

newsletter

NCCR North-South

Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development

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Focus on Central and South America



Colonia Nueva Capital, Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Photo: Marysabel Zelaya

Seeking innovative approaches to urban planning

With the third four-year phase of the NCCR North-South now well underway, the new series of newsletters will take on a regional focus. In this issue, the spotlight will be on research in Central and South America, and on the people conducting it.

Research in this region centres primarily on the livelihood strategies of socially excluded groups, the role of violence and insecurity, and innovative approaches to urban planning. With difficult living conditions at home, urban spaces such as parks and squares could in theory provide a welcome refuge. However, in many Latin American cities, urban spaces have ceased to be viewed as an opportunity but are rather areas which are feared and avoided due to safety concerns. As a result, middle and upper classes prefer to spend their free time in private spaces.

A feature of the new series of newsletters is the alumni interview, allowing readers to learn more about the career path of a former NCCR North-South researcher.

Editorial



Marian Perez
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The Regional Colloquium ‘Mesoamerica Facing Global Processes and Development Challenges’ held in Mexico City last November 3 and 4 was the setting for the first balance on research results of the NCCR North-South programme in Latin America. Hosted by the Azcapotzalco unit of the Autonomous University of Mexico and inaugurated by its rector, Dr. Gabriela Paloma Ibañez Villalobos, the colloquium brought together students from the Central and South American partnership regions and senior researchers from both regions and from Switzerland.

The event was organised around three main topics: Governance and Natural Resources (Peru, Mexico and Bolivia), Governance, Social Movements, Citizenship and Risk Management (Costa Rica, Honduras, Bolivia and Argentina) Social Exclusion (El Salvador, Honduras, Venezuela and Mexico), and an additional input on Migration. For each theme, senior researchers from Central America presented results from the first and second phases of NCCR North-South activities in the region.

Discussions were lively and there was a commitment to keep working together to really contribute to the sustainability of development on the continent. Participants in Latin America have produced relevant research results with innovations in theoretical and methodological approaches that should be disseminated. The language barrier has prevented this from happening to date; this newsletter intends to be a first step to overcome the situation.

Focus on Central and South America

Growing up around waste: Buenos Aires

What is it like to grow up around waste? How does this affect the young people and how they see themselves? These are the questions Argentinian researcher Ada Freytes Frey seeks to answer in her PhD dissertation.

Freytes Frey studied the Reconquista area, a group of poor neighbourhoods near Buenos Aires’ main landfill. The area includes slums which developed in the late 90s, on a site previously used as an illegal dump. This means that living conditions are precarious, with a high level of soil pollution and a lack of basic infrastructure such as sewage, water and electricity.

Many of the young people living in the area try to make a living by collecting waste from the landfill for recycling. Freytes Frey compiled the life stories of forty 15–25-year-olds. “Family ties are very important for these young men and women,” says Freytes Frey. Where family support is absent, young people are left to fend for themselves and often face a life on the street marked by violence and drugs. “The family



Young people from Reconquista working in a solid waste sorting and recycling plant. Photo: Facundo Pérez

plays an important role in transmitting gender stereotypes across the generations,” adds Freytes Frey. “Gender inequalities are very strong: the streets are male territory, the household female.” Having work is of central importance to the male self-image. Getting to this point, however, is not easy in Reconquista. Educational standards are low in schools lacking equipment and with a high level of teacher absenteeism. As a result, many young people leave school early – and even those who do finish basic secondary school (9th grade) find it difficult to get a job.

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Violence in public spaces: Tegucigalpa

Violence and insecurity are also recurring themes in Marysabel Zelaya's field of study. According to figures by the Violence Observatory in Honduras, 66% of deaths by homicide were registered in public spaces. Zelaya's PhD dissertation investigates the spatial and socio-cultural transformation of public spaces in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa.



*Colonia Nueva Capital, Tegucigalpa, Honduras.
Photo: Marysabel Zelaya*

"People are increasingly abandoning these spaces, as they are not considered safe," says Zelaya. "Instead, they are choosing to meet in private spaces or even to stay at home, which denies them the opportunity to participate in the city's collective life and dynamics."

