



USOS



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41st ANNUAL REPORT USOS 2025

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Introduction

In November 2025 we celebrated 40 years of USOS with a partner week, a book launch and a big alumni gathering. It was a moment of connection, of finding back old friends and (re)connecting with the organization of USOS today. It was a celebration of solidarity, experiential learning, and reciprocal partnerships – the key principles that have been sustaining USOS' work since the beginning. Yet the moment was also marked by an uncomfortable paradox: we celebrate a milestone of 40 years of solidarity at a time when that very solidarity is being steadily eroded.

Across the globe, the signs are unmistakable. Budgets for development cooperation are being cut, often drastically. The Institute of Development Policy (IOB) at the University of Antwerp has lost its core funding, and higher education more broadly is facing structural austerity. Fundamental research is increasingly marginalized, as political discourse shifts towards simplification, polarization and short-term interests. Opinions and slogans travel faster and louder than carefully built evidence.

At the same time, we see a broader unravelling of the international order that once underpinned cooperation: multilateral institutions are weakening, conflicts are proliferating, and humanitarian principles are more openly contested. Authoritarian regimes tighten their grip, civic space shrinks, and academic freedom is no longer self-evident. Our students grow up in this world, a world profoundly transformed not only by technological acceleration, but also by the return of hardened borders, exclusionary politics and deepening inequalities. And for our institutional partners, these are not abstract trends but lived realities.

In such a world, the mission of USOS becomes radical. We ask students to commit themselves to a two-year trajectory during which they meet with colleagues from Morocco or Congo, and during which they together delve into some societally relevant topics that concerns us all. We ask students to engage in community service learning, or to do a challenging internship in India, Suriname or Brazil. We ask staff members to devote a substantial amount of their time to continuing the long-term partnerships. We ask our university to be in solidarity with partners facing crisis.

In Nicaragua, the situation has not improved since the confiscation of our partner university. There are continued restrictions and uncertainties but USOS continues to provide support. In eastern DRC Congo, the escalation of violence involving M23 has once again profoundly disrupted daily life and academic collaboration. The planned immersion trip to Bukavu was replaced by a one month stay in Arusha, where both Belgian and Congolese students participated in a rich educational programme. Thanks to USOS fundraising 25 students from the Catholic University of Bukavu who are in difficulty to pay their tuition fees as a result of the war have received a scholarship allowance. These developments remind us that solidarity is not a given, but something that requires continuous commitment, resilience and adaptability.

Looking ahead, we are actively exploring new directions. Discussions on South–South cooperation that had been initiated some years ago are increasingly translated into new initiatives. The USOS book 'Caring for our common home: Sustainability, Justice and Solidarity in University Partnerships' is a testament to this. Building on discussions during the 2025 partner week, representatives from different partner institutions are now also working on new joint research proposals – such as research on forced displacement led by colleagues from India.

On campus, 2025 was a year strongly carried by students. Their engagement remains the beating heart of our organisation. Student representatives have taken up their roles with dedication and initiative, strengthening the bridge between the board, the partners and the broader student community. Plans are also underway for the establishment of an alumni network – Friends of USOS - which will further strengthen our community and support base.

Our collaboration within the Ignatian Academic Network (IgnAN) remains very important, offering valuable opportunities for reflection and cooperation. Initiatives such as the Jesuits' MAGIS investment fund, which USOS joined, highlight the importance of sustained financial solidarity in challenging times. We also continued to strengthen ties with partners like UCSIA, USAB, and the Ruusbroeck Institute, and collaborated with Lerkeveld to support the accommodation of our Indian interns from Ranchi.

Within the University of Antwerp, USOS continues to be embedded in a dynamic and evolving landscape of Global Engagement. The integration of USOS within this framework has deepened, for instance through our role in managing the Open Call for Students. The Debating Development course continued to provide a forum for confronting complex global problems, and focused in 2025 on authoritarianism, power and resistance. It is also a space that has forced us to confront our own positions and differences within the organization.

The past year also brought important transitions within USOS. We had to say goodbye to Manon, who had been supporting us since 2022 with her engagement, creativity and the many fresh ideas and valuable insights she brought to the team. We also welcomed Delicia Kifu as an enthusiast and committed student representative, Adam Rachid as an entrepreneurial and bridge-building ELP fellow, and Daanish Naithani as a dedicated and passionate India coordinator.

And finally, my mandate as chair is coming to an end in 2026. So it is an excellent moment to look back and move forward. I would like to end with a few words I also shared during the celebration of 40 years of USOS, and which for me express why USOS remains so vital.

It is so easy to get locked up in your own truth and start polarizing – even though through social media we are now much more exposed to 'the world' than ever before. It is so easy for the government to cut a line in the budget for higher education and for development cooperation – as we have recently experienced firsthand. It is much more difficult to do what USOS does: asking students, staff and host families to be patient, humble and open to learning from each other. Learning through experience, through living and being in a context that feels foreign, through living the frustrations and the discomfort that come with that, through changing preconceived ideas. That is what the USOS experience is about. The change may not be revolutionary, but it is radical. Moving forward, I wish for all of us to stay true to that.

