

**CORPUS CHRISTI COLLEGE**  
**EXPANDING**  
**HORIZONS 2022**



**SCHOLARSHIP**  
**REPORTS**

Thanks to the generosity of a number of US alumni the College was able to establish the Expanding Horizons Scholarship Fund. The fund is open to all current undergraduates and graduates. In its inaugural year (2017) it provided scholarships for nine students to spend between four and eight weeks in the United States or a similar period of time in a non-OECD country. In 2018 eight students received a scholarship and in 2019 a further six students were supported. The pandemic caused disruption in 2020 and 2021 with travel limited; the scholarship came back in full-force in 2022. Each scholarship provides up to a maximum of £5,000 and offers the recipients an opportunity to experience the United States or a non-OECD country with the aim of building connections to form a basis for greater understanding and shared purpose, allowing them to expand their horizons and hopefully have a transformative experience.

The scholarships have a wide remit and aim to provide broad educational value beyond the scope of the applicant's academic course at Oxford. It is hoped that the trip will also involve significant exposure to the local people and culture of the area/country. The sorts of activities that the scholarship cover include taking an academic course not related to the applicant's current degree, working for an NGO, doing an internship in a business or laboratory, volunteering or taking part in local project.

A number of alumni have generously offered opportunities to our young people to work or study overseas during the summer for which we are extremely grateful.

It is anticipated that we will fund at least three students to spend time in the United States and a non-OECD country during the summer of 2023 and our intention is to continue to raise funds to enable us to offer this scholarship in the years to come.

This booklet contains the reports of the 2022 Scholars which we hope will inspire both donations towards continuing the scholarship for the years to come as well as to enable current students to find out what is possible and to encourage them to apply for a scholarship which will, as the evidence shows, expand their horizons.

**The recipients of the Expanding Horizons Scholarship 2022 were:**

Charlotte Ives – fourth year Biochemistry student (postponed from 2020)

Rory Kinlan – third year PPE student

Bethan Jones – third year History & Politics student

Charlotte Richter – fourth year Law (with Law Studies in Europe) student

Anna Samuel – third year Experimental Psychology student

Xijia Su – second year PPE student

## Charlotte Ives

With the fortunate award of the Expanding Horizons Scholarship I was able to spend a month on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica at Playa Tortuga Reserva, in Ojochal. This trip was an experience of a life time and one I will never forget.

This scholarship provided the opportunity for me to travel out of Europe for the first time. The 48 hours of travelling to reach the reserve, including the long-haul flight, was an experience in itself, pushing me out of my comfort zone. At first I was a little anxious, travelling around such a different country, but by the end my confidence and Spanish had developed significantly and I even enjoyed chatting to locals on the bus (albeit in very basic Spanish and mainly hand signs).

The nature was stunning. I grew up watching David Attenborough and arriving at the reserve felt as though I had landed directly in the scene of a documentary. The views of the beach with the tropical rainforests carpeting the mountains in the background was unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

At the reserve there were 5 permanent staff and between 10-15 volunteers visiting at any one time. The key focus of the reserve was to collect vital data on the turtles which nest on Tortuga beach and collect the eggs to protect them from poachers and natural predators. The eggs continue to incubate in the hatchery for 55 days before being released back into the sea once they hatch. Other research at the reserve included monitoring bats, monkeys, scarlet macaws and there was a strong focus on educating the local community for example hosting school trips and encouraging reforestation by donating trees.



### ***Turtles:***

The turtle conservation was the biggest focus of the reserve especially throughout turtle season, July through to November. Constant night time patrols of the beach protect nesting turtles from poachers and allow data about nesting turtles to be collected, which in turn is passed on to the Costa Rican government. The eggs are collected as they are laid and reburied in the hatchery for protection until they hatch. This work is mainly carried out at Tortuga beach which is legally protected however the most recent aim of the reserve is to achieve protection for the adjacent beach, Playa Hermosa. The reserve organised community groups to walk Hermosa beach at night and in mornings as poacher activity was higher here and the turtle data was critical for putting forward a case for protection to the government.

These walk's, although much more exhausting than anticipated, were amazing. The stars in the sky were brighter than I had ever seen before and fireflies surrounded us. One even landed on my chest for 10 minutes, flashing on and off. The work of the group, which they started 14 years ago, has seen the number of baby turtles released increase from 2,000 to 20,000 so is proving successful. Olive Ridley turtles make up over 97% of the nests at Tortuga and Hermosa but I was fortunate enough to discover a Hawksbill nest, the most critically endangered species of sea turtle in the world. With only a few thousand nesting females left worldwide, the 200 eggs we collected will play an essential role in saving the species.

It is not just the immediate threat to the eggs from humans and animals than endanger turtles but obvious threat of climate change plays a huge role. I found it interesting to learn of one of the less obvious ways in which climate change is threatening these species relates to the fact that the sex of the turtle is determined by the temperature the egg is incubated at. At low temperatures the egg will stop developing and inactivated genes will not reactivate upon increased temperature, leading to limb deformities. At lower temperatures that do not stop development, the turtle will be male, and at higher temperatures the turtle will be female. As a biochemist I found this particularly fascinating but in the face of climate change this poses a threat as the majority of turtles that hatch are now females, even reaching 100% in many places, causing problems later as they reach maturity.



### ***Other conservation:***

The scarlet macaws were my favourite animal in Costa Rica. They were thankfully brought back from the brink of extinction 30 years ago and their constant monitoring at the reserve is important to learn about how the numbers and location of the birds change. Their loud and unmistakable squawk and bright red plumage could be heard and seen daily. The macaws highlight how valuable conversation work is and the impact it can have. This was something I played a part in, recording how many macaws could be spotted in an hour time frame and what they were doing.



Some of my favourite work was the monitoring of the tree frogs. This work was carried out at night, knee-high in a swamp, in the middle of the jungle. We would look for the tree frogs, mainly red-eyed but we occasionally found the parachute or hour glass tree frogs too. We collected data on what tree they were in, how high, if eggs were nearby etc. It was amazing to see frogs at all stages of metamorphosis, from eggs to tadpoles to froglets and full-grown adults. There were also a lot of very large bugs and spiders in the nearby branches which was rather scary at times (especially since many of them were poisonous!).



*This is a red-eyed tree frog like the one above but with its eyes closed trying to hide and you can see how well it is camouflaged! Before I arrived in Costa Rica I was expecting to see animals and birds everywhere but soon realised they were a lot harder to spot than you think. After a while though, and with the help of the guides, their abundance was noticeable.*

A final example of activity was the collection of camera trap videos. We set the traps up on trails and checked their battery and SD cards twice a week. The videos collected then had to be watched and notes taken. Amazingly we captured many big cats including the puma, jaguarundi and the ocelot, providing important information about the location of these animals.



### **People:**

I made many friends amongst the volunteers at the reserve and it was great interacting with like-minded people. Since I was living there for a month, I also became very close with the biologists living there. Their enthusiasm and knowledge about their local nature was amazing and I tried to take absorb as much information from them as I could.

**Food:**

The food in Costa Rica was very natural, a lot of rice, vegetable and fresh fruit, matching their very commonly used greeting/saying “Pura Vida”, meaning pure life. Fishing was a common livelihood for the locals with a pickled fish and prawn soup called ceviche being served everywhere. The fresh fruit was insanely sweet and juicy, incomparable to fruit in the UK, and the smoothies equally so. The biologist would also cut fresh coconuts from the trees on the long walks as a natural refresher.