The areas studied include the Barrio Abajo in the historic centre and the Colonia Nueva Capital, a new establishment in northwestern Tegucigalpa. The Colonia Nueva Capital was created in the aftermath of 1998 Hurricane Mitch, with the aim of providing a quick solution to the housing problem. While hold-ups and robberies occur in both areas studied, murder and homicide, drugs-dealing, rape and domestic violence were found to mainly occur in the Colonia Nueva Capital. The Barrio Abajo's main problems are alcohol and drugs-fuelled crimes and prostitution, as well as excess traffic.

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Gated communities in Tegucigalpa and San Salvador

With violence on the rise in public spaces in Tegucigalpa, the trend of physically closing off entire communities with a gate and walls is seen as evidence of the deepening of urban social segregation. Master's student Ivonne Chain

explores the emergent residential phenomenon of 'closed barrios', and attempts to identify the causes of these closed neighbourhoods.

Chain has identified three types of closed community. What Chain calls Type 1 are gated communities designed as a closed circuit in the 70s with a single entry and exit point, as a 'lifestyle concept' of the time. Type 2 refers to areas which were closed off in the late 80s due to fears about safety. While not originally designed as closed communities, barriers (like at a railway crossing) have been placed across the entrance to roads leading into the community. Type 3 are the modern, purpose-built gated communities of the late 90s and are mainly to be found on the outskirts or in the suburbs of Tegucigalpa. "Type 3 responds to the search for a 'safe environment' and became a trend among middle- and high-income communities," says Chain.

Chain's study followed an earlier PhD study by Sonia Baires of El Salvador, who evaluated patterns of growth of urban gated communities in the capital, San Salvador. Baires determined a clear trend towards controlling access to residential areas within the city by establishing physical barriers, despite the practice being illegal. An inventory of closed settlements in San Salvador revealed that 40% of the housing stock is within a closed community, and that the trend affects all social strata.



*Type 3 gated community, Honduras.
Photo: Ivonne Chain*

"Only those people who have links outside disadvantaged communities succeed in becoming integrated into current social transformation dynamics," according to Baires.

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Sanitation in Costa Rica

Poverty and poor living conditions often mean that sanitation issues are neglected. While Costa Rica has achieved progress in the sanitation sector, PhD researcher Mariela Castro says this was a centralised, top-down process. Castro is studying the factors leading to the successful implementation of sustainable sanitation through participatory planning. For this reason she will attempt to identify factors which determine the success or failure of a participatory planning process.

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Cochabamba: encouraging citizen participation

Alejandra Ramirez is examining the theme of 'citizenship' as a central axis of the sustainable development processes in Cochabamba, Bolivia. Citizenship is defined here as how people can actively participate in the construction of their local, sustainable quality of life. The decentralisation which began in Bolivia in the 90s has resulted in a new type of relationship between the state and its citizens, with citizens becoming more active participants.



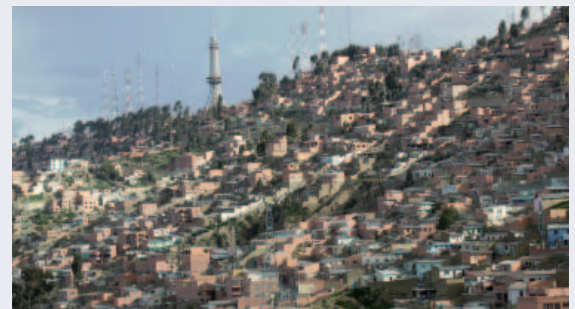
Sharing spaces in daily life in Cochabamba: locals and migrants (right) from the highlands. Photo: Walter Sánchez

Ramirez is focusing on women's citizenship, a field which has been little studied to date. "Cochabamba is known as a place where women are very brave," she says. "My studies to date have shown that the experience of migration plays an important role in the ways that citizenship manifests itself." More than half of the women in leadership roles in 'citizenship agencies' in Cochabamba returned home to Bolivia after having lived elsewhere.

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Minimising risk for homes on slopes in La Paz

In Bolivia, there have been more natural disasters during the past 10 years than in the preceding decades. At the same time, the population of La Paz is expanding to places most prone to landslides: 70% of La Paz is now located in a 'risk area'.



Houses built on the slopes of La Paz. Photo: Luis Salamanca

The situation is further exacerbated by low-quality housing, inadequate infrastructure but also ethnic identity issues. "People know that they live in high-risk areas, but their lack of resources means that they are unable to find a safer place to live," says Luis Salamanca, whose aim is to learn what risk management approaches work best and to apply them on a larger scale. His study has revealed a number of deeper problems: that power groups regulate the land price, and that personal favours determine whether people gain access to land or not.