Sara Geenen

Chairperson USOS

Part 1: Campus Activities

2025 was a vibrant year for the campus activities, with an active role for the student representatives. Delicia Kifu took over this role during the summer from the duo Tijmen de Brouwer and Nette Sneyers. The representatives functioned as a sounding board for the USOS team, took initiatives for campus activities themselves, and fulfilled a bridging role between the students and the USOS board. All representatives were participants in the two-year reciprocal exchange with Bukavu, which shows that this new form of exchange has a positive effect on student engagement.

Student exchanges in 2025 continued to be characterized by reciprocity. All mobilities were designed as two-way exchanges. There was a certain rapprochement between the more traditional exposure trip and the curricular approach within the ISTT group at the Faculty of Design Sciences. The annual three-day preparatory training was attended by both student groups, which resulted in a new cross-fertilisation.

Furthermore, the year was marked by a broader role for USOS within the Global Engagement operations of the University of Antwerp. The USOS staff member continued taking up an active role in the Bureau Global Engagement. At the operational level, USOS took over the permanent call for student initiatives from the Global Engagement Officer, which generated new contacts between USOS and student associations. The integration of USOS within Global Engagement has a positive effect on the embedding of USOS within the university.

Finally, we had the opportunity to discuss campus activities with the Global South partner representatives during the partner week, which gave us a unique sounding board. In general, the partner week had a positive effect on the connection between campus and partner operations.



Participants of the Bukavu/Arusha exchange and the ISTT Suriname/Brazil exchange during the three-day training in February 2025.

1. Two-way exchange DR Congo: Arusha as an alternative destination

After a successful immersion programme for students from Bukavu (and Ujda) in Antwerp in 2024, the participating group of USOS students would normally have travelled to Bukavu during the summer of 2025 to fulfill their two-year exchange. However, due to the takeover of Bukavu by M23, this programme could not take place in DR Congo. During the three-day training in February, extensive attention was paid to the conflict. At that moment, M23 troops were at the gates of Bukavu. Partner coordinator Divin-Luc Bikubanya was forced to return early from fieldwork to Belgium due to the situation, which gave him the opportunity to provide the students with detailed context about the situation during the three-day training.

After consultation with UAntwerp university partners in the region, a match was found with staff from NM-AIST (Nelson Mandela African Institution of Science and Technology) in Arusha for a one-time alternative collaboration. This partner was able, at short notice, to set up an academic-cultural programme with accommodation in host families, in which both the participants from UAntwerp and from UCB could take part. In collaboration with NGOs and under the supervision of local academics, four topics were explored by mixed UCB–UAntwerp groups, each producing a paper and a presentation:

- [Food Security in Tanzania: A Comparative Analysis of Food Loss and Waste with Belgium and the Democratic Republic of Congo](#)
- [Educating Her, Empowering Many, Moving Towards Gender Equitable Education in East Africa](#)
- [Is East African Integration Real?](#)
- [Integrated Analysis of Socio-Economic and Environmental Issues of Nature Conservation in Arusha](#)

The exchange required additional investments, but proved important in view of the continuation of sustained engagement of students and partners. The contacts established for the programme with the NGO Rikolto East Africa resulted in a follow-up trajectory with Rikolto in Belgium, which has for many years guided a trajectory in function of the sustainability of the Komida kitchens, being the student restaurants of the University of Antwerp. Student representative Delicia Kifu played a central role in the following actions:

- “Week van het Goede Eten” (annual Rikolto campaign), January 2026, Komida Stadscampus
- Campaign to promote fair trade coffee at UAntwerp held at the Coffee Corner of the Library of Stadscampus, May 2026 (together with Komida and Green Office)

2. Two-way exchange ISTT (Suriname and Brazil)

For the second consecutive year, USOS invested in the preparatory three-day training for students of Architecture, Urban Planning and Heritage who, with the ISTT group, carried out participatory action research in Suriname and Brazil for three months. As a return visit, this year again students from Suriname and Brazil were present in Antwerp (Borgerhout), adopting the same methodological framework of participatory action research.

The supervising lecturers of the ISTT team have built up a great deal of expertise in meaningful and effective service-learning, which they have developed together with partners from the Global South. The active participation in the USOS partner week of Jonathan Imang (ADEKUS - Suriname) and Múcio Jucá (UNICAP - Brazil) shows that these relatively new activities for USOS have potential for the future of USOS and for the future of cooperation among the partners.

3. Two-way exchange India

For the second consecutive year, we welcomed two students from XISS-Ranchi for the summer internship programme. For this purpose, they completed a two-month internship at 11.11.11 in Brussels, as part of a course at the Faculty of Social Sciences. For the first time, we were able to accommodate the students with host families. Two former USOS participants with experience in India made their homes available for this purpose. In 2026, we again welcomed two students, who again

carried out their internship at 11.11.11. This time, they were offered a room at the Lerkeveld student residence in Leuven, which is part of the IgnAN network.

