC) offered us the opportunity to open a vacancy for an *ELP fellow* who would work for USOS and UCSIA for a year starting in 2022. The *European Leadership Programme* (ELP) is a training programme for young leaders with individual coaching, volunteer work and group formation. At the end of 2021, the selection at JESC was completed, and Divin-Luc Bikubanya emerged as the candidate. Divin-Luc is connected to our partner university *Université Catholique de Bukavu*, and has been following the USOS activities in Bukavu for several years. He

holds a *Master's degree in Globalization and Development* from IOB, and focused his research on the socio-economic dimensions of artisanal and small-scale mining. Divin-Luc's main task at USOS will be to support multilateral cooperation.

The IgnAN network received a new impetus with the launch of a process of *Common Distinction*. In this process, the Jesuit communities and all the works that make up the Ignan network will reflect on the future of their organisation and of the network itself. As a member of IgnAN, USOS has also begun a process of reflection that will continue through 2022.

For 'global engagement' at the UA, 2021 was an important year. After a broad participatory process with consultation moments and workshops, a new action plan for the future was concretised. This plan is the guideline for the proposal of the new Global Minds programme, which will start in September 2022 for five years. As with the current programme, the new Global Minds programme defines the contours of our campus operation, including its *exposures*. A steering committee responsible for the concrete implementation of Global Minds judged that the USOS activities fit in well with the objectives of the programme and therefore also with the new action plan of UA Antwerpen.

In 2021 two strong holders of the USOS partnership, Dominique Kiekens and Johan Bastiaensen, also decide to hand over the function of partner manager to the younger generation. Dominique took up this position in 2017. Johan has been the driving force behind the cooperation with partners in Nicaragua since the late 1980s. For India, Devanshi Saxena takes on the position of partner manager. Devanshi is a former student and former staff member of the National Law University in Delhi and has been a mandate assistant at the Faculty of Law of UA Antwerpen for several years. For Nicaragua, Gert Van Hecken will from now on follow up the relations with the partner institution, whereby he will be assisted by IOB staff members Frédéric Huybrechs and Pierre Merlet. As a professor at IOB, Gert has for many years combined research and teaching in Nicaragua with a deep commitment. Both Devanshi and Gert are thus perfectly placed to further disseminate and concretise the USOS vision based on a long-term commitment to and in the respective regions where they work.

And finally...

In April 2021, I will be in Bukavu to teach at the Université Catholique de Bukavu and conduct research on how workers in small-scale gold mines experience the health effects of their work. I also meet a group of enthusiastic students who are getting ready to come to Antwerp at the end of the year for an *exposure*. And together with the UCB partner managers, I follow the very first partner meeting from a small room on campus via an unstable internet connection. Around that time, I also receive an e-mail from Lieve Vangehuchten, asking me to give her a call. She overwhelms me with the question whether I want to succeed her as chairwoman of USOS. I take a moment to think things over. Driven by the enthusiasm of the students, strengthened by the dedication of many USOS board members and staff, and inspired by the ongoing reflection on the future of USOS, I accept the task. On to 2022.

Sara Geenen, President USOS

Part 1: Campus operation

Even during the second corona year, our society was still largely locked in. Nevertheless, it was a fascinating year with a very rich effect.

The word "campus operation" is perhaps misleading here, as the activities were, by necessity, largely online. A brand new digital pen pal project was born, several hybrid activities were introduced and no less than 32 webinars were organised. Moreover, for the first time, we were able to offer an *exposure* experience in Belgium to a group of students from Congo, for which we also experimented with online and hybrid forms of working. The reception of the group is part of a long-term and reciprocal exchange. A new concept for the *exposures* seems to be born.

These initiatives gave USOS a new impetus and a new face. Presumably, a foundation was laid here on which to build in the coming years.

1. Belgium exposure

For the second year in a row, there was no *exposure* in the global South. Because the vaccination campaign was not yet completed during the summer, we could not send out any students. However, it was possible to host a group ourselves.

During the month of November, we welcomed ten students from the *Université Catholique de Bukavu*, together with their two supervisors. They each stayed with a host family and carried out a modest research project based on a theme of their own choosing. USOS was able to assign an academic coach to each participant, who provided personal guidance. USOS' wide network of former participants and contacts within the university made it possible to find both the families and the coaches.