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Communal Reserve in Peru – some critical insights

Managing land on the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve (ACR) in Peru is the focus of two PhD students of the Graduate Institute in Geneva. Alex Alvarez examined social practices related to land use in the specific context of an indigenous protected area. "The current property owners are actually depleting the area rather than protecting it," according to Alvarez, who admits that the results of his study are quite critical.



Harakmbut inhabitants of the Shintuya Native Community, whose main economic activity is timbering. Photo: Jamil Alca

Jamil Alca says there are insufficient incentives for conservation in the ACR. First results from his PhD dissertation are that current practices by both indigenous and non-indigenous groups are based on obtaining short-term benefits, leading to competition for forest resources and over-exploitation. Timbering, for example, brings short-term economic benefits and this situation institutionalises practices which are contrary to conservation. This is exacerbated by the high degree of informality that characterises forest extraction activities, due to the lack of effective agreements on forest management.

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A walk through Tepito

by Tina Hirschbuehl

Improving an old neighbourhood in Mexico City through participative planning

Mention Tepito and, as a tourist, you will likely be advised to exercise extreme caution if you should decide to visit. Located just north of the historic centre of Mexico City, Tepito is known for its high rates of criminal activity as well as a huge open-air market selling goods with designer labels on them. In a PAMS* project linked to her PhD study, researcher Anavel Monterrubio launched plans to improve the neighbourhood with the participation of its inhabitants: “Before the study, people were not aware of the power they had to improve the area, which has a very bad reputation.”

In her PhD study Monterrubio identified factors enabling people with a low income to remain in the historic central districts of Mexico City, particularly those areas which have been the focus

of renovation programmes. In Tepito, many people fear eviction if the government should decide to improve the buildings there, many of which are in extremely poor condition.

We arrange to meet the leader of the neighbourhood group formed for the PAMS, Agostin Del Razo Cortes, on the Santa Ana Plaza in Tepito. Despite the fact that, as a result of the project, the Santa Ana Plaza has seen some improvement with benches and plants, there is rubbish strewn around the benches and we have to clear a space to sit down. Del Razo Cortes is accompanied by another member of the neighbourhood group, René Vega Rogde, a rugged character, unshaven, with a number of missing teeth. Both are die-hard *Tepiteños* – born and bred in what is locally known as the *barrio bravo*, the ‘fierce’ neighbourhood.



Tepito's market is the largest in Mexico City. Photo: Tina Hirschbuehl

Getting the PAMS project off the ground was not an easy task. “When she first showed up we were ready to hit her,” says Del Razo Cortes. “We thought she was part of a group sent by the government to infiltrate us.” Monterrubio confesses that there were times when she wanted to give up. Not only did the Tepito residents distrust her; there was also infighting among the *Tepiteños* themselves. The group was originally meant to comprise about 20 members. In the end, only about six people stayed. However, Del Razo Cortes says these six represent many sectors of the Tepito population, and Monterrubio adds, “Some of the participants were protagonists in conflicts arising from different ideas about how the available public spaces should be used – so enabling an exchange between these sectors was an important part of the project.”

Despite these hurdles, the project achieved a number of important outputs. This includes forming the neighbourhood group itself: reach-



Murals add some colour to a housing development in Tepito, Mexico City. Photo: Tina Hirschbuehl

ing the point where this was a group in which, following an initial period of distrust, people could air views freely. Sociological buzzwords such as empowerment and capacity-building are frequently used when describing its outcomes. “The PAMS gave us the confidence to carry through what we want, to convince the government that we need funds to improve the public spaces in the neighbourhood,” explains Del Razo Cortes, now clearly less suspicious.

A walk through the barrio, under the protection of Del Razo Cortes and two friends, reveals how creative the area is. A well-maintained, freshly painted art gallery could just as well be in a young, urban, trendy part of any European city. Opposite the gallery is a workshop consisting of what at first sight looks like a garage – on closer inspection it is a space in which spare car parts are artfully crafted into chairs, tables, mirrors – even shaped into flowers. But next to the pockets of creativity in Tepito lie the social problems. “Many people survive on less than 3 dollars a day,” says sociologist Luca Pattaroni of the EPFL in Lausanne, adding that access to a stall in the Tepito market, which stretches for several kilometres, is tightly controlled by the local mafia.