Furthermore, after a break of two years, we launched again a call the India thesis internship at UAntwerp. Previously, this was already open to the Faculties of Law and Social Sciences. This time, it was expanded to Business and Economics and to IOB. We selected eight participants across the four faculties. During the USOS partner week, a meeting already took place between the students and the partner representatives.

4. Two-way exchange Morocco

At the beginning of the 2025–26 academic year, a new call was launched for a two-year reciprocal exchange. This time, the thematic focus is on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) among the (trans)migrant population in Morocco, a theme for which the faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at University of Antwerp and UMP obtained approval for a TEAMS project from VLIRUOS in May 2026.

A group of ten students started the preparation, of which six students currently remain. These students participated in the three-day training and completed their twenty hours of social internship with the following organisations:

- Rode Kruis opvangcentrum Kappelen
- Nafis vzw
- Tajo vzw
- CAW Antwerpen – Zorgteam
- Vzw De Dorpel (Herentals)
- Huisartspraktijk Schijnpoort

Delicia Kifu (Master of Social Work) and Janus Verrelst guided the students with two reflective sessions on their personal experience and on the role of the social organisations for providing access to health for migrants.

The exposure itself is planned for the summer of 2026. During the next academic year, these students will help with welcoming the group from Oujda in Antwerp. We are aiming for the period March–April. The experiences and contacts that the students gained with the social organisations will be taken into account in the approach of this programme.

5. Debating Development

USOS again supported IOB in the organisation of a series of panel discussions, which is also an elective course. Inspired by worrying political developments in the world, the theme of authoritarianism was chosen under the title 'Authoritarian currents: Power, control and resistance in times of crisis' ([programme](#)). Coordinator Gert Van Hecken developed a strong programme of eight panel sessions together with a team of IOB assistants. 200 students, from across all faculties, followed the course and produced interdisciplinary group work. In addition, the series was also opened up to an external audience.

6. Global Pen Friends

This year we had fewer participants than usual for Global Pen Friends, with eleven international pairs ([see Global Pen Friends Blog](#)). However, investments were made in better coordination of the project and a more attractive visual look. In 2026, participation increased again: more than 35 international pairs were formed, with involvement of all nine USOS partnerships. During the partner week, partner representatives repeatedly mentioned that they consider this a valuable activity.

7. Film screenings in collaboration with 11.11.11

USOS continued its engagement in organising the film screenings of 11.11.11 in collaboration with the AUHA association at the Antwerp cultural centre De Cinema. In this way, USOS contributes to accessible socio-cultural programming for a broad audience. The following films were shown in 2025 and were followed by a discussion:

- *Made in Ethiopia* (about a Chinese industrial park in Ethiopia and the conflicting interests)
- *Put your soul on your hand and walk* (about the war in Gaza)

Both screenings filled the entire cinema hall.

8. Global Engagement Month

Under the coordination of Global Engagement, and in particular under the University of Antwerp's Diversity and Inclusion service, activities were organised in March 2025 around Global Engagement. USOS contributed to this programme with a panel discussion on Afro-European identity, based on the NPO television series 'De Afro-Europeaan'. The event attracted many students with an African background and facilitated dialogue and reflection on the place and future of the African diaspora in Europe and in particular on its remaining connection with Africa. The event turned out into a celebration of African culture. For the occasion, the University of Antwerp catering made an effort to provide African snacks for the audience.



Panel discussion during the event 'De Afro-Europeaan'

In addition, USOS contributed to the Global Engagement Month with a workshop on masculinity and a film screening that sparked discussion about the position of women in India.

In 2026, the initiative was repeated, this time during a shortened anti-racism week. Delicia Kifu organised a sip & paint activity about the internal experience of being subject to racism, and we screened a film about caste discrimination in India.

9. Global Engagement Open Call Students

USOS took over the management of the permanent call for students. The student associations Tabieb2be, Al-Ansar and Diversity4Law Students received financial support from the Bureau Global Engagement for the proposals they submitted as contribution to a more globally engaged university. This enabled USOS to come into contact with new ethnoculturally diverse associations.

Janus Verrelst

Part 2: Partnerships

Democratic Republic of Congo

1. The country

In 2025, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) faced a political and economic situation particularly marked by the occupation of the east of the country by M23 rebels. In this part of the country, this mainly concerned the cities of Goma (since late January 2025) and Bukavu (since mid-February 2025), where a climate of fear has grown within populations that have long been battered. This is accompanied by the paralysis of the formal economy; notably the closure of banks and the slowdown – or often the cessation – of commercial activities, which are usually the main sources of income for the population. Furthermore, by dividing the country into unoccupied and occupied regions, the rebel occupation has left the populations of the east of the country feeling abandoned by the central government in Kinshasa (the capital of the DRC), making travel between the country's provinces even more complicated and restrictive. By the end of 2025 and the start of 2026, there remains little cause for hope of an end to the crisis, despite the international diplomatic efforts undertaken by the central government. In practical terms, these efforts centre on the involvement of the current US administration, which is putting as much pressure as possible on the rebels and their regional supporters to withdraw from the occupied areas. In the meantime, before this withdrawal becomes a reality, the security crisis and its political, economic, humanitarian, social and other implications in the east of the country are severely undermining the country's medium- and long-term development prospects.