USOS also offered a programme of socio-cultural activities, which took place during evenings and weekends. To organise these, we could rely on the group of students who had their preparatory programme for their *exposures* in 2020 abruptly terminated. A group of nine students and a supervisor took a break after one and a half years to prepare for their *exposure* to Bukavu in August 2022. They organised trips to various places in and outside Antwerp, including Bruges and Brussels. USOS also organised a weekend in Herentals for both the Congolese and the Belgian students, which promoted bonding between the group. The exchange programme ended with a festive jury session during which the participants presented their results and shared their experiences.

Although the covid measures made the organisation more difficult, for USOS this was a very instructive experience, proving that an "*@home*" experience has a lot of potential for families, students and staff members connected to UAntwerpen. How the group from Congo evaluated this exchange can be read further in this annual report in the section 'partner cooperation Congo'.

[Click here for the report of the exchange](#)



2. Global Pen Friends

For the first time USOS organised an activity in a multilateral context. The *Global Pen Friends* project allowed students from USOS partner institutions to engage in digital correspondence with a student from another country.

Students could register via a central form on the USOS website. On the basis of this information, USOS linked the participants and gave them guidelines for participation. USOS translated the texts where necessary and found voluntary reviews in its network that provided feedback on the content and language.

Some forty students participated in this project, spread across the various countries. In the end, fifteen correspondences were eligible for publication on the blog that the university created for this purpose. <https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/blog/>

3. Webinars on Morocco, Congo and India

The pandemic forced us to organise our awareness-raising activities online. We developed a new and successful format of webinars about and with the countries we work with. During these series of five webinars, different speakers - mainly academics - were given a forum to explain a particular aspect of the country to a broad audience in an understandable way. A chat system allowed viewers to ask questions and interact.

We managed to put together an interesting programme with relevant speakers for the countries Morocco, Congo and India. During the week on Morocco, we could count on more than a hundred participants, including students and staff of UAntwerpen, but also many outsiders found their way to the webinars. For the other two programmes, the numbers dropped a bit, but there was a steady audience.

Before the start of each webinar, a poet recited a poem. This poetic component was experienced as an added value by the participants. Each series of webinars also had a regular host who did the moderating.

Most webinars can be viewed again on our website:

- [Salaam - Azul](#) (Morocco - February)
- [Mbote](#) (Congo - May)
- [India webinars](#) (India - October)

4. Event on decolonisation in cooperation with AYO and Mahara

As a result of the series *reflecting on decolonial perspectives of Debating Development* (autumn 2020), there was contact with the student association African Youth Organisation (AYO). Together we decided to set up a student event on decolonisation as an addition to the academic content of *Debating Development*. Eventually the student association Mahara also joined in.

After several meetings with the associations, a programme was drawn up for a public evening with contributions from students, interspersed with poetry and music. Due to corona, the event could not take place physically. Instead, it became a professional live stream. The event was livestreamed through the social media channels of the various associations at the end of March. We managed to reach hundreds of students, mainly supporters of AYO and Mahara.

5. Workshops anti-racism and decolonisation in cooperation with BAMKO

Following the cooperation between the Brussels diaspora association BAMKO and the Centre for Global Studies at UGent, USOS facilitated the second BAMKO series of anti-racism and decolonial workshops, this time offered at UAntwerpen. During 12 Tuesday evenings, academics from inside and outside UAntwerpen talked to activists about a theme. Because of the coronation measures, all sessions were organised online.

Sixty people registered for this series. They were mainly students and staff of UAntwerpen, but also external students and persons active in social projects.

The following topics were covered: colonial past, decolonising the university, the role of art, anti-racism from a Muslim perspective, intersectionality, Black Lives Matter, climate, international solidarity and mental health.

The participants had the opportunity to voluntarily present a topic in depth to a jury (BAMKO/USOS) in small groups. In the end, three papers were submitted. These were about intersectionality, about the music sector and about South internships for students of Flemish higher education.

6. Impact Entrepreneurship: young entrepreneurs from Congo and Belgium meet

Can young entrepreneurs from Belgium and Congo learn from each other? We asked ourselves this question when we were approached by the *Congolese Youth Entrepreneurship Forum (CYEF)*, an association that originated from alumni of the Faculty of Economic Sciences of our partner university, *Université Catholique de Bukavu*. They wanted to present their association and get in touch with Belgian entrepreneurs.

After consultation with CYEF, in September we organised a panel discussion at UAntwerpen with entrepreneurs from sultry Belgium and Congo. It became a hybrid event, with participants from Belgium physically present, while Congolese participants participated online. We hosted a forum by student-entrepreneur Luka Šeparovic (co-founder Velusta) and Youssef Kobo (founder and director of ASATT). On the Congolese side, the following persons took the floor: Singoma Amisi Mwanza (Federation of Congolese Businesses in North-Kivu), John Nsana Kanyoni (Vice President of the Chamber of Mines in Congo) and George Njenga (Dean of Strathmore Business School, Nairobi/Kenya).

