



USOS



Powered by UAntwerp

40th ANNUAL REPORT USOS 2024

Introduction.....	2
Part 1: Campus activities	4
Part 2: Partnerships	12
Democratic Republic of Congo	12
India.....	17
Suriname and Brazil.....	22
Morocco	26
Nicaragua.....	29



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp

Introduction

I started the introduction to the 2023 annual report claiming that the U of USOS stood for urgency. With global events unfolding in 2024 and 2025, I think it is fair to add the other three letters: SOS. And it is difficult not to feel overwhelmed by the way in which geopolitics are shifting, genocides are taking place under our eyes, climate change is intensifying, economy systems are trembling and societies are polarizing. The space for civil society, solidarity, and academic freedom continues to shrink under the weight of armed conflicts, societal polarization and the growing appeal of autocratic leadership in different parts of the world. USOS offers us the possibility to claim that space and fill it with a firm commitment to critical global engagement, solidarity, and equitable partnerships.

At the level of the University of Antwerp, the new rector team reaffirmed its commitment to the strategic framework on Global Engagement. A notable highlight was the awarding of UAntwerp's Prize Paul Panda Farnana to our long-standing partner Nitlapan, a recognition of many years of collaboration, including student exchange and support for young Nicaraguan scholars. The prize was all the more welcome since, as reported in the previous annual report, Nitlapan and its host university had been seized by the Nicaraguan government. Meanwhile, the ongoing genocide in Gaza reverberated on campus, prompting students to question institutional ties with Israeli universities and occupy the Agora building, a powerful expression of solidarity and critical societal engagement. At the level of the Ignatian Apostolic Network (IgnAN), different jesuit organisations continue to find each other and engage in deep, critical reflections on societal challenges. In 2024, for instance, USOS participated in reflection days on climate and environment. The University Center St. Ignatius (UCSIA), a close ally in our shared mission, opened a new house in Antwerp, further anchoring its presence and outreach to society.

USOS partners in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nicaragua, and India faced mounting difficulties. As can be read later in this annual report, the socio-political and economic context in these countries has affected our partnerships in direct and indirect ways. At the same time, throughout the 40 years of USOS' existence, we have learned that partnerships should be flexible and can be resilient, if anchored in shared values. The partnerships in Morocco, Brazil and Suriname, which more recently gained new energy through the involvement of colleagues of health sciences and design sciences, were further consolidated.

40 years indeed! In our next annual report we will look back on the celebrations, but the preparations for the 40th anniversary have started in 2024. Plans are being made to increase USOS visibility on campus, to involve the partners in a reflection on past and future, and to present a joint book project on 'Caring for our common home'. Behind the scenes, a group of 8 editors – from different partner universities – has been working on collecting, reviewing and editing 15 chapters focusing on academic and societal collaborations, alternative stories practices of care for our common home, protection of nature and social justice.

The year 2024 also saw a deepening of our two-way exchange model, with campus and partner activities becoming increasingly intertwined. A highlight was the one month immersion of Moroccan and Congolese students in Antwerp. While UAntwerp students hosted their Moroccan and Congolese colleagues and took them on a series of socio-cultural activities, several UAntwerp staff members and the USOS partner responsables took care of an academic programme, allowing mixed student groups to focus on societally relevant themes related to diabetes, women's rights and migration. Our invited students could count on 15 host families who opened their hearts and houses. Among them, by the way, several were USOS alumni, which testifies of the lasting impact of the USOS experience. This one month was already preceded by a series of online encounters and a preparation programme in the different countries, which included the possibility for students to delve deeper into the selected thematic lines. The whole trajectory was coordinated by USOS staff members Janus and Manon. The closing ceremony end of September, in presence of students, USOS staff and friends, host families and

UAntwerp representatives, was a celebration of collaboration, hospitality, respect and solidarity. For me personally it was a reinvigorating moment and I want to sincerely thank all those who have been involved. However, the closing ceremony didn't mark the end of the trajectory: UAntwerp and Congolese students continue to exchange and prepare a new immersion trip planned for 2025.

Students were once again at the heart of our work. Not only did they actively participate in many events on themes such as decolonization or climate justice, student representatives also took strong ownership of their roles, co-creating content, facilitating discussions, and shaping the direction of our initiatives. We further welcomed three new board members in 2024 —Vincent, Divin-Luc, and Céline—who bring fresh perspectives to our governance.

Finally, we pause to remember professor Koen De Feyter, whose unwavering commitment to global justice and academic solidarity left an indelible mark on USOS and far beyond. Koen's engagement in USOS started in 2007. He took responsibility for the partnerships with India and introduced the India thesis internship, which continues to this day.

Looking into the future, I hope that the rootedness of USOS in almost 40 years of student exchange and partnerships, can give us some guidance to navigate the turbulences of our times.

Sara Geenen, chairwoman USOS

Part 1: Campus activities

1) Two way exchange Morocco and DR Congo with immersion in Belgium (September)

After students from the University of Antwerp visited Oujda last year for an immersion programme, students from Oujda were invited to Antwerp this time. This marked the first time we completed the new two-year model of reciprocal exposures. To emphasise the reciprocal nature of the programme, we are increasingly using the word “exchange” rather than “exposure”. As in Morocco, students worked in mixed groups on the themes of migration and diabetes. This gave participants a perspective on the theme from both Morocco and Belgium, on topics that are relevant to both countries and even linked to each other. Looking back on this first experience, the link between the two programmes could have been made even closer, and there was still too little overlap between the participants of both programmes. The time gap of one year made it challenging to achieve this. However, this pilot project laid a solid and promising foundation for future exchanges and contributed to closer cooperation between UAntwerp and the Université Mohammed Premier in Oujda.