2. Immersion trip to Arusha, Tanzania: Catholic University of Bukavu (UCB) and University of Antwerp (UAntwerp)

Originally planned for Bukavu, the 2025 immersion experience had to be relocated to Arusha in Tanzania due to the security crisis that has been raging in eastern DRC since January 2025 and which has paralysed the entire city of Bukavu. The 2025 Arusha immersion programme brought together a total of 19 students, including 7 from the Catholic University of Bukavu (DRC) and 12 from the University of Antwerp (Belgium), from 29 June to 31 July 2025. As the photo below shows, it was marked by excellent cultural exchange between the different groups of students.

During the stay, the group was supervised by *Divin-Luc Bikubanya* (UAntwerp and UCB), *Jolien Inghels* (UAntwerp) and *Odile Bapolisi* (UCB). In keeping with its long-standing tradition, USOS maintained the immersion trip's spirit of sharing with host families, exchanging experiences between students from the University of Antwerp and the UCB, as well as academic work on topics that could be incorporated into the students' course programmes.

Each Tanzanian family hosted two students (one Congolese and one Belgian), offering each an enriching experience of cultural exchange between three cultures (Congolese, Belgian and Tanzanian). For the two teams, who had already known each other since the immersion in Antwerp in September 2024, the Arusha experience proved to be very rewarding as it further strengthened friendships and scientific

collaborations through daily activities within the host families, during academic activities organised by theme, and during leisure activities undertaken together.



Hike up Mount Kilimanjaro by Congolese and Belgian students, July 2025

Academically, the students, divided into groups of five, were invited to work on four themes: African regional integration, nature conservation, women's rights and food security. Throughout the programme, visits were organised to various organisations (NGOs, Tanzanian public institutions, international institutions) working in the fields of these different themes. Thus, either in groups organised by theme or with all 19 students together, it was possible to visit the following organisations: *Rikolto*, *Iles de Paix*, the *NGO Network Against Female Genital Mutilation (NAFGEM)*, the *African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights*, etc.

Regardless of the assigned theme, the organisations visited shared several common themes. These various visits enabled the students to learn about the work these organisations carry out on the ground and their impact on the community, and to compare the Tanzanian experience with that of their own countries through presentations by the organisations' representatives and the discussions that followed. By drawing these parallels, the experiences in Arusha were true examples of cultural and academic immersion 'at home away from home'. In the few rare instances where planned visits could not be arranged (e.g. the East African Community), the students and their supervisor were able to quickly mobilise their contacts to find other institutions in the same field that could enrich their research topics. Overall, the spirit and values of USOS were embodied through teamwork, respect for differences and the harnessing of cultural and scientific resources. This was evident in the students' final presentations at the end of the trip. Here is the experience of a Congolese student:

It (the immersion programme) gave me the opportunity to forge strong bonds, both with Congolese students from other faculties and with students and host families in Europe and East Africa. I learnt to collaborate with people from very diverse backgrounds, which enabled me to develop trust in others, teamwork and the effective division of tasks in an atmosphere of solidarity and respect.

For the Congolese students, following a successful initial phase in Antwerp, this phase in Arusha provided a welcome respite given the difficult circumstances of the preceding months, during which the students and their families had been traumatised by the war. The Congolese students were deeply moved by the outpouring of solidarity from USOS, the students on the immersion programme, and friendly families in Antwerp, who sent numerous messages of solidarity and support to the UCB students and their families during this period of war. Given the current political and security situation in Bukavu, USOS's clear commitment to maintaining this programme, albeit relocated, was a sign of solidarity with the group of Congolese students who see this programme as a genuine opportunity for visibility.

3. The USOS – UCB partnership: yesterday, today and tomorrow

The collaboration between USOS/UAntwerp and UCB, now even stronger, faces major challenges. These challenges are primarily global in nature but are also rooted in local and regional realities. At the global level, this specifically concerns the pressure facing development cooperation programmes. At the regional level, the war in eastern DRC (mainly in the cities of Bukavu and Goma) does not facilitate the smooth running of the partnership's activities. Faced with this, USOS and UCB, which have been collaborating for over 10 years in academic, social and cultural spheres, are called upon to redefine their models of collaboration—or rather, to strengthen them in a more meaningful and sustainable way. This is no easy task. It was a central theme in the fruitful discussions that took place in late November 2025 in Antwerp, to mark the 40th anniversary of USOS.



Odile Bapolisi and Toussaint Bacishoga in conversation with the Rector of the University of Antwerp

For UCB, through its representatives present, *Odile Bapolisi* and *Toussaint Bacishoga*, this was a unique opportunity to reflect on achievements and strategies to overcome current challenges. Among other key initiatives for the present and the future, the establishment of the Koen De Feyter Solidarity Fund was noted, aimed at providing financial assistance to UCB students struggling to pay their tuition fees. In addition, UCB is also pleased that these discussions have highlighted the need to strengthen multilateral partnerships, within which its researchers would have the opportunity to collaborate with other researchers from the USOS network in order to broaden their expertise.