The event was followed by a short networking session for about 20 participants who were physically present. Corona obliged us to keep this small-scale.

7. Debating Development: debating inertia

Because of the pandemic, for the second year in a row the debate series was organised largely online. During five webinars and a concluding physical debate, various so-called *slow movements* (e.g. slow food, slow academia, etc) were put under the microscope. This resulted in fascinating discussions with philosophical reflections on the human relationship with time, often from a critical viewpoint of the dominant development discourse.

An introductory session on the time dimension of climate change was followed by conversations on global food production, the university, decolonisation, covid-19 and activism.

Debating Development was incorporated this year by UAntwerpen as a full-fledged course. Until now, the subject was offered by five faculties. Since this year, all nine faculties of the university offer the subject. This had an immediate impact on the enrolment figures: whereas previously about 90 students took the course, this year the figure was 156. In addition, more than one hundred external participants took part in one or more sessions.

- Some of the webinars can be viewed [here](#).
- A written report of the series can be read [here](#)

Janus Verrelst, scientific collaborator USOS

Part 2: Partnership

Democratic Republic of the Congo

I. Political and economic situation

Three quarters of the Congolese population live in extreme poverty (less than USD 1.9 per day), a situation that has been exacerbated over the past two years by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the last elections, held in 2018, which brought Félix-Antoine Tshilombo Tshisekedi to power, there was hope for the Congolese people. However, to date, the country is still suffering from an indescribable socio-economic crisis. Several Congolese observers point to inexperience, clientelism, patrimonialism and misappropriation of public funds as reasons for the ineffectiveness of the current regime's policies.

In terms of security, the proliferation of active armed groups continues to create insecurity, particularly in the east of the country, where massacres are causing anger among the population. Here, the population regularly protests against the lack of action by the incumbent government. At the political level, the news is still dominated by institutional instability and internal strife within the ruling class, which is denounced by certain opposition and religious groups. However, despite this criticism, Félix Tshisekedi's clan is already expressing its willingness to participate in the 2023 elections. All this under the watchful eye of the camp of Joseph Kabila, the former president, who has been 'removed' from the political arena, but who has not yet said his last word.

II. Partnership with the *Université Catholique de Bukavu (UCB)*

Four major activities were carried out in 2021: the *Global Pen Friends* project, the exchange between History students, the *exposure* of Congolese students to Belgium and finally the *Research Design and Methodology* course. The success of these activities is the result of a will to strengthen the cooperation between the UCB and USOS. In July 2021 this was made concrete with the signing of an updated agreement by the rector of the UCB, Professor Kanigula Mubagwa, and the president of USOS, Professor Sara Geenen.

1. *Global Pen Friends*

The *Global Pen Friends project* enables students and researchers to engage in in-depth correspondence between USOS partner countries. It is an exchange between students from universities belonging to the USOS network in Belgium, DR Congo, India, Morocco and Nicaragua. This exchange is based on a common interest in an international development theme, with a focus on opinions and on interactions between students and/or researchers.

The initiative aroused particular interest among UCB students. This was observed after a call had been distributed to the student representatives of all the faculties at UCB. After Ancert Mushagalusa (who was in charge of coordinating this project at UCB level) informed them about it, they in turn passed the message on to their fellow students.

Due to the great interest, a selection had to take place first. In the end, twelve students from UCB participated. This exchange between students strengthens the cohesion and scientific cooperation within the USOS network.

2. Exposure trip of Congolese students to Belgium

The cooperation between the UCB and USOS is aimed at the personal and academic education of students and staff. An important initiative in this respect is the *exposure*. After three *exposures* (in 2016, 2017 and 2019) of the Belgian delegation to the DRC (the first two in 2016 and 2017 to Bukavu, the last to Rwanda), in 2021 it was USOS's turn to host a group from Congo.

At UCB level, a committee was set up to prepare the *exposure*. The committee included a representative from the social service, the communication service and the service for cooperation and external relations of the UBC. After a selection procedure, ten students were retained from the different faculties: Agronomy (1), Economics (4), Law (1), Medicine (2), Science (1) and Social Sciences (1). The selection was based on an extensive motivation letter and the study results. In addition, an even distribution across the faculties was taken into account.