As planned, we invited a group of students from Bukavu to join this programme as well, marking the start of a new two-year programme. With the participation of students from Bukavu, a third thematic focus was chosen for the programme in Antwerp, namely access to sexual and reproductive rights for women. This theme was chosen for three reasons: 1) the supervisor from Bukavu (Odile Bapolisi - Law) is conducting research into access to abortion in the DR Congo, 2) the supervisor from Antwerp (Jolien Inghels - Sociology) is conducting research into female genital mutilation in Kenya, and 3) several participants from Oujda (Science and Medicine) are affiliated with the Moroccan Family Planning Association (AMPF) and are committed, among other things, to providing sexual education in secondary schools. With all these profiles together, we could enable very rich and open exchanges with the help of organisations such as Sensoa, Pimento and De Kraamvogel and with substantive input from the Health Sciences and Social Sciences faculties of UAntwerp on issues like access to contraception which are often perceived as being sensitive, involving different cultural orientations and three country contexts that are very different from each other.

In addition to participants from Oujda and Bukavu, there were also participants from Antwerp. The programme was preceded by a call for participation in the two-year exchange with Bukavu. Our students were asked to support the programme in Antwerp, which they did with enthusiasm: they participated in the group work, took the foreign students under their wing and looked after their well-being. Deep friendships quickly developed.

Initially, 35 students from UAntwerp applied for this programme. In February 2024, following a university-wide call, they were invited to a personal interview at USOS and to an introduction day about the exchange and about Bukavu. As the preparations for the programme progressed, a group of 15 dedicated students remained. In April and May, five online meetings took place with the three country groups together, using French as the working language. While the first meeting was intended as an introduction, the second meeting focused on cultural differences and intercultural skills. For the last three meetings, the students were divided into groups based on the chosen thematic line and attended a webinar given by lecturers from the three participating institutions. This online learning trajectory is new to USOS. In 2023, we received modest financial support from the university to invest in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), which enabled us to prepare tools for this programme, which included the use of preparatory assignments and interactive online methods. In retrospect, this online part proved to be important for group formation and for introducing the

thematic lines. In addition, this hybrid approach enabled us to acquire Erasmus+ mobility opportunities without students having to stay for the minimum period of two months. This was the first programme at UAntwerp to obtain Erasmus+ funding for such hybrid approach.

The immersion programme in Antwerp was based on the following pillars:

- **Academic training:** under the supervision of Sara Geenen, the Institute of Development Policy (IOB) developed the course “Global Engagement in Practice: immersion internship” which provided the framework for the approach, final objectives and evaluation of the exchange. The students were tasked with mapping the challenges related to the inclusion of Congolese and Moroccan communities in Belgium with regard to diabetes, labour market, education and reproductive and sexual rights, and with formulating policy recommendations. Researchers from Health Sciences and Social Sciences gave presentations and provided guidance for the students, including the delivery of a final assessment. Organisations like VDAB, OKAN education, Cadix Hospital, etc provided for work visits and input from the professional field. For the group work, the students were divided into mixed country groups. At the end of the programme, they submitted a paper and defended it orally before a jury. The foreign students earned three credits for this, which were transferred to the partner institution by the IOB. The students from UAntwerp did this voluntarily, with the exception of one History student whose programme also validated this.
- **Immersion:** USOS found a total of 14 host families for the seven participants from Morocco and nine participants from DR Congo. The families were given an information session in advance as well as the possibility of weekly contact with USOS on request and a festive closing session at the end. The dynamic with the families was positive and the students expressed their gratefulness for the hospitality of the families.
- **Intercultural exchange and reflection:** The programme included numerous sessions in which the groups were able to express their orientations and values in a structured manner, including a full training weekend organised by USOS and the youth organisation Pimento. Each participant submitted a weekly reflection assignment about their experience and about the chosen thematic line, which was discussed per country group on Fridays during weekly meetings. We were impressed by how well the three country groups managed to evaluate the group dynamics and to intervene where necessary, with the aim at ensuring the inclusion and well-being of all participants.
- **Cultural activities:** the students of UAntwerp stood for a rich cultural programme, which included visits to Bruges, Brussels, museums in Antwerp and even an animated kayak trip in Dinant.

After return, the programme was evaluated positively by the three country groups and seems therefore to be worth repeating. [Gazet Van Antwerpen reported on the event with an article and some pictures.](#)

As a follow-up, the students from UAntwerp continued to prepare for their immersion in Bukavu, including participation in the three-day training programme in February 2025. Due to the capture of Bukavu by M23, Arusha in Tanzania was identified as an alternative location for the exchange to go ahead. We will be assisted in this by staff from The Nelson Mandela African Institution of Science and Technology (NM-AIST).



The full group during their training weekend in Herentals



Visit to De Kraamvogel



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp



Visit to Antwerp's Town Hall



Kayak trip in Dinant



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp



Snapshot of the closing ceremony, with handover of certificates

2) Two way exchange Suriname and Brazil (spring and autumn)

After USOS and the Interdisciplinary Studio for Territories in Transition (ISTT) decided to join forces last year, 11 master's students from the Faculty of Design Sciences participated in a three-day seminar in February to prepare for their fieldwork in Suriname and Brazil, taking place in spring. Both the type of fieldwork and the destination countries were new to USOS, but the tailored training was well received by the students.

The participation of students from Brazil and Suriname in a fieldwork course of Design Sciences, with exploration of public spaces in Borgerhout, brought a two-way dynamic to this partnership. You read more about this in the section "Partnerships - Suriname and Brazil".

3) Two way exchange India (April – June)

Last year's India thesis internship for Law and Social Sciences students was followed by a new type of immersion in Belgium for students at Xavier Institute of Social Service (XIIS) in Ranchi. Two students stayed here for two months and completed an internship at the NGO's 11.11.11 and IPIS as part of the internship course of the Master of Political Science (Stefaan Walgrave). Their presence led to several meetings with the former UAntwerp participants of the to India internship. You read more about this in the section "Partnerships - India".