Divin-Luc Bikubanya & Odile Bapolisi Ndjovu

India

This report provides an overview of the activities of the USOS India partnership over the academic year 2025–2026. It complements the report submitted by the previous India Coordinator, Devanshi Saxena, for 2024–2025, and focuses on the transition in coordination, the preparations for the 2026 outgoing mobility to India, the 40 years of USOS celebrations involving Indian partners, the incoming mobility through the Erasmus+ credit mobility grant, and other activities organised on campus.

Transition in coordination

In July–August 2025, Daanish Naithani joined as the new India Coordinator for USOS, taking over from Devanshi Saxena. Daanish is a doctoral researcher at the Faculty of Law, University of Antwerp, working on trust in specialised courts. He brings to the role both prior experience of academic engagement in India and a working familiarity with partner institutions in Delhi.

1. Outgoing mobility 2026 – India Exposure Internship

A central focus of the year has been the preparation of the 2026 India Exposure Internship. Interviews for student selection were conducted in October 2025, leading to the selection of eight students from across the University of Antwerp, drawn from the Faculty of Law, the Institute of Development Policy (IOB), the Faculty of Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Business and Economics.

In February 2026, a three-day preparatory workshop (“drieaandse”) was organised on campus for the selected students. The workshop introduced them to Indian culture, caste politics, and broader political and social dynamics in India conducted by Ms. Swati Kamble, an independent researcher with a PhD in Socio-Economics (University of Geneva), and discussed what they could expect during their time in India in July 2026. A guest lecture was delivered by Mr Arjun Kasana, founder of the ‘Think Act Rise Foundation’, on navigating life in India and on forest rights of tribal and Adivasi communities. Sessions also covered safeguarding, ethics in fieldwork, and reflective practice.

Florence Van Durme, from the Faculty of Law, has volunteered to co-coordinate the visit and will be travelling with the group of students. At the time of writing, preparations are at an advanced stage and detailed coordination with NLU Delhi and XISS is in progress. The group will depart Antwerp on 29 June 2026 and travel via New Delhi to Ranchi, returning to Belgium at the end of July.

2. 40 years of USOS

As part of the celebrations marking 40 years of USOS, Indian partner institutions were invited to be part of the programme scheduled for 26–29 November 2025. Invitations were extended to Fr Robert Pradeep Kujur from St. Xavier’s College Ranchi, Prof. Anant Kumar from XISS Ranchi, and Prof. Sophy Joseph from National Law University Delhi. Their participation provided an opportunity to reflect on four decades of solidarity-based partnership, to discuss future directions, and to mark the institutional milestone with the partners who have been central to the India programme.



Students with Fr Robert Pradeep Kujur of St. Xavier's College, Ranchi at 40 years' celebration

3. Incoming mobility 2026

In coordination with the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Belgian NGO 11.11.11, a two-month internship was organised in Brussels for students from our partner institution, Xavier's Institute of Social Service (XISS) in India. Interviews were conducted in February and March 2026, and the selected students Rajanya and Lakshya from XISS arrived in Belgium on 16 April 2026 to begin their placement at 11.11.11.

On 24 April 2026, 11.11.11 organised a workshop on mining exploitation in Jharkhand. The eight UAntwerp students preparing to travel to India in July also took part in the workshop, creating a direct connection between the incoming and outgoing mobility cohorts and ensuring that the outgoing students were exposed to current advocacy work on the issues they will encounter in Jharkhand.



Rajanya and Lakshya giving a presentation on mining activities in Jharkhand



After the presentation: Students selected for India Exposure Trip 2026 with students from XISS, Ranchi

4. Looking ahead

The coming months will be devoted to the successful delivery of the 2026 India Exposure Internship and to the consolidation of the partnerships that underpin it. In parallel, we are preparing the renewal of our Erasmus+ credit mobility grant, which will allow us to continue the incoming and outgoing exchanges with our Indian partners over the next three years and to build on the momentum of the current cycle.

The India partnership remains one of USOS's most active and substantive bilateral engagements, sustained by relationships of trust that have been built over four decades and continue to grow. We look forward to deepening these relationships further through the activities planned for the coming year, and to reporting back to the Board on outcomes after the July 2026 visit.

Daanish Naithani

Suriname and Brazil (ISTT)

1. Introduction to Partnerships

The Interdisciplinary Studio for Territories in Transition (ISTT) at the University of Antwerp (Faculty of Design Sciences) coordinates partnerships with Anton de Kom University (AdeKUS, Bachelor in Civil Engineering) in Suriname and Universidade Católica de Pernambuco (UNICAP, Bachelor in Architecture, Urbanism and Heritage) in Recife, Brazil. These collaborations develop global engagement education that fosters intercultural competencies and promotes global citizenship. Faculty from the three universities co-supervise master's theses and research projects. Students from Antwerp (Master's in Architecture, Urbanism, Heritage Studies, Maritime and Logistics Management) spend about three months in Suriname or Brazil. In turn, AdeKUS (Civil Engineering) and UNICAP (Architecture, Urbanism and Heritage) students can travel to Antwerp through ERASMUS+ or Global Minds grants. Projects follow Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods, addressing socio-spatial injustices such as housing insecurity, displacement, exclusion, climate change, and poor living conditions in vulnerable neighborhoods. Each research phase contributes to an ongoing multi-year study, guided by local supervisors and aimed at empowering marginalized communities.