The preparations started in January 2021 with a meeting of the ten selected students, their parents and the guidance committee consisting of Professor Kamala Kaghoma, in charge of the internship, and Mr Toussaint Bacishoga, in charge of student affairs. This day ended with a meal and so every month a preparation meeting was held with a facilitator on various topics related to this preparation.

At the organisational level, several parents expressed their gratitude for the way the trip was conducted and especially for its results. There were some concerns during the initial preparations, including the conditions for the trip, especially the COVID-19 measures; but for a first experience, the trip was considered a success.

3. Student exchange history

The exchange between UAntwerp History students, UCB Economics students and History students from the *Institut supérieur pédagogique de Bukavu* (ISP) focused on collective memory and living history. The exchange, which took place on 7 May 2021 with the support of USOS, consisted of sharing questions and answers between students regarding the place of the colonisation of Congo in the collective memory in Belgium and in Congo, the *Black Lives Matter demonstrations*, the image of King Leopold II in the public space, and relations between Congo and Belgium after independence. Finally, the exchange of views focused on current and future relations between the DR Congo and Belgium.

This exchange was supervised on the one hand by Professors Maarten Van Ginderachter and Marnix Beyen (History; UAntwerpen), and on the other by Professors Dieudonné Muhinduka, Kamala Kaghoma and Usungu (from UCB and ISP). The latter supervised the interactions in Bukavu.

Meeting in the main hall of UBC's Centre of Excellence, 96 students and their Belgian counterparts had a two-hour online exchange. At the end of the session, recommendations were made and wishes were expressed for repeating this kind of experience, which aims to strengthen scientific knowledge about the course of history between the two countries.

4. Research Design and Methodology course 2021

In November 2021, UCB and IOB, with financial support from USOS, organised the fifth edition of the *Research Design and Methodology course 2021* in Bukavu. The team of trainers consisted of Prof. Tom de Herdt, Prof. Sara Geenen, Prof. Kamala Kaghoma.

From 1 to 6 November 2021, 45 participants from diverse and rigorously selected academic backgrounds were able to gain in-depth knowledge about the design of scientific research, be it quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods. The different paradigms were introduced; ethical aspects were discussed; and the students were also introduced to some more specific methods such as ethnography, participatory research and quantitative techniques applied to social sciences. The aim was that by the end of the course, the students would be able to apply the basic principles (including reliability and validity) of the different methods and set up their own research designs. According to the participants' testimonies, this approach meets the need for capacity building in research. The course involved not only researchers from Bukavu, but also from other provinces of the DR Congo.

In the same context, the participants had the opportunity to reflect on the decolonisation of research by discussing among themselves the actions to be taken at the level of awareness, at the ethical level, at the level of funding, at the level of scientific exchanges and partnerships and finally at the level of the independence of research itself.

Divin-Luc Bikubanya et Ancert Mushagalusa, collaborators of the UCB-USOS partnership



India

1. India's role in global pandemic management

"The entire year of 2020 was consumed by the pandemic and it seems that the first few months of 2021 will also be swallowed up by the effects. In India, the safety precautions are still in force. Things have been slowly and steadily returning to 'normal', and I believe that after all the vaccination drives are over, we will truly be back on track to returning to pre-pandemic life and I might be able to attend offline classes as well. However, I still believe that things will never truly be the same. We will continue to feel the effects of this pandemic for years to come, but the ones who are, and will continue to be, hit the hardest by the current circumstances are the already vulnerable of society: those dependent on the informal sector, women, people with disabilities and other minority communities."

Ishaany, student at National Law University, Delhi <https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/has-the-pandemic-set-back-the-movement-for-reducing-inequality/>

This quote is from the *Global Pen Friends* Project Blog and shows a time capsule of student life in 2021. However, the security measures did not end as early as Ishaany hoped. In 2021, India, like the rest of the world, continued to adapt to the changing situation of the coronapandemic and the rules and guidelines that came with it. It was one long year in which the country battled the effects of global vaccine inequality and a second wave of COVID. India's response to the pandemic, whether in the form of a joint proposal by India and South Africa for a waiver of the COVID vaccine patent at the WTO, or in the form of the relatively rapid development and distribution of indigenous COVID vaccines, triggered a global debate on various aspects of global health management.

2. Global Pen Friends Project

The lives of students at our partner institutions were still interrupted by the pandemic and digital lessons remained the norm. The operation of USOS was also adapted to this reality. Following the success of the USOS International Student Blog in 2020, a pen pal project was launched in early 2021 and the project saw significantly high participation from students in India, resulting in several blog posts. These exchanges provided an opportunity for students to interact in a limited but meaningful way and share their knowledge and insights on a topic related to the SDGs. For example, the excerpt below is from a letter written by Megha, a student at XISS (Ranchi) to Michael Akilimali Bahigara, a student at UCB in Bukavu.