4) Global Pen Friends

In 2024, the Global Pen Friends Project brought 78 students from Nicaragua, Brazil, DR Congo, India and Belgium together through letter exchanges. Fifty participants completed the programme; letters from ten pairs were published on the USOS blog and social media channels.

This year, the letters were sent directly between students, with Manon in CC. Thanks to a new template and clear instructions, the students prepared their letters for the blog themselves. This significantly reduced the workload. In addition, all universities were assigned one or two ambassadors who promoted the project locally and provided support.



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp

The planned meetings at campus level were ultimately cancelled. Organising them proved more intensive than anticipated and required more guidance than was feasible within a part-time position for Manon. Nevertheless, the idea of local meetings remains valuable, given the potential for additional connections between students and with USOS.

Despite the high number of blog posts, the reach remained limited. Therefore, extra efforts were made to increase visibility through ambassadors, social media and university channels. Students also suggested areas for improvement: more contact moments, flexible deadlines and broader promotion. Many expressed their willingness to cooperate in this regard in the future.

Global Pen Friends 2024 was an exciting edition with valuable intercultural exchanges. The innovations in working methods made the project more efficient and form a good basis for further strengthening in 2025.

5) Film screenings in collaboration with 11.11.11

In 2024, we continued our collaboration with 11.11.11 with a series of socially engaged film screenings that provided space for reflection and discussion. The screenings took place in collaboration with De Cinema and various higher education institutions in Antwerp, and explored urgent global themes such as extractivism, activism and the struggle for dignified healthcare.

In March, we programmed a double bill: *Disease With No Name* and *Mercy Killing*. Both films told poignant stories about the health crisis in the Global South and the consequences of structural inequality. The post-screening discussion brought together health activists and policymakers, among others, who emphasised the importance of equitable access to healthcare.

In November, we screened *The Illusion of Abundance*, a documentary that tells the story of three Latin American women who are resisting the destructive impact of large multinationals on their communities and environment. The panel discussion after the film provided a powerful platform for conversations about ecological resistance, women's rights and international solidarity, with contributions from human rights defenders and representatives of 11.11.11, among others.

These film evenings once again demonstrated how powerful cinema can be as a means of raising awareness and creating connections between students, activists and the wider public.

6) Debating Development 2024: Harbours (in)justices? Unveiling the undercurrents of port prosperity in Antwerp and beyond (October – December)

The Debating Development series continued in 2024 as a course of IOB with support from USOS and the Institute for Environmental Studies and Sustainable Development (IMDO). The 22nd edition brought together academics, policymakers and social actors for a series of debates on the role of ports in global development, with a special focus on the context in which Antwerp has shaped its port. Eight panels, each from their own perspective, considered how ports can or cannot be transformed in line with global socio-ecological justice. The involvement of students, university staff, concerned citizens and port workers made this edition a lively and relevant series. The series was taken as an elective course by 236 students from all nine faculties of the University of Antwerp. As an assignment for the course, the students worked in groups of four to describe an imaginary port that meets the socio-ecological needs of the Antwerp region, but also of the Global South, which is linked to Antwerp through trade. The 57 group papers were each presented in a video or podcast.

Earlier this year, a selection of students from the 2023 series was invited to present their paper on the 'university as ivory tower' at UAntwerp's Town Hall Meeting on Ethnic and Cultural Diversity. These confrontational presentations contributed to the exchanges about inequalities and representations at UAntwerp.

7) Other public events

a. Cobalt Rush: film screening with panel talk (March)

The two student representatives of USOS took the initiative to explore Europe's Green Deal, and more specifically the impact of the energy transition on cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo. To this end, they decided to screen the documentary [Cobalt Rush](#), which was co-produced by IOB-affiliated researcher Bossissi Nkuba. The film shows the impact of cobalt mining on people and the environment. The screening was subsequently commented on by a panel of researchers and an employee. Member of European Parliament Sara Matthieu (Greens) had confirmed her presence for this panel but unfortunately had to cancel due to illness.

The event attracted around a hundred interested people, including many students, among them the USOS students participating in the two-way exchange with Bukavu. A collection of pictures was [published at the Beeldbank of UAntwerp](#).



From left to right: Guillaume de Brier (IPIS), Roy Maconachie (University of Bath, producer of Cobalt Rush), Bossissi Nkuba (IOB, co-producer of Cobalt Rush), Sarah-Katz Lavigne (IOB), Sara Geenen (USOS/IOB)

b. Public panel talk “Understanding Ongoing Conflicts in North Kivu” – March

As an initiative of several postdoctoral researchers at IOB, USOS contributed to the organization of a panel talk that was open to the public and attended by around 40 interested persons. The panel consisted of Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka (University of Mons), Bienvenu Matumo (La Lucha - Paris 8 University) and Christoph N. Vogel (UGent)

c. Campus events related to India (June and October)

Luca Verhaeghe, a student of Film Studies and Visual Culture (Social Sciences), was able to make a short film about community participation among Adivasi in the context of resistance to mining. She did this in collaboration with a local production company when she stayed longer in India after her thesis internship with USOS in Ranchi in 2023. Financial support from the Global Engagement Open Call for Students enabled her to screen the film in both Ranchi and Antwerp. In June, USOS organised the film screening at the city campus of UAntwerp in collaboration with the NGO CATAPA as part of their “Right To Say No” campaign. The screening attracted various students and NGO workers and led to a fascinating discussion amongst the public.