**Excursions:**

The volunteers had Sundays off and I managed to do a lot of extra activities. One of the highlights for me was horse riding along the beach at sunset. A memory I will never forget. Equally, the day boat trip to Cano island where we saw turtles and dolphins was a magical experience. At Cano we spent the day snorkelling around the coral reef before returning on the boat. We spent other days swimming in waterfalls, playing at the beach and exploring local villages and national parks.



When returning to San Jose I stopped for 2 nights in Quepos to look around the famous national park, Manuel Antonio. Here we saw a 3 toed sloth for the first time and it was just as amazing as I had imagined. The tour guide showed us other animals such as an anteater, bats, crab eating racoon, howler monkeys etc. We were able to use the guides telescope to get some fantastic close up photos of the animals. Upon leaving the park we were disappointed to see our sandwich and crisps had been taken from the lockers by some monkeys so went to a local restaurant for some lunch instead.

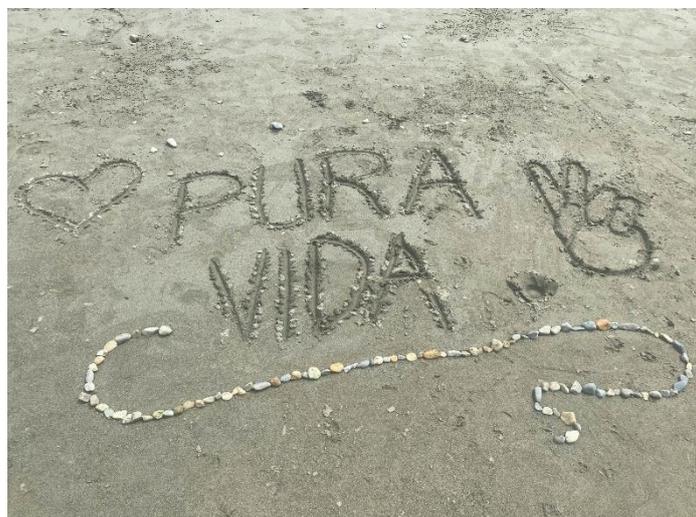


*This is a wax tail hopper which uses wax from the tree to create a waxy tail to protect it from predators. The guide said this will be the rarest insect I will see in my life.*

**Thoughts:**

In a strange way I was also left a little concerned by the trip. If Costa Rica is supposedly one of the most untouched countries in the world then I worry for the future of many of the unique species and for our climate. Even in the most “remote” places, the human mark was never far from reach and the 5-hour bus journeys across the country involved passing through hours of palm tree farms, a result of deforestation. It also seems there are more expats in the country than Costa Ricans and although they often seemed very appreciative of the nature, huge patches of rainforest could be seen in the mountainsides where trees were burnt and cut for house development to meet the growing demand. The conservation efforts of groups like Playa Tortuga Reserva are essential and awareness needs to increase.

This trip was the most memorable experience of my life and was made possible by the Expanding Horizons Scholarship. I have made many memories which will stay with me for life and seen sights I may never see again. Thank you!



## Bethan Jones

I want to start by thanking the Expanding Horizons Scholarship Fund for giving me the opportunity to go on this trip with their generous grant. It has been an eye-opening and enriching experience and one that I will carry forward with me into the next chapter of my life after Oxford. I am incredibly grateful for the connections I have made and things I have learned. Thank you to the alumni who donated to the fund and made all that possible, to the Selection Committee and to Rachel Clifford for all her help and support.

This September I travelled to the US for four weeks on the Expanding Horizons scholarship in order to research and build connections with organisations involved in advocacy work, protest, and radical projects. The purpose of my trip was to connect with and learn about activist communities in the US, utilising the UK's culture of activism as a point of comparison. I am currently engaged in writing an article about this research for *The Lemming*, a publication based in Manchester which I am the editor and a staff-writer for. We are a political magazine with a focus on radical politics, cultural commentary, and advocacy and in recent issues I have written about the squatting movement (something upon which I also based my dissertation), the Kill the Bill protests and the arms manufacturer Elbit Systems. We encourage reader action in issues they care about, offering ways to get involved in activism, and building mutual aid networks for campaign groups across the North, spotlighting and working with organisations such as the Northern Police Monitoring group, Palestine Action, Demilitarise Education (who aim to expose university ties to the arms trade) and community projects for the empowerment of people living in poverty, women and ethnically-diverse communities. We are currently building a network of like-minded organisations to partner and collaborate with, and the project I undertook in the US was designed to help connect the dots and create an international basis for our work.

I began this project focusing on the demilitarisation movement, however quickly discovered that grassroots demilitarisation organisations in the US are few and far between. They tend to be channelled through more centralised advocacy organisations, such as the Quaker Office of the UN, and therefore were not where the heart of community radicalism seemed to lie. My focus throughout the trip therefore became far broader- looking at community projects, anarchists, and environmentalists in order to get to the centre of grassroots movements and the people involved in them. My focus was on three cities- San Francisco, New York and Boston considering a range of different organisations whose work ranged from women's liberation to anti-fascism, to community-centred environmentalism. In preparation for the trip, I reached out to several Quaker contacts of mine, arranging meetings. However, some of the most valuable interactions I had were with people I met whilst I was out there- in bookshops and cafes, and subsequent connections made through these people.

### **San Francisco: women's lib and anarchists**

The US is all about visibility; from the lawyers' ads that run on TV, to the billboards in Time Square- everything is right in front of your eyes, advertised and displayed. This is no different in the activist scene; activism in the US is far more visible, more manifest within the framework of society itself. On a street in the Mission district of San Francisco, stands a tall, multicoloured building coated in murals and artwork. From the viewpoint of Mission Dolores Park, you can see atop of this building a huge alabaster mural of a woman giving birth. This is the San Francisco Women's Building; created in the 1970s, it was a place that brought together disparate women's services throughout the city. Offering legal aid for women facing immigration hearings, domestic abuse services, training for jobs and education, arts projects- under the roof of this kaleidoscopic building sits the first woman-owned and operated community centre in the country. Their mission statement is to "advocate self-

determination, gender equality and social justice”, strengthening the community of women in the area by giving them a space to go. A room of one’s own.

It is strikingly different to many of the women’s services in the UK- often hidden within the walls of hospitals, or in appointment-only nondescript office blocks. In the UK, women’s services, sexual assault and domestic abuse support centres are often accessed through police, hospitals, GPs, the authorities. You often have to know where to look for them, and often accessing them also includes some kind of interaction with a GP, police officer, or some other form of authority that people may feel uncomfortable about using as a go-between. The UK has far fewer visible refuges that advertise their work so openly as the Women’s Building and that have such few links with representatives of the state, making them a safe space for people whose immigrations status may be insecure or who have had bad experiences with the authorities in the past. Its visibility makes the work that it does far more accessible to a broader range of people.