In Suriname (Feb–Apr 2025), cooperation continued in Moengo—formerly a bauxite mining town resettled by an Afro-Surinamese community—with the NGO *Kracht voor de Toekomst*, which is converting a former theater into a youth education and recreation center. Research in Latour also continued on how residents and community organizations can reclaim and reorganize abandoned parcels for safer pedestrian and bicycle mobility and recreation.

In Recife (Brazil), PAR co-researchers include informal residents of the historic Santo Antônio district, such as the homeless and members of an occupation movement inhabiting a long-vacant building—an initiative launched in 2023.

In Antwerp (Oct–Nov 2025), research continued in the super-diverse district of Borgerhout, focusing on community-driven solutions to the severe shortage of green space. Borgerhout Intra Muros has the city's lowest green space ratio and prosperity index.

2. Partnership activities

a. Intensive USOS Three-Day Training, February 3-5, 2025

After the first-semester research preparation guided by ISTT supervisors Johan De Walsche, Nathan De Feyter, Thomas Vanoutrive and Marleen Goethals (2024–25), ten master's students (1 Maritime and Logistics Management, 3 Urbanism and Spatial Planning, 6 Architecture) joined an intensive program on research in post-colonial and intercultural contexts. Organized by Janus Verrelst (USOS), it combined expert lectures, discussions on positionality, power and ethics, communication training, and a culture shock session. Shared meals and activities further strengthened mutual understanding while preparing students for their research.

b. Fieldwork in Suriname and Brazil, February-May 2025

From mid-February to early May 2025, three master's students collaborated with UNICAP peers in Santo Antônio (Recife), conducting participatory action research on women's experiences of unsafety in public space, the reorganization of the occupied office building (Leonarde Cisneiros) based on residents' needs and spatial habits, and the spatial and habits needs of homeless people living in the area. Local promoter Mucio Jucá organized interviews with stakeholders in urban renewal and housing from municipal and state governments, as well as NGOs, and facilitated connections with occupation movements and Recentro. A design week with Recentro focused on the temporary revitalization of public space in Santo Antônio.

In Suriname, two student teams worked with community organizations in Moengo and Paramaribo-Latour on research themes described in the introduction, under the supervision of AdeKUS co-promoters. ISTT promoters Johan De Walsche, Marleen Goethals, and Nathan De Feyter visited the projects in Suriname and Brazil (March 5–25, 2025) to co-supervise the research, develop new agendas, and strengthen ties between academia and stakeholders.

c. Completing research and master's thesis juries – May to September 2025

After their return in May 2025, the UA-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. As all the students decided to write their scription in Dutch it was not possible this time to involve UNICAP colleagues in the juries for the master's thesis based on research in Recife .

d. UNICAP and AdeKUS students in Antwerp – October–November 2025

From October to November, three UNICAP and three AdeKUS students collaborated with 15 ISTT students (Architecture and Urbanism), who will travel to Suriname and Brazil in spring 2026. Together, they conducted participatory action research on greener, higher-quality public spaces in Borgerhout, engaging elderly residents, people experiencing homelessness, and Groeningerplein users through observations, interviews, collaborative mapping, and model-based workshops. Lecturers Mucio Jucá (UNICAP) and Jonathan Imang (AdeKUS) joined from November 17–21, contributing to the workshop and guiding preparations for the students' research abroad. The program concluded on December 5 with an exhibition at the Borgerhout District House, where local organizations expressed interest in collaborating in the next edition.



The international students' team of the international research workshop 2025 in Borgerhout



The international students' team organizing a participatory research activity in Borgerhout November 2025

The exhibition of the results of the international research workshop in the District House of Borgerhout December 5th – 2025.

e. UAntwerp-students prepare for their PAR- research in Suriname and Brazil – October–December 2025

From October to December 2025, 15 new ISTT-students (see 2.4) prepared for their PAR research in Suriname and Brazil under the supervision of ISTT coordinators Mariana Moura, Nathan De Feyter, and Marleen Goethals. Drawing on key literature on PAR, post-colonial contexts, and informal settlements, they critically reflected on previous master's theses, defined their research questions, and developed methodologies. The presence of Brazilian and Surinamese students enriched this process, fostering knowledge exchange and new connections.

f. New ISTT call December 2025

The new call for students interested in conducting master's thesis research with ISTT in Suriname or Brazil during the 2026–2027 academic year resulted in 16 applicants (8 architecture students, 6 urbanism students, and 2 heritage studies students).