The above event was moderated by Richard Toppo, postdoctoral researcher at the IOB. On his initiative, another lecture was held in October on the relationship between civil society and military groups in Colombia and India. Two more public events followed in March 2025, this time on the topic of gender. You read more about this in the section “Partnerships - India”.

d. Public lecture ‘The cultural splendour of Al-Andalus’ (November)

At the request of the Antwerp diaspora association Ibn Sina, with which USOS has collaborated in the past in the context of student exchanges with Morocco, USOS supported a public lecture at UAntwerp on Al-Andalus, the Moorish civilisation on the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Ages. For this lecture, Moroccan historian Ahmed Tahiri highlighted the role of the Amazigh in the emergence of the culture of Al-Andalus. The event was supported by Empact, formerly known as the Federation of Moroccan Associations. Around a hundred people attended, including students and mainly Moroccan diaspora with an Amazigh identity.



Moroccan historian Ahmed Tahiri delivers a presentation on the history of Al-Andalus to an engaged audience, primarily from the Moroccan diaspora, including Mounir Ktitou, the Moroccan Consul-General in Antwerp (pictured on the right).

Janus Verrelst en Manon Coulon



USOS
Powered by UAntwerp

Part 2: Partnerships

Democratic Republic of Congo

The country

The socio-political and economic landscape of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) underwent a significant transformation in 2024. The year commenced with the inauguration of President Félix Antoine Tshisekedi on 20 January 2024, marking his second tenure in office. In the aftermath of this event, which was met with optimism by the majority of Congolese, the nation has been confronted with a series of unfortunate events that are endangering the future of its political, social and economic landscape at the local and regional levels. These events range from the attempted coup d'état on 19 May 2024, to the resurgence of the mpox disease and the acute revival and expansion of the M23 rebel offensives in the east of the DRC (with the occupation of the cities Goma and Bukavu following early 2025). In the midst of this fragile and increasingly macabre situation, the appointment of Judith Suminwa Tuluka as female Prime Minister in May 2024 (a first in the country's history) raised many expectations, but the results so far have hardly been positive. Concurrently, the discourse surrounding the revision of the constitution, initiated by the nation's governance, has superseded the establishment of a robust nation and a well-structured postcolonial state, both politically, socially and economically. The volatile and unpredictable security situation is having a detrimental effect on economic growth, whilst concomitantly reducing the productivity of the agricultural and mining sectors, which represent the primary source of employment for the majority of the Congolese population. More than 60% of Congolese (around 65 million people) will still be living on less than \$2.15 a day in 2025.

The partnership

- **The immersion trip: The Congolese experience in Belgium**

As in previous years, the preparations for the exchange have aroused great enthusiasm in the student community (and the academic community in general) at the Catholic University of Bukavu (UCB). The call for participation was launched on all the University's communication platforms (posters on valves, publications on student WhatsApp forums, Facebook, etc.). At the end of the application period, a total of 51 students from various faculties had applied, including 34 female and 17 male students.

The selection criteria included: academic performance, faculty representativeness, gender balance, social commitment through development actions, capacity and openness to communication and social inclusion, commitment to previous activities organised by USOS (such as Global Pen Friends programme, hosting the 2021 immersion trip, etc.).



First meeting with the parents of students selected for the immersion trip, March 2024

In order not to disrupt the smooth running of work on dissertations, internships, seminars, etc., the academic authorities recommended that finalist students (Bac 3 and Master 2) should not be involved in the selection process. The following students were selected to take part in the immersion trip: IGEA MULEMANGABO Divine, HAWA MUHEMERI Lucie, MUGOLI MWINJA KAHAMIRE Martine, KASSAMI Virginie, LUBEMBELA Bénédict, MWANBALI AGANZE Josué, BISIMWA BARAKA Crispin and CIKURU BUSANE Roland. The team, led by Odile Bapolisi, made the first trip to Kigali (Rwanda) to apply for visas, which were granted, thanks in particular to the intervention of USOS, which cleared up an administrative blockage encountered on the spot. The second trip, the journey itself, took the itinerary Bukavu-Kamembe-Kigali-Addis Ababa-Brussels.



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp



Welcoming Congolese participants at the airport of Brussels, September 2024

Although the trip was very long, it was a profound opportunity to get to know each other. The students took the time to talk to each other, to get to know each other and to create an energy that kept them going throughout the immersion trip. After a month's stay with Belgian families, this trip was, for almost all the students, their first experience outside the Great Lakes sub-region and, for some, outside the DRC. As well as being an enriching collective experience, everyone particularly appreciated the friendly environment, both socially, through meetings with other Belgian and Moroccan students, and academically, through the training provided by USOS (see chapter on campus activities).

- **The Research Design in Social Sciences course**

The year 2024 was exceptional in that the Research Design in Social Sciences course was organised twice in Bukavu (7th and 8th edition since the creation of the course). The first edition of the year took place from 18 April to 24 April 2024, with the participation of 27 (young) researchers from the east of the DRC, trained by Profs. Kamala Kaghoma (UCB), Sara Geenen (IOB) and Dr. Pierre Merlet (IOB). The second edition of the year ran from 28 November to 04 December 2024. It saw the participation of 27 researchers, supervised by profs. Kamala Kaghoma (UCB), Marie-Rose Bashwira (UCB) and Tom De Herdt (IOB). The two courses ended with the evaluation of practical work, to enable the young researchers to enrich the research they are working on.



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp



Participants with their certificate at the end of the training, April 2024



Participants training, November 2024

As in previous years, this training programme has been very popular (between 100 and 150 candidates each time) with researchers from the sub-region. The increased participation of women in this programme is testimony to its impact in actively integrating women into the research community. This is a fundamental need for the UCB and the Congolese academic community more in general.