*The Women’s Building in San Francisco*

This was also true of the group of anarchist activists we made contact with who operate out of a bookshop in Haight-Ashbury- the counter-cultural hub of the city. Bound Together Books sits in a crucially central spot on Haight Street and sells a range of left-wing, socialist and anarchist literature, whilst moonlighting as a community hub where people read poetry and discuss politics. One of the people who runs it- Jim, an alias he’s been using for forty or so years- is a veteran organiser, anarchist and climate activist. Originally from Detroit, he had moved to San Francisco in his early twenties having been homeless



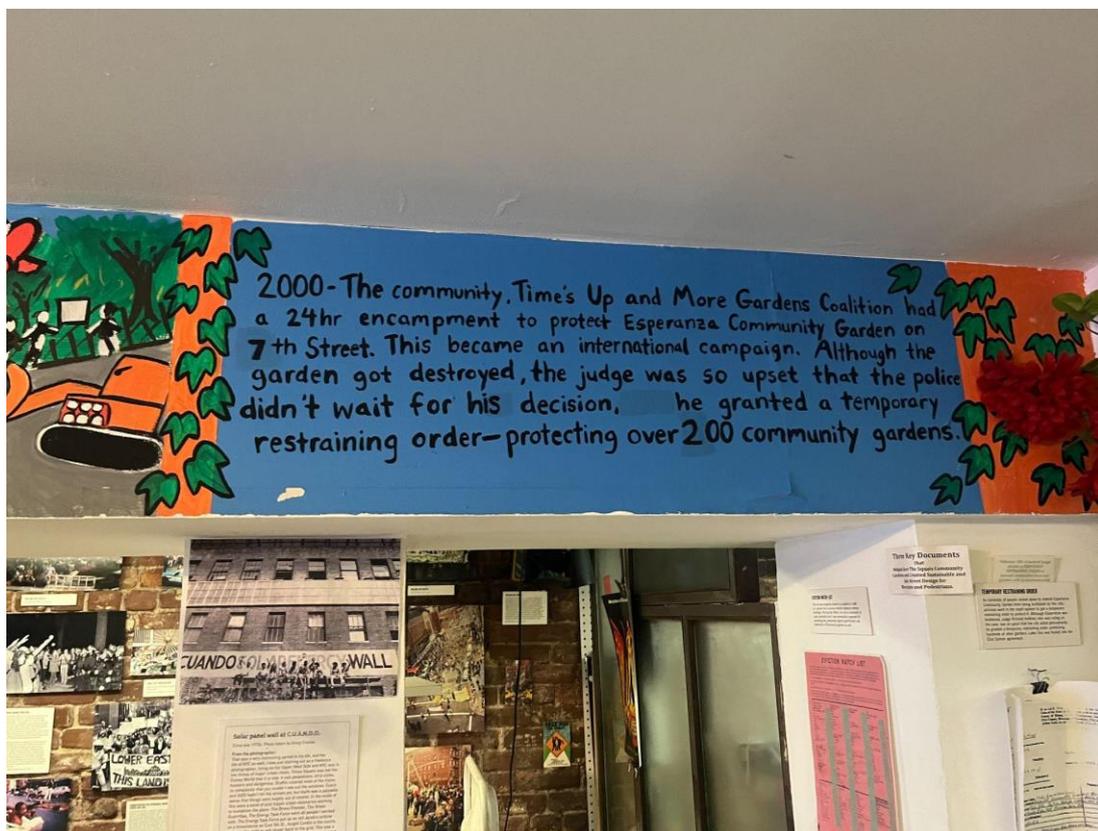
from a young age and helped to win countless legal battles with the City over the rights of homeless people whilst still unhoused himself. He was an anti-nuclear activist, involved with the Seeds of Peace operation to disrupt nuclear tests at Nevada Test Site. Jim’s mission at Bound Together Books was to create an intergenerational community who were interested in organising against issues such as gentrification, police violence and Rachmanism. The success of this mission was manifest at a poetry night I attended there; the room was filled with people from multiple generations (including

my 80-year-old Airbnb host who had come along) sharing mutual aid and community building ideas and creating networks of solidarity between their different causes.

### New York: squats, the UN and community gardens

The transition from the West Coast to the East was a profound one, a huge shift in pace, climate, and temperament. Through Jim's introduction, I met with Bill, who is an anarchist journalist and a bastion of the New York radical scene. He had grown up just outside New York, and had moved into the City during the 1980s, when New York was experiencing serious issues with poverty and crime. Bill was part of a scene of young punks and squatters who had moved into the hundreds of empty, condemned buildings on the Lower East Side that had been left to rot by the City government and who then renovated them themselves, making use of the empty space and establishing community gardens in order to provide outdoor spaces for people to come together. Whilst the community gardens have remained- though it is a constant battle to get them from being redeveloped- the squats have all but disappeared, with only a few legal squats remaining that have been sanctioned by the City. Bill now operates the Museum for Reclaimed Urban Space (or squatting museum) on the ground floor of what used to be known as C-squat, one of the punk squats of the 80s and 90s that has now been legalised. The museum aims to preserve and archive the history of the counterculture movement of this time and chronicles- through newspaper clippings, communiques, photos and write ups- the history of the squatting and protest movement in New York. Within the museum there was a great deal of discussion over good names to have for protesting. A different Bill spoke about how good his name is for a radical- "you can be William, Bill, Will, Billy- the list is endless, and it doesn't raise suspicion. All different names on different forms of ID- the government can't keep track". Bill tells me that Jim has for long gone by his pseudonym, with his real name only catching up to him after he broke his neck and had to access Medicare, at which point authorities connected the dots. Perhaps this says something about the sheer size of the US- it has always been easier there to live off grid.

Returning to the visibility of American activism: the museum itself sits on a busy street and is open for anyone walking by to enter- they run a tour of the radical history of the Lower East Side and



ensure the gates to the local community gardens are opened every morning, helping in the composting, conservation and community projects that the gardens house. They are a loose collective of people striving to live a community focused, politically active life and to do this openly. Through archiving and preserving the history of anarchist subcultures and curating free exhibitions of radical's fights to reclaim space or protect it from being bought out and developed, they are aiming to make this kind of radicalism viable once more, to "bring it all back home".

In New York more generally, walking around the Bowery and Chinatown, you can see offices on the road: "having problems with your boss? Walk-in legal advice here", "are you being exploited by your landlord or housing association? Come talk to us today pro-bono". It is difficult to discern the extent to which these places are a product of America's litigious society rather than a program for workers' and renters' rights- but regardless they do in some capacity remind people of those rights, and of the fact that they are legally enforceable. Once again, this is something in the UK that you would need to know where to look for, something often mediated by ombudsmen with limited real power or trade unions, but only if you are in the right industry with effective union representation. There is much to be said for the accessibility of this information in the US, but something paradoxical when viewed through the lens of the lack of rights workers in the US have conferred upon them.



*A billboard in Brooklyn advertising Project 86, a workers' rights campaign run by a vodka distillery- a strange confluence of consumerist culture and political protest*

In New York I also visited one of the few centralised organisations of the trip: QUNO- the Quaker Office at the United Nations- who perhaps represent one of the most embedded anti-war movements in the world. They work out of the UN's central building and have a uniquely holistic process for peacebuilding. QUNO works to build better peacekeeping architecture within the UN itself, and often hosts sit-down meetings of representatives from different groups in conflict with one another in which they do not talk politics but instead are encouraged to get to know one another. They support conscientious objectors around the world, write policy briefs for the UN, and work to empower and support community leaders on the ground in places suffering conflict. As a

Quaker organisation, they are not specific to America but instead embody a far more international approach, with offices in Geneva and work that mainly takes place outside of the US. They are less activist and more policy driven, an institution that demonstrated an interesting contrast with the grassroots groups I met with, illuminating an approach that is adjacent, rather than opposed, to big power politics.