"There is a direct correlation between gender equality and GDP. The promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment can lead to national progress in inclusivity, as outlined by the United Nations Development Programme, which combats discriminatory practices and challenges the roles and stereotypes that affect inequality and exclusion. Establishing gender equality in high-level corporate leadership is still a challenge."

3. Participation in digital summer courses

Four students from XISS (Ranchi) participated in the digitally organised summer courses "The Sustainable City" (Ms Shruti Srivastava and Mr Aniket Kumar) and "Modelling Infectious Diseases and Health Economics" (Ms Aaushi Pandey and Ms Priyansa Kumari) at the University of Antwerp. The feedback from these summer courses was positive, but the saturation with digital learning also affected the participants. In 2022, USOS will continue to support the participation of students from NLU (Delhi) and XISS (Ranchi) and at the time of writing, we are optimistic about the possibility of facilitating physical participation.

4. Webinars India

USOS organised a week of webinars on India from 18 to 22 October. The webinars were fascinating and informative discussions by Belgian and Indian experts on various topics ranging from Indian history, culture, law, politics and current affairs. Below is a brief summary of the webinars:

"Is there really a struggle between secularism and religion in India? What are these religious conflicts about? How are minorities treated and what is the real colonial story? Why is Kashmir so important and what are the political developments in the country? What is the relationship between Belgium and India? And what is the story behind the asbestos problem?"

The series started with a lecture and discussion by Prof. Jakob De Roover (Ughent) on the limits of secularism in India, very topical in the light of the religious and nationalist leadership of the current ruling party. This was followed by a film evening about the documentary 'Breathless', which drew attention to the problem of asbestos dumping in India, and a discussion with the audience in which the comparison with the PFOS/PFAS dumping problem in Belgium was also discussed.



The next webinar on 20 October was by Delhi lawyer Sanya Kumar, who gave an introduction to the laws governing the problem of domestic violence, also known as the global shadow pandemic. The language of the webinars alternated between English and Dutch,

depending on the language preference of the invited speakers and discussants. This was followed by a webinar on Kashmir: Paradise or Hell on Earth? by journalist Gie Goris, who discussed the history and current situation in Kashmir. This issue remains topical in the wake of the withdrawal of Kashmir's special status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in 2019. The series concluded with a webinar on the role of the Flemish Jesuits for education and development in India by Prof Idesbald Godderis and Aditi Athreya who provided a nuanced insight into the history of the missionaries in India and also explained the origins and evolution of the Xavier Institutes, including XISS, Ranchi which is also a partner institution of USOS in India. The recordings of the webinars are available to watch again. The webinars were also complemented by poetry by Siel Verhanneman and Anton Voloshin.

5. The future is multilateral - a look ahead

As Ishaany's quote shows, we will never really return to the old normal, as the pandemic has fundamentally changed us and also taught us more creative ways to continue the partnership. While strictly digital learning will remain an important tool in times of need, a more blended approach will be an option in future engagements. While initiatives such as the summer schools at the University of Antwerp, the India exposure and the *Global Pen Friends* Project will continue as far as they can be safely organised, USOS looks forward to developing a multilateral partnership between all partners in a cooperative manner.

Devanshi Saxena, Partner responsible for India

Morocco

For the second year in a row, the traditional "Morocco operation" of USOS was significantly thwarted by the COVID context in Belgium and Morocco. This was also the case with the renewal of the Antwerp-Morocco cooperation, postponed last year, under the title "*Exchange to change*", which aims to get to know each other's activities and projects better, to exchange good practices on a peer-to-peer basis, and to explore synergies and concrete cooperation.

1. The "*License professional Gestion & Mediation Sociale*" project

In September 2021, the one-year *Licence Professionnelle* course started for the fourth consecutive academic year. Due to the corona crisis, only 34 students could be selected from the more than 300 enrolled from all over Morocco by the end of December 2021. At the moment, it is unclear how the new academic year will proceed. Traditionally, the Antwerp lecturers each teach a module in the autumn course for ten days: Steven Gibens, (UA & KdG) (Social Mediation); Luc Goossens (UA) (Sociology) and Jos Mertens (ex KdG) (Psychology) and Fauzaya Talhaoui (UA) (European Institutions). Subject to the necessary reservations, the various modules have now been postponed until spring 2022 in the hope that the webinar format will then no longer be necessary.