Lessons learned and future prospects

The USOS-UCB partnership grows stronger every year. Through the experience of its activities, in particular the immersion trip, USOS is becoming increasingly well known in the social and academic spheres of the city of Bukavu, in particular through the dissemination of USOS values that the beneficiaries of the partnership pass on to society. We cannot forget the impact of the Global Pen Friends initiative in this process. As every year, in 2024, some of our students got involved alongside students from other partner universities, and environmental and health issues were at the heart of the debate. In 2025, we're going to focus on that, by putting students at the heart of the partnership at a local level.

We hope to achieve this by organising an information session on USOS, which will also include feedback to parents and students at UCB on the recent immersion trip by the 8 students who took part last September in Antwerp/Belgium. This is in preparation for the next immersion trip, which will bring the Belgian students to Bukavu (or elsewhere, if the programme has to be relocated because of the uncertain security situation there). We are convinced that a strategy that puts forward the appropriation of USOS activities/values at the UCB will contribute to the blossoming of young students who are more committed to an academic world at the service of the community/society.

Divin-Luc Bikubanya, Odile Bapolisi Ndjovu, Toussaint Bacishoga Bahiga

India

Introduction

In 2024, USOS facilitated incoming mobility from our Indian partner institutions to the Faculties of Law and Social Sciences at UAntwerp and organized several campus events bringing together stories from India and other countries and weaving global solidarities. 2024 also marked the start of the internships programme and semester exchange funded by an Erasmus Plus Credit Mobility Call from 2023. Two students from XISS interned with Belgian civil society organisations 11.11.11 and International Peace Information Service (IPIS). In addition, one student from each partner institution participated in summer schools at KU Leuven and UAntwerp. Following the initiative of Dr. Richard Toppo, USOS organised three campus events. These are described below. It is preceded by a snapshot of India in 2024.



Students from XISS Ranchi (Shashwat Kumar, Bhavya and Sanjivani Ray)

The country: Election Year 2024, third time's the charm?

General elections in the world's largest democracy were held in 2024 over seven phases from April 19 to June 1. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was re-elected for a third time by [646.4 million voters](#). However, his party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), lost its outright majority, [signalling reduced support](#). The BJP formed a coalition government with allies like the Telugu Desam Party and Janata Dal (United), marking Modi's first term leading a coalition.

India maintains the status of one of the [fastest-growing](#) economies in the world, however, significant [challenges to democratic institutions](#) and notable declines in civic freedoms have been reported. According to the ["Free to Think 2024"](#) report from Scholars at Risk, academic freedom in India reached its lowest point since the mid-1940s. The government exerted increasing control over universities, [limiting student protests](#), cancelling lectures and pressuring academics. India's [freedom of expression](#) ranking has also deteriorated as per Freedom House's Freedom in the World reports. Another major change was the repeal of old criminal laws premised on dismantling the [colonial architecture around](#)

[criminal laws](#). However the new laws retain the same old provisions which curtail freedom of speech and expression. For example, even though the word ‘sedition’ has been deleted, provisions relating to the same offence [still exist](#), even though in a different manner.

[Surveillance concerns](#) grew in 2024 as reports emerged of attempts to hack the devices of opposition figures and journalists using spyware. Civil society organizations experienced [intensified scrutiny and repression](#). In addition, [anti-minority hate speech](#) incidents rose dramatically in 2024, with a significant concentration in states governed by the BJP and its allies. Legislative measures, such as the implementation of the [Uniform Civil Code in Uttarakhand](#) and [amendments to the Waqf Act](#), were criticized for undermining the rights of religious minorities.

It was a challenging year for our partner institution National Law University, Delhi as three students [died by suicide](#) on campus. These were not isolated incidents as rising pressure to succeed at higher educational institutions has been attributed to what is now being called “[a suicide epidemic](#)”. USOS expresses solidarity with the students and staff at NLU Delhi.

The partnership

- **Incoming Mobility: Internships**

In 2024, two students from XISS Ranchi joined the internship course at the faculty of social sciences. As part of the course, Shashwat Kumar interned with 11.11.11 under the guidance of Kris Vanslambrouck and Fay Vastenhou. Sanjivani Ray interned with IPIS Antwerp under the guidance of Lisa Loeper.



Shashwat Kumar (centre left), on his final day at 11.11.11



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp



Sanjivani Ray presenting her final report at the offices of IPIS Antwerp

The students were well integrated by the organisations and had an opportunity to learn about the organisations and their work. Both students reported that they had a positive experience. They also presented their institution and their work at UAntwerp in the presence of the USOS General Assembly.



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp

- **Summer Schools**

In 2024, one participant from each Indian partner institution participated in a summer school, supported by USOS. From NLU Delhi, doctoral student Dev Dhar Dubey participated in the summer schools GOVTRUST: A multi-level perspective on trust and public governance from 19th to 23rd August 2024 and the Legal Technology and Legal Innovation Summer School from 26th to 30th August 2024 at the University of Antwerp. From St. Xavier's College Ranchi, Dr. Priya Srivastava participated in the summer school Laboratory Animal Science – FUNCTION B from 19th June to 10th July 2024 at the University of Antwerp. From XISS Ranchi, Bhavya participated in the summer schools Europe Inside Out at KU Leuven from 17th to 28th June 2024 and the CityLabX Summer School at UAntwerp from 1st to 5th July 2024.

- **Campus Events**

On 19th June, USOS organised a film evening on coal mining in Jharkhand. The event was organised by Luca Verhaeghe, one of the participants of the outgoing mobility to India in 2023, who is now working with CATAPA vzw on the 'Right to say no' campaign. Luca collaborated with Shanku Toppo from the production house [Akhra Ranchi](#). This collaboration resulted in an experimental short film that is also part of her master's thesis. The short film was titled 'The Sonic Ecology of the Adivasi Landscape' and focused on soundscapes and community participation. This was followed by a screening of 'Rat Trap' by Akhra, highlighting the realities of miners' lives. Both films are introduced by the makers and the discussion was led by Dr. Richard Toppo from the Institute of Development Policy, UAntwerp.