2. Outlook for 2026

a. Fieldwork in Suriname and Brazil February-May 2026

From February to May 2026 the 15 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 Mariana Moura, Marleen Goethals and Nathan De Feyter will visit the projects in Suriname and Brazil in March 2026, guiding the student teams, establishing new research agendas, and enhancing ties between academia and stakeholders.

b. Six two-month research stays at the University of Antwerp for AdeKUS and UNICAP students October–November 2026

Thanks to Erasmus+ credit mobility, three AdeKUS students and three students from UNICAP will be able to travel to Antwerp for a third edition of the international research workshop in Borgerhout.

Marleen Goethals

Morocco

Women and healthy lifestyle in the prevention of diabetes type 2 in Oujda



1. Introduction and Background

In December 2024, partners from Oujda and Antwerp agreed to jointly develop a VLIR-UOS Short Initiative (SI) project to obtain financial support for a health-promotion programme targeting women at risk of type 2 diabetes. However, the political environment in the Oujda province complicated the process. The provincial deputy to the Minister of Health proposed redirecting the project towards female medical doctors, who would receive fitness subscriptions and counselling. This was presented as a prerequisite for gaining access to public health centres.

After extensive discussion with the Oujda partners, the proposal of the provincial deputy was not accepted. The intended target group of the project consists of women from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The project aims to improve their access to a healthy lifestyle in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3 (good health and well-being) and 5 (gender equality). Redirecting the programme to a more privileged group would contradict these goals.

Also, a national reorganization of public offices in Morocco revealed that the post of provincial deputy to the minister of health will be abolished from end-2025. Then the regional health governance will move to a central coordinator more connected to the university hospital (CHU). As a result, collaboration with public health centres in 2025 had to be approached cautiously.



2. Establishing New Partnerships

In preparation for the administrative transition, renewed contact was sought with the CHU. A collaboration with the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, led by Prof. Amin El Oumri, was established. Together with Prof. Abdellatif Maamri from Mohammed Premier University (UMP), a 2025 activity plan was developed.

It was agreed that physiotherapists and physicians in physical medicine—alongside nurses—should be involved as key care providers in the project. Visits to the hospital and several private physiotherapy practices revealed that physiotherapists in Oujda do not traditionally engage in lifestyle counselling, unlike their counterparts in Antwerp.

To address this gap, a series of lessons was prepared to be taught by Antwerp colleagues from 15–19 September 2025 and again in June 2026. Efforts were also made to engage with ISPITS, the public paramedical college in Oujda. However, frequent changes in management made it difficult to establish a stable cooperation. A new attempt is planned for 2026.

Meanwhile, Professors Maamri and El Oumri have become central local partners. Additional



initiatives emerged from this collaboration, including facilitating contacts between Flemish organisations (e.g., USOS, SENSOA, ENABEL) and the AMPF/IPPF to develop a sexual hygiene education programme for Moroccan primary schools. A future colloquium on this topic is envisaged. Prof. Maamri visited Antwerp for preparatory meetings, and further discussions are planned.

Prof. El Oumri has contributed to a doctoral research project on ankle sprain rehabilitation in Antwerp, leading to a joint article submission. Furthermore, a physiotherapy student from Antwerp completed a three-month internship in Oujda, adding valuable intercultural experience.

3. Development of the Healthy Lifestyle Trajectory



A core component of the project involves interviewing women and their social networks to identify needs, capabilities, and cultural boundaries related to lifestyle change and diabetes prevention. UMP and AMPF will assume local leadership in this process.

To strengthen the intercultural expertise of the Antwerp team, contact was established with the Antwerp non-profit organization NAFIS. Initial discussions suggest that collaboration will be mutually beneficial, and a substantive

meetings are being held from early July 2025.

4. Funding Challenges and Future Outlook

The recent rejection of the VLIR-UOS SI application poses a significant challenge. The team invested substantial effort into developing the proposal, but VLIR-UOS has shifted its regional focus to the Beni Mellal region and removed health projects from its specific funding priorities. This reduces opportunities for initiatives in other Moroccan regions, including the Oriental region, where healthcare access remains uneven.

To ensure continuity, substantial external funding is now required to establish a dedicated lifestyle centre as a cornerstone of preventive health promotion in line with SDG 3 and 5. Despite the setback, the team remains committed and will proceed with a TEAM-2026 application.

5. Knowledge Exchange Visit: September 2025

From 15 to 19 September 2025, a working visit to Oujda focused on knowledge exchange in respiratory and cardiac rehabilitation. The Antwerp team consisted of Prof. Dirk Vissers, Prof. Bart Van Rompaey, Wendy Hens, Dr. Samera El Bakkali and Ms. Tina Coremans.



a. Workshop at CHU Oujda

The first workshop, hosted by the Department of Physical Medicine (Prof. El Oumri), was attended by 20 physiotherapists and physicians. The session introduced principles of respiratory and cardiac rehabilitation in postoperative care, combining theoretical instruction with practical demonstrations.

Participants were familiar with some respiratory techniques, but most equipment (e.g., PEP devices, oscillatory PEP, IMT devices) was new to them. Knowledge of cardiac physiotherapy was limited. The session included training on subjective and objective parameters used in personalised cardiac rehabilitation plans.