We walk past stalls and more stalls selling everything from DVDs to fake designer shirts, watches to handbags. I feel fortunate to be guided by *Tepiteños*; I wouldn’t venture here alone. I keep clutching my pockets to ensure that the cash I am carrying is still there.

Exiting the market, Del Razo Cortes points out a football field which has seen better days. “This field was in the Guinness Book of World Records in 1979, for the longest football game

ever played – it went on for a month.” Now, the field looks neglected – one of the many spaces in Tepito requiring improvement.

“Whatever is constructed, we want it to be done by *Tepiteño* architects and builders. We want the sweat and blood to remain here.”

** The aim of the NCCR North-South’s PAMS projects is to allow researchers to actually test their results, with a one-off contribution of a maximum of CHF 50,000.*

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Alumni interview

The alumni interview will become a regular feature of this new series of regionally focused newsletters. Our first guest is Silvia Hostettler, who completed her PhD dissertation within the NCCR North-South in 2006. Silvia Hostettler is currently based in India, as Executive Director of swissnex Bangalore, part of a network of science and technology outposts run by the Swiss State Secretariat for Education and Research (SER) and the Department of Foreign Affairs. Swissnex is a key component of the Swiss strategic policy on the promotion of education, research and innovation. It has branches in Bangalore, Boston, San Francisco, Shanghai and Singapore.

How did your experience within the NCCR North-South prepare you for your job as director of swissnex Bangalore? *It taught me how to be able to work in different cultural contexts and with people from various backgrounds. Being in a country like India can be overwhelming in itself; having had some exposure to working in developing countries and interacting with Indians has definitely helped me for this job. In the NCCR I was multitasking between research, project management and coordination. My current job consists of many different tasks and a lot of networking where I can really use my previous experience with the NCCR.*

Can you describe a typical day at your current workplace? *The obvious answer would be that there is no typical day at my current workplace. Nonetheless let me try to give you an idea. I have a first look at my email around 7:30. I arrive at the office around 9 and talk to the people in my team, which right now consists of an assistant, a*

communications and event manager and an academic intern. There are always decisions to be taken about what projects to pursue, whom to meet, how to set up meetings, when it would be best to travel, etc. Right now we are renovating the offices, which involves many decisions about colours, floors, lamps, tables, chairs and so on. Then I work on reports or reply to my emails. At 1 we have lunch on the roof terrace of the office building. In India, people will often share food and it's important to eat together. We bring the meals from home, usually prepared by cooks as cooking just takes too much time. What's more, my cooking skills are seriously limited. In the afternoon I might accompany Swiss visitors to meetings at research institutions or companies or have my own meetings. I leave the office at 5 to pick up my daughter at daycare. From 8 to 10 I am usually online again.

You did your PhD research in Mexico. How did you end up in Bangalore? Good question. I wanted to continue to work in the field of research but not do research myself. I also wanted to live abroad again for a few years. And I wanted a challenging job. When I heard about this opportunity in India, I thought it was a perfect combination. I really like India. However, I would also have been happy to go back to Latin America.

Your PhD topic was 'Land use changes and transnational migration: the impact of remittances in Western Mexico'. Are your research insights of any significance to your current work? Not with regard to my everyday work, but I read about these topics in India. Due to the economic crises, many Indian migrants return from the Gulf States as not enough work is available; this has strong effects on the local economy in Kerala for instance. I also meet regularly with the Swiss Development Cooperation Team in New Delhi where I was based for a year. I continue to be very interested in land use and migration. Actually, my PhD thesis was published recently, so I had to rewrite parts of it and actually really enjoyed it. I had a moment of doubt whether I should have continued in research, but as you know, the grass is always greener elsewhere ...

Has being a part of the NCCR North-South network helped you in any way, and if so, how? It has helped me in many ways. Most importantly I learned to work with people who are different from me and I got to know many different fields of research interacting with them. The NCCR is a fantastic platform for learning, not only thematic knowledge but also by widening one's ho-

rizon. I also made some great friends who continue to be wonderful sounding boards and advisors for all kinds of questions.

'Research partnerships' are a common theme both at swissnex and within the NCCR North-South – do you think that research partnerships are approached in similar ways in both places? No, there is at least one big difference. In the NCCR North-South, capacity-building from the North to the South is an explicit goal whereas in the research partnerships supported by the Indo Swiss Joint Research Programme (ISJRP) this is not one of the objectives. Furthermore, the NCCR North-South conducts many socio-economic research projects, which is not the case in the ISJRP, where the scientific domains have largely been determined by the Indian funding agency, the Department for Science and Technology.