On 3rd October, USOS, with financial support from VLIR-UOS, organised another documentary screening of the movie 'The Hunt' by Biju Toppo, who is a co-founder of Akhra Ranchi. The screening was followed by a talk by a guest speaker, Dr. George Kunnath from the London School of Economics. Dr. Kunnath talked about the Maoist movement in India and the FARC Guerillas in Colombia and spoke about the constructive effect of civil society interaction with armed movements.



Bhavya at KU Leuven



Future prospects

At the time of writing this report (May 2025), the second year of incoming mobility supported by the Erasmus plus credit mobility grant is taking place. Two students, one from XISS Ranchi and one from St. Xavier's College have been invited for summer schools at the University of Antwerp. Two students from National Law University, Delhi are participating in the Sustjustice module at the Faculty of Law and two students from XISS Ranchi are enrolled at the Faculty of Social Sciences for the Internship course under the English language Master of Political Sciences and will be interning with 11.11.11. in Brussels.

On 4th March 2025, USOS organised the workshop on Men, Masculinities and Gender Justice. The event was coordinated by Dr. Richard Toppo and a guest lecture, Ahmad Faraz who is an international development and humanitarian professional was invited to facilitate the workshop. On 6th March, a movie screening of 'The Great Indian Kitchen' was organised followed by a guided discussion. The Indian film highlights the deep-rooted gender inequality in societies and delivers a powerful social commentary on domestic oppression and resistance. Both events were part of the Ethnic Cultural Inclusion and Global Engagement Month at the University of Antwerp and were supported by VLIR-UOS.

In the latter half of 2025, the call for the outgoing mobility to India in 2026 will be launched. We look forward to strengthening existing partnerships and forging new bonds with a new group of students in 2026.

Devanshi Saxena

Suriname and Brazil

Introduction

The partnerships of USOS, through the Interdisciplinary Studio for Territories in Transition (ISTT), with the Anton de Kom University (AdeKUS) in Suriname and the Universidade Católica de Pernambuco (UNICAP) in Recife, Brazil, aim to develop and implement global engagement education to foster intercultural competencies among students and staff and to promote global citizenship. Faculty members from the three universities collaborate to set up master's theses and other research projects for students. Students from the University of Antwerp (Master's programs in Architecture, Urbanism, Heritage Studies, Maritime and Logistics Management) stay for about three months in Suriname or Brazil. Students from AdeKUS (Bachelor in Civil Engineering) and UNICAP (Bachelor in Architecture, Urbanism and Heritage) are given the opportunity—if grants applied for through ERASMUS+ credit mobility or Global Minds are awarded—to travel to Antwerp. The ISTT of the Faculty of Design Sciences at the University of Antwerp coordinates this project.

Students and faculty engage in Participatory Action Research (PAR) addressing socio-spatial injustices related among others to housing insecurity, displacement and urban renewal, exclusion from participation processes, climate change, and the substandard quality of life in vulnerable residential neighborhoods. This project thereby also creates opportunities for knowledge development and empowerment by marginalized communities. Each research period is conceived as an interim action within a multi-year study, in which students build on each other's results. The local supervisors act as the continuous leaders of these research projects.

In Suriname, in 2024, further collaboration took place with an ethnically mixed community of vendors and visitors at the central market of Paramaribo, and with an Afro-Surinamese community in Moengo, a former bauxite mining town in the east of Suriname. A new collaboration was also initiated with an Afro-Surinamese community in Latour, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Paramaribo, located in the southern part of the city.

In Recife, the co-researchers of the PAR project are informal residents of the central historic inner-city office and commercial district of Santo Antônio: homeless individuals living on the streets and occupants of an office building that has been vacant for years and is now occupied by an occupation movement.

In Antwerp, the research project took place in super-diverse Borgerhout. Here, in collaboration with residents, solutions were sought for the lack of green public space. Borgerhout has one of the lowest ratios of green space to neighborhood area in the city (specifically in the Borgerhout Intra Muros neighborhood), and the Borgerhout district also has the lowest prosperity index in the city of Antwerp.

The partnerships

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

After the research preparation under the guidance of ISTT supervisors Johan De Walsche, Nathan De Feyter, Thomas Vanoutrive, and Marleen Goethals in the first semester of 23-24, 11 master students (one from Heritage Studies, five from Urbanism and Spatial Planning, and five from Architecture) took part in the intensive training program on research in a post-colonial and intercultural context. This training is organized by Janus Verrelst and Manon Coulon (USOS) and includes lectures by country experts, discussions on positionalities, power dynamics, ethical considerations during research,

sessions on effective communication 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.

- **Fieldwork in Suriname and Brazil, February-May 2024**

From mid-February to early May 2024, the 11 master students collaborated with UNICAP peers in Santo Antônio, Recife, conducting participatory action research. Local promoter Mucio Jucá organized 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 utilized here to collaborate with interested citizens, local community development foundations, a market traders' organization, 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.

- **Completing research and master thesis juries – May to September 2024**

After their return in May 2024, the UAntwerp students wrote their research report. The master's thesis juries took place in June and September. During these juries, the AdeKUS supervisors also acted as jury members. UNICAP colleagues were only involved in the master's thesis juries for English-language theses.

- **UNICAP and AdeKUS students in Antwerp – October–November 2024**

The international students' team of the international research workshop in Borgerhout

From October to November, three Brazilian students from UNICAP (4th year Bachelors in Architecture, Urbanism and Heritage) and two Surinamese students from AdeKUS (Last year Bachelors Civil Engineering) visited Antwerp. They collaborated with ten new ISTT-students (six from the Master's program in Architecture, three from the Master in Urbanism, one from the Master in Heritage Studies, and one from the Master in Maritime and Logistics Management) who will travel to Suriname and Brazil in spring 2025. Together, they worked on PAR research into opportunities for more green and higher-quality public spaces in Borgerhout. They collaborated with young people from Borgerhout, families with children and without a garden, and older residents. Research activities included participatory observations, interviews, counter-mapping, design workshops using collages, and even real-life testing of urban tactics in public spaces.