2. *Global Pen Friends*

The *Global Pen Friends project* enabled students from Belgium, DR Congo, India, Morocco and Nicaragua to engage in dialogue on a topic related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The most inspiring exchanges are published on this blog of the University of Antwerp.

Anyone with an informed analysis or opinion who wanted to share proposals on education, democracy, human rights, gender, social justice, health, climate or the environment was welcome.

The UMP students, nominated by Professor Driss Driouchi, were very active in this correspondence project and submitted very good letters on a variety of subjects.

3. Morocco webinars



During the week of 15 February 2021, USOS staff member Yasmien Naciri organised under the title *Salaam - Azul* five well-attended "Morocco webinars" on the following topics

- Political-historical relations and in particular the Belgian colonial interest in Morocco, with researcher Gert Huskens (ULB - UGent)
- Language, in particular the diversity of languages in Morocco, with linguist and Berberologist Dr Khalid Mourigh
- Religion and more specifically the role that Islam has played in Morocco, with historian Lotfi El Hamidi, lecturer and columnist (NRC, De Groene Amsterdammer)
- Imazighen (Berbers) of the South with researcher Malika Ouacha (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
- The Rif region with journalist Yassin Akouh.

Every evening there was poetry in collaboration with Amina Belórf and Soukaína Bennani.

4. Towards an extension of the cooperation between UAntwerpen and UMP

At the end of 2005, the rector of UAntwerpen and his counterpart, the president of UMP, signed an agreement in which the two universities committed themselves to cooperation.

The shared experiences and developments within USOS and the Moroccan higher education sector have led both partners to reflect on a new phase of cooperation to consolidate the 2005 agreement.

To this end, a consultation week was organised from 11 to 15 October 2021 to prepare and explore the concrete terms of a new cooperation agreement. Participants for the UMP were Prof. Rachid HAJBI, Vice President for Academic Affairs (Vice Rector), Prof. Driss DRIOUCHI, former Vice Dean of the Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences, coordinator of the Professional Licence "Management & Social Mediation" and Prof. Dr. Abdellatif MAAMRI, Faculty of Sciences (Dept. of Biology). The UMP delegation had the opportunity to get acquainted with their colleagues from Antwerp, Prof. Ann De Schepper, Vice Rector; Prof. Christine Engelen, Director of Linguapolis; Prof. Dimitri Geelhand de Merxem, Fac. Medicine; prof. Koenraad Keignaert, director Department Social, Cultural and Student Services; prof. Bart Van Rompaey, Fac. Medicine and prof. Dirk Vissers, Fac. Medicine.

The consultation week was hosted for USOS by Luc Goossens, Steven Gibens and Fauzaya Talhaoui.

Initial discussions will continue in the spring of 2022 as part of a return visit to the UMP by a delegation from the University of Antwerp, to be formed at a later date. The purpose of this visit is to concretise an updated agreement between the universities.

Driss Driouchi, Steven Gibens and Luc Goossens - partner responsible for Morocco

Nicaragua

1. Nicaragua in deep crisis

2021 was a year of 'elections' in Nicaragua, but also a year in which the last semblance of democracy was squeezed to death. It seems to have drowned definitively in the authoritarian swamp in which Nicaraguan politics has been entangled since colonisation. What is new here is that the 'pax ortegana' with the other factions of the northerly democratic elites seems to have been buried for the time being (?). Prior to the 'elections', all possible opposition candidates from the non-Ortegan elites (including the daughter of ex-president Violetta de Chamorro) were pre-emptively arrested, accused of foreign financing, money laundering or some other pretext. In addition to this group, old Sandinista allies were also arrested, including ex-guerrillas Dora Maria Tellez and Hugo Torres, who before the 1979 revolution took part in the spectacular occupation of the Nicaraguan parliament, freeing Daniel Ortega from Somocist prison, among others. Those -today critical- old friends even seem to be seen as the greatest threat to the Ortega regime.