### **Boston: direct-action & political violence**

The person I met in Boston was the only interviewee whom I had met before going on this trip- she is an old school friend, who moved to Boston when we were fifteen and who has been living there ever since. She lives in a suburb outside of the city, in a communal co-operative house inhabited by more people than the house can reasonably fit but who all support, feed and care for each other. The house is an exercise in serious political engagement; they all organise for a range of causes- anti-racism, the defunding of the police, community engagement- and help to run an anarchist bookstore in Downtown Boston. They are a sober house- no alcohol or cigarettes allowed onsite. The white people living in the house pay reparations into a fund that they then donate to Black charities. They cook and eat communally every night, grow their own food and host events. They are people who live their politics outwardly and in earnest.

My interviewee is a radical activist involved in direct-action- and was in fact the first person to introduce me to politics back when we were twelve. Recently, they were involved in the Stop Line 3 campaign in Minnesota which was campaigning to stop a Canadian oil giant from running a pipeline through Northern Minnesota, violating treaties with the Ojibwe people and in the process creating a crude-oil pipeline [whose carbon footprint would exceed the entire state of Minnesota](#). My interviewee had been involved in the blockade of the construction site and had chained themselves to some machinery; she was facing charges for the action for over a year until they were dropped this September. A refusal to plead out and her demand for a trial had apparently persuaded prosecutors it would not be worth pursuing, unsurprising given the huge reliance on plea bargains in the US to keep the justice system running.



*The Stop Lines 3 Protests in Minnesota where protestors chained themselves to bulldozers and other machinery.*

Meeting with my interviewee in Boston also brought to the surface two very crucial differences between UK and US activism culture: firstly, that it is concrete- rather than symbolic- action that is emphasised in the US, secondly, that this gives way to far more violence from police and protesters alike.

The UK's current climate of left-wing activism is broadly two-fold: the symbolic actions of groups such as Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion, and then more tangible, but much smaller, campaigns implemented by grassroots groups working within communities to affect local change and build policy, such as Northern Police Monitoring Project. Whilst these localised projects tend to have specific and less transferable aims catered to their area, focus and organisation, the symbolic actions of the first group are focused on broad-sweep media coverage and generating public discourse, such as with the recent Van Gough soup protest, the 2019 XR occupation of Marble Arch or the climate protest which marches through London every year. I don't say that these actions are symbolic in an effort to disparage them- symbolic protests are important in terms of allowing greater coverage of a movement and greater access through demonstrations that don't require that the demonstrator risk legal ramifications. However, these demonstrations are often visible only for a short while and tend to ebb away once the original momentum has subsided, perhaps having raised consciousness of the issue-at-hand but with little real result. This ebb and flow means that British activist culture is not as consistently visible or ingrained within the fabric of society- the traction these symbolic protests build is often transient and rarely sustains the kind of pressure that leads to change.

Other than rare exceptions such as Palestine Action- UK activist communities do not engage in direct-action campaigns, preferring either local policy-based initiatives or large symbolic protests; in other words, there is far less fence-cutting, occupying or industrial sabotage. In the US, this is more prevalent- activists travel around the country in order to join blockades and encampments, there is far more contact with the authorities, and activists will often congregate and disrupt sites specific to their cause- as with the blockading of the Minnesota pipeline.

This leads into the second key difference: that of violence. The UK's protest scene is non-violent to an unusual degree, even within Europe- one just has to look at the French *gilets jaunes* protestors who experienced [serious violence at the hands of riot police](#). The image in the UK has been challenged in recent years with incidents of police violence towards protestors increasingly coming to light, whilst the current limitations on protest being passed into law may change this further, but broadly street protests in the UK take place with either the explicit consent or passive cooperation of the police. In the US, this is demonstrably different- clashes with the police are more frequent, tear-gas, rubber and sometimes real bullets are used by law enforcement and actions tend to involve the risk of arrest and greater property damage.

This is not to deny the existence of the many activist movements in the US with nonviolent aims and practices, but as the incident in Charlottesville in 2017 demonstrated, where a left-wing, peaceful protester was murdered by a far-right white supremacist, violence is never far from the realm of possibilities. Most of this violence is driven by the far-right- people such as Kyle Rittenhouse who fatally shot two anti-racism protesters in 2020- yet as [The Guardian reported last year, the police are three times as likely to use violence against left-wing protesters](#). The violence of the police and the far-right creates a climate, my interviewee tells me, where radical protesters are also more inclined to violence- mostly towards property, sometimes interpersonal- creating a maelstrom of conflict.

My interviewee is not a non-violent activist, and she represents a growing group of young people embracing a direct-action approach. She engages in sabotage, vandalism and street skirmishes with the far-right and has recently begun to attend classes in self-defence due to a particularly virulent chapter of the American Nazi Party that has sprung up in Boston and arrives at left-wing protests

heavily armed. “It’s a newer country, more malleable, more open to change” she tells me, “And this means it’s far more contested. There is more potential to create something new in America than in the UK- but it raises the stakes; you have people on the extremes of the political spectrum trying to make headway in totally opposite directions.”

## **Final Thoughts**

There are several things to be learnt from the way the US treats activism; firstly, that visibility is key- the more obvious the routes are for people to protest, find the support they need from grassroots organisations, or to get involved in community projects, the more successful and accessible these things will be. Routes to protest should be manifest in society- and perhaps the malleability of US society characterised by my Boston interviewee helps to unground more hegemonic acceptance of the political system. Showcasing alternatives is important.

Secondly, the impression I left with was that activism truly works best on a localised level, one that springs from well-maintained and cared for communities of people with similar aims who can then network with other organisations doing similar work across the country in order to build solidarity and learn from one another. The communities of activists I spoke to in the US were engaging in concrete battles on the local level, fighting for tangible, achievable aims. With Jim and his legal fights to protect the rights of homeless people, the Museum for Reclaimed Urban Space working to protect community spaces, the Women’s Building in San Francisco supporting women through issues of immigration and gendered violence, and my interviewee in Boston trying to stop the building of the Minnesota pipeline- these are all actions that engage in the particular, something which UK activists could learn a lot from. However, it has to be said that the US is also such a different, and in many ways hostile, template upon which these movements build; it is a vast country with far greater levels of political, police and interpersonal violence that is de-stabilising and often leaves people fearful rather than defiant, shutting activism down rather than opening it up.

I have taken so much from this trip and am still in contact with Jim and several of the other people I met as continuing journalistic contacts and friends in the left-wing activist community. My hope is that we can learn from each other, and in building mutual-aid communities, construct better informed, empowered, and community-focused frameworks for effecting political change.

## Chantelle Richter

### **Introduction**

This Summer, I travelled to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to take part in a variety of social projects aimed at improving local favelas (Brazil’s urban slums). This opportunity was incredibly insightful and even though the time seemed to fly by so quickly I was able to learn so much about Brazil: its culture, its language, its history, and most of all about its kind people. Not only was this trip a great educational experience but it has also helped me to grow personally; Travelling by myself has improved my confidence and allowed me to meet so many incredible people (Brazilian locals as well as international volunteers) from all across the world.