Lecturers Mucio Jucà (UNICAP) and Jonathan Imang (AdeKUS) joined the research workshop from November 9 to 15. During his stay, Mucio Jucà also gave a public lecture at the Faculty of Design Sciences titled "Bridging Worlds: Brazilian Perspectives on Belgian Urbanity." The schedule also included discussions and student guidance sessions on the upcoming research of the UAntwerp students in Suriname and Brazil.

The international student workshop concluded on November 29 with a well-received presentation of the research results at the District House of Borgerhout. The international research workshop received [media coverage](#).



The exhibition of the results of the international research workshop in the District House of Borgerhout november 29th 2024



The poster of Mucio Jucá's lecture at the Faculty of Design Sciences titled "Bridging Worlds: Brazilian Perspectives on Belgian Urbanity"



USOS

Powered by UAntwerp

10 UA-students prepare for their PAR- research in Suriname and Brazil – October–December 2024

From October to December 2024, the ten UAntwerp students (see 2.4) also prepared for their PAR research in Suriname and Brazil. Under the supervision of ISTT coordinators Johan De Walsche, Nathan De Feyter, Thomas Vanoutrive, and Marleen Goethals, they conducted literature research, defined research focuses and questions, and developed their research methodologies. For the UAntwerp students preparing research in Recife and Suriname, the presence of the Brazilian and Surinamese students proved highly beneficial, fostering knowledge exchange and the development of friendships.

New ISTT call – November–December 2024

The new call for students interested in conducting master thesis research with ISTT in Suriname or Brazil during the 2025–2026 academic year resulted in 28 applicants (14 architecture students, 13 urbanism students, and 1 heritage studies student). Based on motivation interviews with Johan De Walsche, Nathan De Feyter, Janus Verrelst, and Marleen Goethals, 24 students were ultimately selected. In the meantime, twenty students have applied for a travel grant via Mobility Online. There is roughly an equal split between students choosing Suriname and those choosing Brazil.

Future prospects

From February to May 2025 the 10 ISTT-students (see 2.4) will travel to Suriname and Brazil. They will conduct - in an intercultural team with UNICAP and AdeKUS students- design-driven participatory action research in socially vulnerable areas in Suriname and Brazil. Mucio Jucá from UNICAP and Jonathan Imang and Brian Delprado from AdeKUS will guide them during the fieldwork.

ISTT promoters Johan De Walsche, Marleen Goethals and Nathan De Feyter will visit the projects in Suriname and Brazil in March 2025, guiding the student teams, establishing new research agendas, and enhancing ties between academia and stakeholders.

Thanks to Erasmus+ credit mobility, three AdeKUS students from the Bachelor's programs in Civil Engineering will be able to travel to Antwerp for a second edition of the international research workshop in Borgerhout or another super-diverse neighborhood in Antwerp (see 2.4) in October-November 2025. As for the participation of the students from UNICAP, we are still awaiting the results of the Erasmus+ credit mobility call from early 2025 and a new call for the two-way exchange grants from Global Minds.

Marleen Goethals, Johan De Walsche & Nathan De Feyter

Morocco

Introduction



For over a decade, the University of Antwerp has fostered a strong and productive partnership with various faculties of the Université Mohammed Premier (UMP) in Oujda. This collaboration has focused on key areas such as healthcare, the education and training of healthcare providers, and migration-related challenges. Through joint research initiatives, academic exchanges, and

capacity-building projects, the institutions have worked together to strengthen health systems, enhance medical education, and respond to the complex dynamics of migration.

The Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of Antwerp has established a solid presence on the ground through its collaboration with UMP and the Association Marocaine de Planification Familiale. Together, they are tackling inequalities in access to healthcare, with a particular emphasis on Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and 5 (Gender Equality). Special attention is given to internal and chronic diseases, recognizing their growing burden on public health systems and the need for long-term, integrated care solutions. More recently, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) has joined the partnership, further reinforcing the collective effort to expand access to sexual and reproductive health services for underserved populations—driven by the shared commitment to ensure that no one is left behind.

The partnership

- **Women and diabetes management**

In Oujda, the Moroccan region next to the Algeria border, a prevalence of 16% of type 2 diabetes (T2D) was reported by our team in 2024. Regional barriers and facilitators towards the T2D treatment were identified in a joint project of the Université Mohammed Premier (UMP) and the University of Antwerp. Increasing urbanization was found to be a risk factor for sedentary lifestyle. Half of the participants was illiterate, 84% had no occupation, 71% was obese or overweight and 57% was 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 to all layers of the population. According to the WHO the accumulated number of nurses, midwives and physicians 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 specialized care. 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 sport centres is culturally limited. Gender-sensitive sport 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, specialized in dietary adjustments and coaching of physical activity for the development of the intervention.

In order to stimulate sustainable development, the preparation of the intervention started through a bilateral exchange of academics and health professionals from Oujda and Antwerp. Budgets for the upstart of the intervention are explored. These budgets have to enable a start but sustainable means have to guarantee the continuous implantation in local healthcare.



Academics 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). Three female doctoral students were provided with the necessary methodological support to develop their project, analyse and interpret data.

At the request of the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine, a dialogue has been initiated to set up a joint cardiac and respiratory rehabilitation programme. The Antwerp partners will help facilitate this and establish the necessary contacts to set up an exchange of lecturers. Prof Dr Ahmed Amin El Oumri will be responsible for the UMP. The specific request is to help train and supervise the staff of the UMP and the adjacent CHU during the first few years. It will also look at what structural and organisational changes are needed to build this training. This has already led to the planning of an internship on this

topic for a UAntwerpen student in Oujda in the spring of 2025. In addition, a collaboration has been initiated around a PhD at UAntwerpen on ankle sprains. In this international collaboration, ultrasound protocols of lesions are blindly tested and discussed.