A particularly valuable intercultural insight concerned breathing instructions: techniques taught in Antwerp as “pursed-lip breathing” or “exhaling with an open throat” are explained in Oujda as “exhaling cold air” versus “warm air”—a practical teaching tip the Antwerp team will adopt.

b. Workshop at UMP

A second workshop at Mohammed Premier University, organized by Prof. Maamri, brought together around 40 physiotherapy students and primary care physiotherapists. The presence of the dean and vice-dean signaled strong institutional support. Dr. Amal Azdimousa, responsible for cardiac physiotherapy at ISPITS, was also present.



Students were not accustomed to interactive teaching or live demonstrations, sometimes resulting in



humorous moments, but engagement grew throughout the session. Teaching materials—including respiratory equipment and heart rate monitors—were donated to the CHU and ISPITS to support continued practice.

The exchange strengthened intercultural competencies on both sides, including norms of greeting, interaction across genders, and teaching behaviors.

Both the hospital, the university, and ISPITS

expressed interest in repeating this initiative.

6. Consolidation and Future Cooperation

Follow-up visits in November and December 2025 further solidified collaboration among UMP faculties and helped define the framework for activities in 2026



Bart Van Rompaey and Dirk Visser

Nicaragua

1. Introduction

In 2025 there has been no significant change in the situation in Nicaragua and USOS has continued supporting a team of former workers of Nitlapan, the research and development institute of the UCA (which was arbitrary and illegally confiscated and closed in 2023). Thanks to the support of USOS this team is trying to maintain alive the legacy of Nitlapan, focusing mainly on following up on the institute's previous work on Territorial Development processes in the Nicaraguan countryside.

2. The partnership

In 2025, this team has continued with the process of meeting virtually on a regular basis. The objective of these meetings remains to strengthen the working group motivated to continue Nitlapan's legacy despite the risks and uncertainties of Nicaragua's sociopolitical context. These meetings have allowed the implementation of a collaborative work and the establishment of procedures for safe communication and decision-making. The team has also maintained support for a larger group, which is made up of other former collaborators and founders of the institute, which often accompanies these virtual meetings. In 2025, the team also organized a 2-day meeting in Pantasma in October 2025. This meeting involved 4 team members and provided a space for consolidating the group and staying informed about the situation in each territory and finetuning the collaborative strategies of intervention.

A large part of the collaborative work implemented in 2025 consisted in establishing a formal structure in Costa Rica that could facilitate the acquisition of external funding to support the continuity of the work in Nicaragua. However, the legal procedures for registering the Nitlapan association in Costa Rica were heavier than initially expected and the process is only expected to be completed in the first trimester of 2025 and will require the travel of several members of the team to Costa Rica for the signature of the legal statutes.

With respect to field activities the team has continued supporting the work of rural banks in the municipalities of Matiguas, Rio Blanco, Pantasma, and La Dalia. The support has consisted in a continued technical accompaniment, in responding to concrete requests and in an effort to maintain a communication channel opened between the rural banks through a whatsapp group. This has allowed to maintain and strengthen the bond of the team with local allies and a continued presence in the territories. The team has also worked in the elaboration of technical manuals on the establishment of rural banks which will be made available for a larger public by the newly created Nitlapan institute in Costa Rica and are expected to form the backbone of the future work of the team whether in Nicaragua or in other Latin American countries.

In order to strengthen Nitlapan's team, one of the member was invited to participate in a course on participatory collaborative research organized in Ecuador in March 2025 in the scope of VLIR ICP Project implemented by IOB and its Latin American partners. While the participation of the member of Nitlapan was valued very positively, he was not allowed to legally return to Nicaragua by the authoritarian regime. This demonstrates again the risks faced by the team that USOS has been supporting in Nicaragua and also the importance of maintaining alive the solidarity network of which USOS is part. In 2025 this work

Important efforts were also made to maintain the link between the Nitlapan team and the other activities of USOS. While these efforts were not successful in allowing the participation of Nicaraguan students in the 2025 USOS Global Pen Friends initiatives, Nitlapan had a relevant and important participation in the elaboration of the USOS book 'Caring for a common home' and in the activities of the celebration of the 40 years of USOS.

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 2025 in the scope of the design of new ERASMUS-MUNDUS Joint Master in Critical Development studies and social environmental justice 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, the 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). Research cooperation has also continued in 2025 through the PhD research processes implemented by several former UCA and/or Nitlapan researchers within IOB-UA doctoral (Alder Contreras, René Rodriguez, Milagros Romero and Maria Jose Cordero). Finally, Pierre Merlet has been able to secure his position as a postdoctoral researcher at IOB-UA until 2027.

The financial support of USOS has been fundamental throughout this process. It has allowed to financially support four team members to support local rural banks, to cover for the expenses of the team meeting in Pantasma and to pay the costs related with the administrative process of registering the Nitlapan Association in Costa Rica.

Pierre Merlet and Milagros Romero López