What experience has most shaped where you are now? That is a difficult question. I was on an exchange programme in Colombia when I was 17 and I did my studies and research in Scotland, Burkina Faso, Ghana and Mexico. By now, I have travelled to about 50 countries. So I guess the interest in other countries and the experience of having been exposed to different cultures has had a large influence on my career. Doing a PhD has certainly also been a key experience. It is so stimulating, tough, strenuous and gratifying all at the same time and it has taught me to take decisions and to trust them.

You have two young children. How do you manage the work/life balance? The work/life balance only exists as long as all the work is done. If it isn't, then life has to wait. It is really one of my big frustrations not to be able to achieve a work/life balance. By now, I have decided that it is impossible to be on top of work, have time for my family life, look after my health and still have time for my friends. Therefore, very often work gets priority and everything else is put on hold, which is not always great for the children.

Where do you see yourself in ten years' time? I have no idea. I never had a master plan for my career. I follow my interests and that has worked out well for me. So far so good.



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NCCR North-South News and Events

Perspectives 5

This volume presents 36 peer-reviewed articles written by interdisciplinary teams of authors who reflected on results of development-oriented research conducted from 2001 to 2008 within the NCCR North-South: Hurni H, Wiesmann U, editors; with an international group of co-editors. 2010. *Global Change and Sustainable Development: A Synthesis of Regional Experiences from Research Partnerships*. Perspectives of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, University of Bern, Vol. 5. Bern, Switzerland: Geographica Bernensia, 578 pages.

NCCR North-South policy briefs

A number of new policy briefs will be published in the coming months, on topics ranging from research partnerships to HCES (Household-Centred Environmental Sanitation). Topics currently featured in the *evidence for policy* series are: parks and people, migration, decentralisation and climate change. The production of regional policy briefs is also underway: the aim is to produce 64 in total (8 per region).

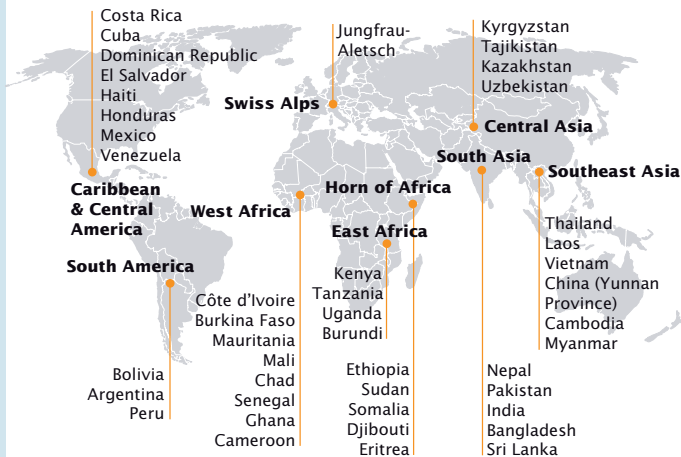
North-South Forum

The NCCR North-South and the North-South Centre at the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich are planning to hold a joint event twice a year. The first joint North-South Forum will focus on agricultural land investment and the effects on rural areas; the date will be announced on www.north-south.unibe.ch

Nepal book on bestseller list

Alongside popular novels such as the final volume of Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy, an NCCR North-South book on Nepal's peace process and world lessons on federal structures has featured on bestseller lists in Kathmandu. The book, *Peace Process and Federalism in Nepal*, was edited by Bishnu Raj Upreti, Nicole Töpferwien and Markus Heiniger. It was published on the occasion of the 50-year anniversary of bilateral cooperation between Nepal and Switzerland.

Partnership Regions



Programme Management

- The NCCR North-South is directed by a board made up of representatives from the Swiss Partner Institutions together with the Regional Coordinators. It is headed by programme directors Hans Hurni and Urs Wiesmann, and coordinated by Thomas Breu.

Swiss Partner Institutions

- Centre for Development and Environment (CDE)
Institute of Geography, University of Bern
Hans Hurni and Urs Wiesmann
www.cde.unibe.ch
- Development Study Group (DSGZ)
Institute of Geography, University of Zurich
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