- **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. 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 budget has been used to support these activities. A possible colloquium with Antwerp and Moroccan partners on this topic is to be organized in the future.



Concerning the diabetes trajectory, initiatives for a tailored intervention have been started. Due to a lack of budget a dedicated centre for women could not be established yet. Currently, the Oujda and Antwerp partners are targeting a low budget program including the targeted group. Starting from winter 2024 until end 2025, women and their social network will be interviewed to determine their needs, capabilities and boundaries for culture-sensitive intervention. The UMP and the AMPF will actively participate in this.

Bart Van Rompaey and Dirk Vissers



USOS
Powered by UAntwerp

Nicaragua

Introduction

As reported in the 2023 USOS annual report, USOS has taken the decision to continue its collaboration with Nicaragua despite the illegal and arbitrary closure of the Universidad Centro Americana of Managua-Nicaragua (UCA), USOS' main partner in Nicaragua, by the Nicaraguan government. USOS has decided to focus its action on supporting the work of the previous team of Nitlapan, the research and development institute of the cancelled UCA. Indeed, Nitlapan's team has initiated a collective process of critical thinking, strategic planning and organizational restructuring aimed at maintaining its legacy alive, especially around two elements: i) the institute's previous work on Territorial Development processes in the Nicaraguan countryside; and, ii) the importance of Nitlapan within UAntwerpen global engagement processes with the Global South (Nitlapan received in 2024 [the UAntwerpen Paul Panda Farnana Prize](#) which rewards collaborations that promote reflection and dialogue about equitable north-south partnerships, decolonisation, global citizenship, anti-racism, epistemology and knowledge violence, development cooperation).

The partnership

That is how, in 2024, a group of collaborators from Nitlapan, supported by USOS, has been working on strategically redesigning its action-research agenda on Territorial Development. The work consisted of the following activities:

- Regular virtual meetings have been held since January 2024 to strengthen a working group motivated to continue Nitlapan's legacy despite the risks and uncertainties of Nicaragua's sociopolitical context. Establishing agreements on security mechanisms for communication and decision-making procedures has been a priority in the formation of this working group. Similarly, creating an environment of trust grounded in shared responsibilities and collaborative production has been one of the foundational principles for solidifying the group. A larger team, which is made up of other former collaborators and founders of the institute, has often accompanied the virtual meeting. Through these meetings, we have made progress in solidifying our understanding of the continuity of Nitlapan's work and redefining our work agenda.
- In June 2024, the group had a two-day workshop in Managua to facilitate communication and deepen reflection for the continuity of actions in the short and medium term. This workshop, involving 10 team members, provided a space for the team to reunite, something that had been impossible since the institute's closure in August 2023. Besides consolidating ourselves as a work team and staying informed about the situation in each territory, we discussed and defined the strategic lines of interest, priorities, and work agenda.
- In June 2024, part of the team visited some territories to reactivate connections and communication with local allies in rural areas communities. During these visits, it was possible to meet with community leaders from seven rural banks supported by Nitlapan in the municipalities of Matiguas, Rio Blanco, Pantasma, and La Dalia. The objective of these visits was to discuss how they have managed to sustain their activities following the closure of the institute, the difficulties they have encountered, and their future prospects. These contributed to maintaining and strengthening the bond with local allies, while also helping to identify which areas of Nitlapan's work are still valued and deemed necessary.

Moreover, for the resurgence of Nitlapan, the team has considered it necessary to have a formal structure that facilitates the acquisition of external funding to support the continuity of the work. After evaluating several options and risks for establishing a new organization, the decision was made to create an association in Costa Rica, retaining the name of the Nitlapan Research and Development Institute. The legal procedures for registering the Nitlapan association began at the end of 2024 and are expected to be completed in 2025.

The support of USOS has been fundamental throughout this process. From the budget of €31.500 (€20.000 from 2023, €10.000 from 2024, and €1.500 from Paul Panda Farnana price), €29.377 were expended. These expenses include financial support for six team members (€25.188), the workshop in Managua and field trips (€3.783), and the initial payment for the administrative process of registering the Nitlapan Association in Costa Rica (€406).

In addition to these activities, we have also continued our partner cooperation along several pre-existing lines. Our education cooperation with Nitlapan-UCA has continued in 2024 in the scope of the VLIR ICP Connect program, implemented by a network of partners including IOB-UA, researchers-lecturers previously associated with Nitlapan-UCA, Universidad Andina Simon Bolivar in Ecuador, and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Colombia. While the project consisted initially in the design of a pilot version of a digital-blended 'master in globalization and development', the consortium has now been widened to other European partners (International Institute of Social Studies-Rotterdam Erasmus University, The Hague, Netherlands (ISS) and Sorbonne Institute of Development Studies of Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France (IEDES)) and the objective has moved towards the design of a new ERASMUS-MUNDUS Joint Master in Critical Development studies. Within this project we have secured the participation in the project of researchers-lecturers previously associated with Nitlapan-UCA. Research cooperation has also continued in 2024 through the PhD research processes implemented by several former UCA and/or Nitlapan researchers within IOB-UA doctoral (Alder Contreras, René Rodriguez, Milagros Romero). Furthermore, former ELP fellow within USOS and UCSIA, Maria Jose Cordero, initiated in 2024 her PhD studies at IOB-UA under the supervision of Gert van Hecken. Finally, Pierre Merlet has been able to secure his position as a postdoctoral researcher at IOB-UA until 2027.

Pierre Merlet