The Sunday before my program started I woke up at 4am to take an early coach from Bristol to London. I knew I had a long journey ahead of me because after the three hour coach journey I had to take a connecting flight to Paris before my final 11 hour flight from Paris to Brazil. However, I remained focused on my excitement to visit the country I had always longed to visit after seeing its bright colours, beautiful beaches and tropical music broadcasted all over TV during the 2014 World Cup. I rediscovered my love for Brazil when I started reading a lot more during lockdown. I was particularly interested in learning more about Brazil’s cultural history as the country with the highest

Black population outside of Africa. Through different books and podcasts I started learning more about Afro-Latino culture and some basic Portuguese phrases, but this was not enough. I wanted to visit this country and learn more about its people first-hand!

### Social projects



When I arrived in Rio that evening I was met by Viviana, the local program coordinator. On our journey from the airport to the volunteer accommodation, Viviana told me a little bit about her life growing up in Brazil and how neither of her parents had gone to University before her. Viviana explained that despite loving her home country and understanding that its beauty attracts visitors from all across the world, she knows the harsh realities that less advantaged Brazilians face. Having access to good education can be particularly difficult for those who do not come from wealthy families and she explained that social mobility opportunities can be much harder to come by in Brazil than in certain European countries like the UK. Viviana said that this is what

motivated her to find a job which would help give back to her local community and provide good opportunities to children and adults. Viviana informed me that one of the main projects I would be involved in would be teaching English and sports to children in a school located in one of the safest favelas in Rio: Rocinha.

Most of the other volunteers had already arrived and Viviana introduced me to the 4 other participants that I would be sharing a room with. Nathan and Michael (two friends from Australia, Emma (from America) and Alexia (from Greece) welcomed me and showed me to my bunk bed. We spent the rest of the Sunday night eating a traditional Brazilian meal: Feijoada made by Vivian. After this we met the volunteers from the other rooms and played cards together. The next morning we all woke up early to have safety training and briefing with the staff in order to better prepare us for our different social projects and time in Brazil more generally.

The first few weeks, I was assigned to the teaching social project in Rocinha. From 9am-2:30pm every weekday I would travel for one hour with 7 other volunteers from our hostel in Glória (a beautiful neighbourhood not too far from Copacabana beach) to the favelas of Rocinha. Our school was at the top of a steep hill and before you could even see the school clearly you could always hear the sound of laughter and excitement of the children ready to greet you for another day of learning. One thing which really stuck with me from my time in Rio was how grateful the children were to be able to go to school. Even with the children who would often misbehave, you could tell that they were still eager to learn in some way.

The class I was assigned to consisted of children aged between 11 and 13. I had such an amazing time volunteering with them and teaching them English. One of my highlights was playing the "egg challenge" against the other 7 classes. For this challenge the children had to run into the middle of the playground and grab the equipment and materials they thought would best help us to protect our egg (which would later be dropped from a considerable height). Our class managed to collect a good range of materials before the other teams could take them all. The classroom was in happy chaos for the next two hours trying to assemble a strong protection for our egg. The class collectively agreed to use some balloons to cushion the bottom of the egg and some newspaper and ribbon to

create a miniature parachute. There was a lot of disagreement as to what to name the egg (this was not a requirement for the challenge although my class took it upon themselves to decide that this was in fact the most important part of the challenge). After much deliberation we agreed on “Ovo de Hulk” (The egg of Hulk).

Unfortunately, the ribbon had not been well attached to the balloons and our egg ended up being severely damaged resulting in us placing 6th (second to last) but most of the kids laughed instead of cried and we had great fun during the two hours of assembling.

In order to prepare for Brazil’s February carnival, I spent a lot of time with the children preparing dances to English and Brazilian songs that they could perform in the parades. We also had a mini-carnival fashion show where the children designed carnival costumes and then we made them out of tissue paper, cardboard and other art materials. This was a great cultural exchange for the other volunteers and I as Viviana explained the cultural and historical importance of Brazil’s world famous carnival. She explained the European origins of the carnival and how this was later influenced by the African slave trade. During the ‘early carnival’ week at the school we listened to lots of different Samba artists and a professional dance instructor came into the school to give the students a samba footwork class.

The most rewarding part about volunteering in the school was seeing how much the student’s English improved as the weeks went by. I have previously taught English in China and Morocco but I found that my Brazilian class’ English level was a lot more limited than any other classes I had taught before. Despite this, the enthusiasm of my class was incredible and through many lessons and games I saw significant progress in their language abilities. It was heart-warming to see their confidence grow and my favourite memory is definitely the end of school performance where the children introduced themselves in English and different students presented the various projects our class had been working on to an audience of teachers and their families. On my last day volunteering at the school, each student in my class presented me with a card they had written in English and certain students made little gifts such as origami hearts and different designs they had created using ironing beads.



In the final two weeks of my program I was assigned to the community gardening project in Rocinha. The aim of the project is to introduce less advantaged Brazilians in the favela to gardening and growing fruit and vegetables. Through this project, local residents in Rocinha have been able to find new ways of making money and spending their time which has helped to reduce the number of young people getting involved in illegal and dangerous ways to make money. On Wednesdays and

Fridays I would go to local schools and youth groups with some of the other volunteers to raise awareness about this project and encourage young people to see gardening as a fun hobby and business opportunity rather than something which is only for old people. On the other weekdays, the volunteers would actively participate in gardening and cultivating the fruits and vegetables. This was a new experience to me as I had never really done any gardening before besides growing a small amount of cress for class in primary school. We planted lots of different vegetables and fruits including potatoes and limes.

One of the highlights of the gardening project was being able to learn about and try some fruits and vegetables which I had never heard of before visiting Brazil. I tried a Jaboticaba which is a small, round fruit similar in taste and appearance to a grape. I thought they were wonderful and I loved how sweet they tasted!

On Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, I volunteered at fun and educational sessions for seniors. These took place in a community centre close to the volunteer accommodation in Glória. These sessions offered a range of activities from baking to painting. One of the focuses of the sessions was to help to build relationships between the elderly participants and the younger volunteers. I really admired the effort that the community centre leaders put into every session as when I spoke to many of the participants they told me that these classes were the main things that they looked forward to each week and some said that they felt less lonely having this centre to go to and meet other senior citizens. Many of the participants that I met were incredibly friendly and this project was a great opportunity to practise the Portuguese that I had learnt as the other projects were mainly conducted in English. There were definitely times where it was hard to communicate due to the language barrier, however, these issues were often overcome with gestures and sometimes the community centre leaders would help us to translate. Communicating with natives in a language I had only recently started to learn was daunting at first but the warmth of all the participants and other volunteers really helped my confidence to grow and my communication to improve.

My favourite part about this third and final project was listening to all the stories that the participants would tell me. There was a particularly lovely woman named Manuela who would always show us pictures of her grand-children and a man named Bernardo who told me many interesting stories about his life in Brazil. He told me that family was such a big part of his childhood and that they would always eat big dinners together, watch sports together and go to the beach together. He said that he had travelled to the USA a few times when he was younger and one thing which struck him was how family time seemed a lot less valued over there. He also told me the beautiful story of how he met his wife at a bar near Ipanema beach and they danced together all night long!