The lemma is clear: 'whoever is not 100% for me is against me'. Any independent voice must be stifled. This was also evident in the attack on a whole series of NGOs and organisations that were disbanded and confiscated in 2020 - a process that continued into 2021. One of the organisations affected is the *Fundación del Río*, with which we have worked intensively in previous research projects. All this led to Ortega 'winning' in the boycotted 'elections' and to an internal consolidation of the Ortega-Murillo regime. On the international stage, however, all this comes at a price in terms of increasing isolation, sanctions by the U.S. and the E.U., a threat of exclusion from the Organisation of American States, and a deepening of dependence on Russia, China (after the breakdown of relations with Taiwan), Cuba, Venezuela and even Iran and North Korea -though it is not entirely clear what the specific weight and cost-benefit for Nicaragua in this 'alliance of dictatorships' is. In the long run, this will probably also have disastrous economic consequences, given the large dependence on the US for trade and investments. For example, air traffic to Nicaragua remains scarce and difficult, while in the rest of Central America it has largely recovered after the corona crisis. This threatens to slow down the clear recovery from the corona crisis. The public call for democracy and justice from students, which began with the uprising in 2018, seems further away than ever. The repression is leading to a mass exodus of mostly younger people to Costa Rica, the US and other countries.

2. Our partners in survival mode

For our partner organisation, this context remains extremely and life-threateningly problematic. Especially during the wave of closures and confiscations of NGOs, there was great fear that UCA could also be affected. It forced UCA to be more cautious in allowing anti-regime protest on campus. So far, it has been limited to a further and drastic reduction in government subsidies while UCA remains a member of the umbrella organisation of universities. This will further reduce the number of scholarships for underprivileged students, which also has an impact on the total number of students (some 60-70% of students are grantees) and thus on the number of programmes designed. There are also significant reductions in the number of staff, both in the many temporary contracts and in the permanent staff.

As we reported last year, **Nitlapan-UCA** -which is largely self-financing- is not directly affected by these measures, although there are concerns about continuing to receive foreign funding. As part of the strengthened political control, a recent law establishes certain consequences for receiving foreign funds. Organisations must declare whether they receive foreign funding, and are thus considered an 'agent of the foreign country'. For example, they are not allowed to interfere in the political debate, which could result in prison sentences or fines. Even if Nitlapan abides by these rules, this obviously creates an uneasy uncertainty. The pre-electoral context - with even more polarisation, mistrust and vigilance - did make it often more difficult to visit communities and even more difficult to bring groups of people together in public, partly also because of recurring corona riots. However, almost all ongoing social and research programmes could be continued (see also later in this report). The **Fondo de Desarrollo Local** (microfinance organisation) also seems, for the time being, to have consolidated at the reduced level of last year and has perhaps even received a little more oxygen through the cautious post-corona recovery. Meanwhile, it remains active in the field of green microfinance. In the framework of the European Microfinance Platform Action Group on Green, Climate-Smart and Inclusive Finance, it has even taken a leading role in a learning network on 'Green Heroes'.

... and Nicaragua no longer a VLIR partner country, but not completely excluded for the time being.

Last year, we announced that Nicaragua would only be able to count on VLIR funding for study grants, but in the meantime, it turns out that there are still transition funds available for finishing and consolidating activities that have already been started. This implies that we can still finance activities in Nicaragua within the ICP CONNECT programme (see below). It remains to be seen whether this will also be possible within Global Minds activities from 2022 onwards (especially *exposures*).

3. Partner activities 2021.

Despite the difficult context, we continue and can continue our partner cooperation. As before in DR Congo during the first Kabila regime, these are moments when **solidarity** with our partners, now in Nicaragua, is extremely important.

Thanks in part to the further digital revolution resulting from the corona crisis, our **education cooperation from Nitlapan-UCA** (with a **Central American Task Force**) took important new steps within IOB's Going Global. Via the digital channel, lecturers from the Central American Task Force (Fernanda Soto, Selmira Flores, Jennifer Casolo, among others) once again provided several **guest lectures** in the masters at IOB. At the same time, the previously planned and postponed **research course** (including a local version of the course module 'Local Institutions and Poverty Reduction' from the IOB masters) was offered **digitally**. Eventually, 15 of the 19 candidates from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, France and Chile were admitted. In the meantime, 5 of them have successfully completed the entire course; 5 others only have to finish their thesis (and plan to defend it in the new version of the course in 2021). Another 5 students dropped out, 2 of them because they received the message that their scholarship to study at IOB in Antwerp had been approved.

The pilot version of this course was evaluated by both the students and the Central American Task Force as very positive and promising. Mistakes were made and much was learned, Among other things, it learned that such a digital course must be spread out over a much longer period than similar courses in the full-time programme of IOB in Antwerp. It also learned that there is a real (and paying) demand for this type of programme from an interesting segment of already working

and somewhat older students (who are no longer able to move to Antwerp for a year to study full-time at IOB).