### **Additional activities**

#### **Sightseeing in Rio**

On the weekends, the volunteers and I had lots of free time to explore Rio. As our accommodation in Glória was not too far from Copacabana beach, this ended up being one of our favourite places to spend time together. On the first weekend of the trip, Viviana organised a BBQ and a trip to Chacrinha park next to Copacabana beach. We were lucky enough to spot some monkeys during our walk and we saw a few toucan birds too. Back on Copacabana beach we spent our time alternating between playing footvolley and sunbathing on the beach.

One of the most beautiful views of Rio can be seen from the top of sugarloaf mountain. In order to reach the top, we took a cable car which in itself was a fun experience, although our group spent most of the time trying to distract Alexia as she stopped enjoying the ride after she realised how high we were. That same day we decided to visit the Christ the Redeemer statue which was a sight

straight from a postcard and Viviana told us a little bit about Brazil's Christian history and the motivations for the statue.

Café Cultural Sacrilégio quickly became one of my favourite places in Rio. It served the most delicious quesadillas and always had live music which created a warm and lively environment. On one of the nights, I convinced some of the other volunteers to come with me and we all had a go at some Samba - it felt just like a scene from a movie!

### Visiting Iguazu Falls

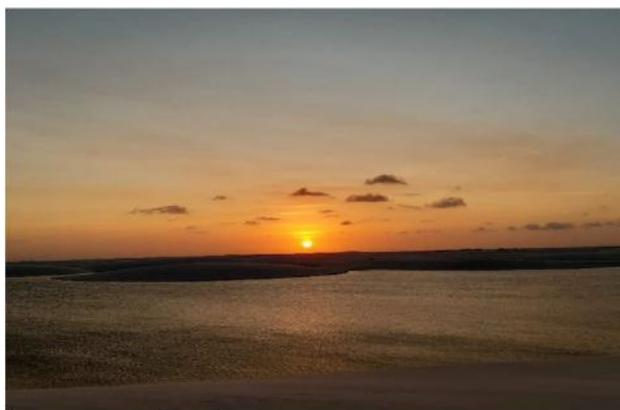


To visit Iguazu falls we had to take a short flight from Rio to the border between Brazil and Argentina. On our first day there we visited the Devil's throat (el Gargante del Diablo) on the Brazilian side of the falls. From here you can walk down a walkway to get a closer and even more breathtaking view. The spray from the waterfall was actually a great way to cool down after walking the trail in the heat.

On the second day, we headed to the Argentinian side of the waterfall. This side had a lot more walking as it offered more trails. However, its views were equally impressive and offered a nice view of the waterfalls from the top. On this day we took a boat trip which went right underneath the waterfalls and allowed us to feel the power of the falls.

### Visiting Lencois Maranhenses

After our volunteer program in Rio had finished, Alexia and I decided to travel to some other parts of Brazil before flying back to Europe. My highlight was definitely going to Lencois Maranhenses. To reach this place we first had to take a flight from Rio to São Luis where our tour company picked us up from a hotel and drove us to Barreirinhas where we then took a ferry. Lencois Maranhenses National Park is best described as a white sand desert filled with beautifully blue freshwater lagoons. Alexia and I spent the afternoon admiring the landscape and cooling off in the lagoons. At sunset the whole tour group was gathered on top of a big dune watching the sun go down over the desert. Our tour company was kind enough to pack us all drinks and we were able to enjoy a traditional Brazilian drink (Caldo de cana or 'sugar juice') whilst watching the sky turn orange.



On the second day at the national park, we took part in a speedboat tour of the Preguicas River which was home to a range of beautiful trees and scenery. After a calm ride we arrived at a small village called Vassouras where I got to feed some small monkeys. The next stop on our tour was Mandacaru village where Alexia and I climbed up a lighthouse to have a beautiful view of the river and the sea.

## Visiting Chapada Diamantina

Finally, Alexia and I visited Chapada Diamantina national park which has lots of different places to explore such as caves, rivers, waterfalls and mountains.

On day one of our trip here we started at the Mucugezinho river and Devil's pool waterfall where you can swim right up to the edge of the waterfall and look down. A lot of people in our tour group watched instead of participating (including Alexia with her fear of heights) but I decided to try it after being convinced by our tour group leader and it was truly an amazing and adrenaline fuelled experience. Another waterfall which we visited was the Mosquito waterfall next to the poza azul (blue pool). The natural sites in Brazil are so magical.

## Concluding Remarks

My time in Brazil has been very educational and rewarding. I have learnt so much about Brazil's history and culture first-hand and I had an invaluable opportunity to practise and improve my portuguese. Without the help of Corpus Christi's Expanding Horizons scholarship this would not have been possible so I would like to express my gratitude to all the alumni that donate towards this scholarship.

## Anna Samuel

Having just completed my degree in Experimental Psychology at Corpus Christi College and wishing to pursue a career in clinical psychology, I was keen to gain clinical experience and become familiar with the mental health system in a different country. And so, this September, I spent 4 weeks in Ghana, volunteering in a psychiatric ward and the local school.

### **Arriving**

Stepping off the plane, bewildered and overwhelmed, I met the other volunteers who I would be living with for the next 4 weeks. The driver took us to a motel in Accra where we spent our first night. We woke up early in the morning to begin the tedious 6-hour journey to Busua. We travelled in a small minibus, with our luggage precariously tied to the roof of the bus with only a few ropes. But these two days of travelling soon became worthwhile when we finally arrived in Busua – a beautiful fishing village in the Western region of Ghana, often referred to as Ghana's 'surfing capital'. This is where I spent the majority of my stay.



I stayed in a volunteer house and became quickly familiar with the 4 other volunteers I shared a room with. Facilities were basic, with no hot water, frequent power cuts, and a giant hole in the ground which acted as a rubbish bin and was occasionally burned.

Our meals were cooked by a young local woman who introduced us to many Ghanaian delicacies, including jollof rice, red-red, fufu, yams, and plantain. Meals were very carbohydrate-heavy and often lacking any vegetables, but nevertheless, delicious. At mealtimes, we faced the additional challenge of fighting off the goats, chickens, dogs, and cats who roamed the village freely.

### **Volunteering at the hospital**

I spent my first two weeks volunteering at Dixcove government hospital. The 20-minute drive from our accommodation was made challenging by the numerous potholes which littered the roads, requiring the drivers to zigzag between them. More than 5 people were piled into each taxi, with an unlucky person having to sit in the boot of the car.

Arriving at the hospital on the first day, I was shocked by the general lack of hygiene and very basic equipment. I helped in various wards, including psychiatric, male, maternity, and paediatric ward. We were quickly entrusted and given responsibilities far beyond our qualifications, especially considering I have no background in medicine. I was given the task of taking and recording patients' vital observations during the ward rounds. I saw patients with a variety of medical issues, including malaria, hernias, and sepsis.



I particularly enjoyed helping in the maternity ward as this involved caring for new-born babies while their mothers rested. I was even given the opportunity to observe a caesarean section which was extraordinary to witness, and even more extraordinary that I didn't pass out. Lots of women on the maternity ward were very young and already had multiple children. The new-born babies did not yet have names as this was the sole responsibility of the father who would decide on a name based on an influential figure in their life. This was just one of the many apparent examples of gender inequality in Ghana.