This positive pilot experience prompted IOB to set up a project to investigate the feasibility of a **digital-blended 'master in globalisation'**. The digital version would be in line with the original idea of a joint IOB-UCA master. Again, the intention is to embed the joint digital programme locally in a number of local hubs with IOB partners where the digital lessons can be combined with live classes, workshops, fieldwork, etc.... The difficult context in Nicaragua today is of course no gift in this. Furthermore, the perspective of this digital master is also to generate extra income itself (through the paying students) to guarantee the economic sustainability of the initiative and to reduce the excessive dependence on (VLIR) subsidies. In this way, the experiences in cooperation with Nicaragua also play a further role in the renewal of education at IOB. The members of the Central American *task force* were also very visible during the first attempts at transversal partner consultation (of IOB and of USOS) and in a number of internal discussions, particularly on North-South partnerships and decolonisation.

Research cooperation was also continued. In the **Belmont project**, important steps were taken, especially in the field work. Finally, the 'agricultural diagnostics' could take place - a collaboration with researchers from the French Agroparistec who, in tandem with Nitlapan researchers-technicians, mapped the history and economic-technical situation of a number of micro-territories. Together with the various other action-research processes (including an analysis of local perceptions on 'development' and the further support of a network of *citizen science* weather stations), this now forms the basis of concrete actions and analyses of this (expiring) project; both in terms of academic publications (<https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/trufilepath/publications/recent-publications/>) and the support of reflection processes on green microfinance and the involvement of various actors in the interventions of Nitlapan and FDL. In this context, Milagros Romero, associated with Nitlapan-UCA and IOB, is also continuing to work on her PhD; she will visit IOB at the end of 2021.

Cooperation with FDL on green microfinance has also continued, including supporting the search for additional resources to continue developing these activities and through active networking via the European Microfinance Platform. In the context of that platform, FDL is now seen as one of the 'Green Heroes' of the sector and, with their experience and openness, they are playing an important role in the establishment of a learning network on green microfinance. .

Also working on their doctorate: **René Rodriguez, Carmen Collado and Danya Nadar**. Finally, we can also report that **Pierre Merlet** successfully defended his doctorate on 18 November. He was also appointed 60% postdoctoral researcher at IOB (within a project investigating social-ecological challenges in Nicaragua, Mexico and Canada) and also temporarily 40% on the 'digital master' project of IOB. In addition, he remains - now from IOB - very actively involved in the cooperation with Nitlapan-UCA.

Despite the difficult corona context, the USOS junior researcher programme continued with five (until November) and seven researchers (from November onwards) respectively. Until November, the fellows were Mayte de los Ángeles Molina Camacho and Bryant Horacio Mendoza Ramírez (Centro de Biología Molecular), Muriel Amparo Ríos Novo and María Elena Salgado García (Instituto Interdisciplinario de Ciencias Naturales) and Daniela Andrea Mendoza Tijerino (Instituto Interdisciplinario de Ciencias Sociales). From November, seven new fellows were appointed after a competitive selection: Amalia Carolina Bornemann López and Maria Alejandra Sobalvarro Gutierrez (Instituto de Capacitación,

Investigación y Desarrollo Ambiental- CIDEA), Ligia Judith Garcia Loásiga and Ana Maria Vallecillo Conrado (Instituto Interdisciplinario de Ciencias Naturales), Sandra Loana Castillo Blanford and Mirian Elena Orellana Torres (Instituto Nitlapan), and Nicarao Laertes Delgado Duarte (Centro de Biología Molecular). USOS co-financed their local research grant and some additional training costs. Marlon Howking (former fellow for Nitlapan) obtained his master's degree at IOB in September 2021. Two previous grantees also actively participated in the *Global Pen Friends* initiative. Maria Elena Salgado wrote the blog text "Climate change is not only an environmental issue_" <https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/climate-change-is-not-only-an-environmental-issue/> together with Hannelore Peeters (UAntwerpen), while Muriel Amparo Ríos Novoa wrote the blog text "Sustainable agrifood systems: a transformation challenge_" together with Serge Mukotanyi Mugisho (UCB DR Congo) <https://blog.uantwerpen.be/global-pen-friends/sustainable-agrifood-systems-a-transformation-challenge/>.

Finally, we also received a report and photos from Nitlapan-UCA on the use of the funds from the solidarity action for the victims of the devastating hurricanes on the Caribbean coast in 2020 (EUR 3089). This was used to purchase agricultural equipment, seeds, etc... and distribute them to the families.

Johan Bastiaensen, partner responsible for Nicaragua