A prominent issue within the hospital was patients being unable to fund their treatment. While Ghana does have a National Health Insurance Scheme, many patients were not signed up for this and so incurred treatment fees at the hospital which they were unable to afford. Nurses explained that they would sometimes have to use their own money to pay for patient's treatments. Additionally, the hospital does not provide any food to the patients. Their family members are expected to deliver their meals. For patients without any family, this meant they would have no access to food while in the hospital. Again, the nurses explained that they would try to bring food from their homes to help. This was shocking to hear about and gave me a new appreciation for the NHS which we have access to in the UK.

The psychiatric ward consisted of a small room and was run by just a psychiatrist and mental health nurse. I quickly learned of the stark difference between the mental health system in Ghana compared to in the UK. For example, in Ghana, epilepsy and migraines are treated as mental health disorders. Furthermore, in Ghana, committing suicide is illegal. Therefore, those who have attempted suicide will be sent to jail, rather than receiving the psychological help which they need.

Once a week, we went on home visits to check on patient's progress and ensure they were taking their medication. Rather than wearing scrubs which we normally wore to the hospital, we were told to wear normal clothes so as not to be too conspicuous and raise suspicions amongst the community. Home visits were sometimes unsuccessful as they were not booked by appointment so

simply involved wandering around the village and knocking on people's doors. The majority of patients were out at work or had left the village. We did see some patients with epilepsy, schizophrenia, dementia, and migraines. Everyone welcomed us into their homes with no hesitation and were extremely grateful that we had come to visit. A recurring issue was that many patients could not afford the drugs they had been prescribed, therefore worsening their condition. In hope of an alternative solution, many patients and their families had turned to religion in seek of a 'cure'. In general, Ghanaians were extremely religious, with references to God and Jesus everywhere in the village.

When we weren't seeing patients, I had many interesting conversations with the psychiatrist. He held the shocking view that homosexuality should be considered a mental health disorder and that it should remain in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Despite a very heated debate, I was unable to alter his opinions on the matter.

We also frequently discussed the challenges of stigmatisation, often leading to individuals with mental health disorders being isolated from their community and family members. This can become particularly problematic when the individual is subsequently made homeless, cannot maintain a job, and receives little or no support from family. These widely held attitudes meant that the psychiatric ward was relatively quiet, with people being reluctant to seek help for these problems.

In an attempt to challenge the stigmatisation of mental health, I was able to assist the mental health nurse in running some outreach sessions within the community. This involved discussions about what mental health is, some common mental health disorders and their symptoms, misconceptions of mental health, as well as potential protective factors. I was pleasantly surprised by the response from the local community, with many people attending who were willing to listen and contribute to the discussion. We hoped that these individuals would share their knowledge within the community, in hope of gradually changing people's perceptions of mental health. Although there are evidently huge gaps within Ghana's mental health system, it was encouraging to observe individuals taking steps in the right direction.



## Volunteering at the school

For the following two weeks, I volunteered at the local school, teaching children ranging from the ages of 2 to 14. Classrooms were built from basic brick blocks and had no doors. There was also no toilet at the school so both children and teachers used a hole built into the ground.



Arriving at school each day, we would be welcomed by swarms of excited children who would run over to hug us, exclaiming 'Madame Anna!'. Teaching was rewarding, but extremely challenging. I taught a range of subjects including English, Maths, History and Science. We would often be left to teach a class of over 30 children alone. It was difficult to gain the children's attention who would often shout and talk over one another. It was upsetting to learn that the teachers regularly used caning as a form of discipline. An additional challenge was the

language barrier, especially amongst the younger children. The children's first language was Fante. Although their English-speaking abilities were impressive, it was evident that they had not been taught to write in English.

On our last day at school, we surprised the children with sweets, toys, and pens. As expected, this caused complete chaos and excitement. I formed close bonds with some of the children and it was sad to leave, but I thoroughly enjoyed my time at the school and felt as though we were truly making a difference.

## Daily life in Ghana



Each day, we volunteered from 9am until 1pm, when we would return to the house for lunch. Afternoons were free and were normally spent on the beach, learning to surf, and playing sports with the locals and children. In the evenings, we would head to the local bar where we drank and played cards with the locals. We had bonfires on the beach and occasionally ended up singing some questionable karaoke. We quickly learned that Ghanaians love to party with music being blared from huge speakers, and locals dancing and singing throughout the night.

## Weekend travels

The weekends provided an opportunity to explore other areas of Ghana, including the nearby villages of Butre and Takoradi. One weekend, we visited Cape Coast. Our first stop was the historical Elmina Castle. Although initially built for the trade of gold and ivory, the castle later became a key stop on the route of the Atlantic slave trade. Walking through the dungeons which would previously have held hundreds of slaves in awful conditions was an extremely shocking and emotional experience. The following day, we visited Kakum National Park and did the canopy walk. This consisted of seven bridges hanging 130 feet above the ground and provided a spectacular view of the vegetation below. After this, we ate lunch at Hans cottage – a restaurant which sits on a lake that is home to many crocodiles!



On another weekend, we visited Nzulezo stilt village. The unique village is supported by wooden stilts and sits on Tandane Lake which is home to a variety of wildlife. To reach the village, you must travel about 5km through the mangroves in a canoe. The village has a population of about 600 people. Wandering around, we were amazed by the clever construction of the houses, shops, cafes, church, and even a school. A local man in the community centre explained the interesting history of the village and the first settlers. Before returning to Busua, we also visited Ankasa rainforest where a local guide took us on an adventurous walk in search of wildlife and vegetation. We also had a refreshing swim in the fresh stream.

On the last weekend before leaving Ghana, we decided to explore the capital, Accra. This was a different experience from the small village of Busua we had become used to. Accra was much more built up and bustling with people and traffic. We saw Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum – an impressive memorial to the first president of Ghana. We also went to see the independence arch which was built in recognition of Ghana gaining its independence in 1957.

## Conclusion

Overall, I gained so much from this experience, learning about a completely different healthcare system, and immersing myself within an unfamiliar culture, while also making a difference to the local community. I truly fell in love with Ghana and everything it has to offer – from the beautiful landscapes and wildlife to its rich culture and fascinating history. Although the greatest thing was



undoubtedly the Ghanaian people. They were the kindest and most welcoming people I have ever come across and maintained an admirable sense of positivity, despite the challenges they face from extreme poverty. I formed such strong connections with both the local people and my fellow volunteers. It was an unforgettable experience and I have no doubt that I will return to Ghana in the future. I am incredibly grateful to the Expanding Horizons scholarship for giving me this incredible opportunity.

## Xijia Su

### **Introduction**

My earliest experience with East Africa started with a civil society project to support African communities in Guangzhou, China. Interacting with them and supporting their navigation in the COVID-19 restrictions sparked my interest in the region's language and culture. Later during an impact investment learning experience, I conducted industry research on Kenyan telecom providers.

All these led me to decide to explore Kenya physically between June 2022 and August 2022. I was able to intern at the Companionship of Works Organization - a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) dedicated to skill education and youth empowerment.

The Companionship of Works Organization (CoWA) is a Kenyan NGO with over 20 years of experience in youth employability through job placements, entrepreneurship, and life skills training. CoWA has a nationwide network of over 1,300 companies and organisations as potential employers and mentors. CoWA has been active in hosting additional job coaching sessions to bridge the gap between employers and job seekers.

### **Background**

I am mainly working on two areas: business development & partnerships. Based on the organisation's needs, I was tasked with fundraising among international organisations and supporting operations.

For business development at CoWA, I get to tackle the unemployment problem in Kenya first-hand. Kenya is a highly youthful and energetic land in East Africa. The nation is in economic transition with millions of migrations into cities to pursue decent living. As urban business development stagnates, individuals have limited access to secure employment, a steady income, and a community. With 39% of Kenyan youths still searching for jobs, the root cause of unemployment is the disconnection between education and the workplace. The lack of innovative businesses further limits the youths' abilities to realise their human potential.

Specifically, tackling the youth segment of the population requires special attention. Youth aged between 15 to 24 form the "bulge" in Kenya's population. However, among the 10 million youth, the

39% unemployment rate poses the most significant policy challenge. With 800,000 more youths entering the job market annually, staggering unemployment risks nation-building and regional stability. A further breakdown shows more than 80% of all the available jobs are in the informal sector which absorbs 41% of the youth. The associated income insecurity makes individuals vulnerable to the spread of extremism and terrorism. Kenya needs to provide the appropriate skills education and jobs to its growing youth population. This could allow it to experience a boost in economic growth capturing the “demographic dividend” of a well-equipped and economically independent youth.

### **Early exposure to national NGO networks**

I was lucky enough to catch a networking event on my second day of arrival. An Irish charity Trócaire organised a resource mobilisation workshop for its Kenyan members in different parts of Kenya.



During the introduction and pitch segments of the event, I acquired a rapid overview of the emerging priorities that our fellow NGOs are addressing, including Somali refugee support, gender empowerment in disconnected regions, and infrastructure support.

Upon closer interaction, I felt the inherent shortage of professional support among fellow NGOs. In terms of external communications and stakeholder engagement, much more could be available to amplify their impact and call for greater awareness.

Outside of the program schedule, I was able to listen to first-hand opinions about Kenyan politics. There was a mixed perception leading to the August election, ranging from doubt in the efficacy of the ongoing political campaigns to cheerful optimism about change. All of these would only materialise in the coming weeks.

### **Designing an impact measurement system**

As I embarked on day-to-day responsibilities at CoWA, I started to support them in the build-up of an impact measurement system. What I learnt during the event quickly help me discover the room for the experiment. Capitalising on my past experiences with impact measurement, I was able to put forward an easy-to-manage online reporting framework. I envisioned it to be simple and easy to maintain with an accessible user interface.

During my day-to-day experience in CoWA, I had the opportunity to closely interact with fellow CoWA colleagues. With more discussion, I could unpack the many challenges in implementation. For example, many components of the campaign are delegated to sub-organisations and partners. This means that tracing the outcomes of each component would be particularly challenging. Much of the operation is in the more remote regions of the country with even less road access. This makes third-party verification difficult, and the ground partners would not always have the incentive to disclose every shortcoming in their operation. As a result, further interventions may lack the required input to improve the existing practices.

Still, interventions from third-party organisations would only become more effective when there is evidence-based empirical support. For CoWA’s beneficiary, the impact could not only last until the

job placement is achieved or until the end of the project cycle. Continuous monitoring must also extend to 3 months, 6 months, or even years after their participation. Only when the evidence suggests that the beneficiaries experience long-lasting changes in their employment status and salary, could we say that there has been positive capacity development.

### **Learning the pain points of organisation operation**

Working on fundraising has given me new observations about social impact projects. Because of the limited fund available for my organisation's specific area, we need to source opportunities that may be marginally relevant to the organisation's missions. This means that the stated purposes of the fund may largely shape the future direction of the organisation's operation.

On one hand, the visions of overseas donors could direct attention to areas that are otherwise likely to be neglected. This applies to grants that help to offset the cost of pioneer projects, the return and impact of which tend not to be certain. On the other hand, some of the local organisations that interact more with local people and understand local problems thoroughly may not have much say in the need assessment. This could mean that local organisations have to shift focus every financial year, such that they could obtain funding sources.



Theoretically, international donors and national implementation partners would deliver maximum effect when there is synergy in need assessment and execution. However, the issues on the ground are not communicated well enough in most cases. Social media campaigns tend to focus more on prominent cases. For most of the development and welfare projects, the impact could not be communicated to a wide audience.

To support further welfare improvement, economic and political development at the national level remain the main pillars. Aid and foreign-initiated impact projects tend to support pioneering projects and do not commit to repeated funding that drains out the limited fund available, which could have been diversified to support new ventures.

Private sector development is also critical. Market efficiency is yet to be fully realised in the aid and development scene. With more international capital channelling into local entrepreneurial ideas, there is significant hope that more development is forthcoming when more employment brings more income. For example, e-commerce and ride-hailing become popular in just a few years in Kenya. Many workers opt for this flexible way of work as delivery staff or part-time online sellers.

As part of my responsibilities in CoWA to identify promising job prospects, I took note of the operation of e-commerce and ride-hailing in Nairobi. There are two major concerns. Firstly, the legislative and economic protection for workers in these new sectors is still absent. As individuals are highly separated from one another, there is hardly any negotiating power between the workers and the company. Although these problems with gigging economy are hardly new, the context of



emerging markets further amplifies the issue. For example, the procedure of dispute resolution is very different from the local habits: navigating different functions within a single could be a challenge for first-timers. Secondly, the influx of foreign capital disrupts the status quo and raises the tension between stakeholders. For example, there are some regions in the city where online ride-hailing drivers are deterred not to pick up passengers. Unfortunately, there is hardly any systematic resolution to this problem. In some places, there is a tacit agreement of limiting e-hailing to a certain stop and the taxi drivers will finish the last leg of the journey. In some other places, there are many confrontations with violent armed conflicts

### **Acquiring local insights in an informal setting**

Over lunches at work, I have another way of understanding regional life in an informal setting. Sharing local dishes with my colleagues give me new knowledge of Swahili and different perspectives on serious topics like democratic elections. A vibrant discussion between two of my colleagues sparks new thoughts in my mind over the meaning of voting, about the practical outcome of voting. One of my colleagues holds that he would not vote because he does not want to actively choose between the two leaders that he deems both inspirational. Meanwhile, another of my colleagues argues that everyone should vote in the active pursuit of the entire country's political future – absenteeism would become a collective action problem if too many voters do not vote. Consequently, the government would not lose its legitimacy. My colleagues' different opinions do prompt me to consider the limitations of our current representative democracy and how we could improve upon them.

### **Understanding the local microfinance challenge**



Opportunities to build bridges also extend beyond the workplace. These are windows to feel the imminent local problems. My exciting encounters started with my flight to Nairobi. I was seated next to a Kenyan information technology specialist who also has a concurrent passion for starting his music school. Upon further conversations, he shared with me his concerns about the starting capital and the initial acquisition of equipment. In Nairobi, speaking to local drivers and fellow bus (matatu) passengers also gave me fresh perspectives on local ways of living. Specifically, I felt particular about the microfinance challenges among them.

Because of the absence of a social finance mechanism, individuals must resort to private loans with a high interest rates. For an average “tuk tuk” (rickshaw) driver, 35% of earnings would go to fuel, 40% would be used to pay back the loans, with 25% left for their families. Furthermore, some seem to be permanently stuck in the cycle of no stable income leading to poor credit history, eventually, making them unable to access credits for economic activities.

In the organisation I work for, CoWA, there is an ongoing initiative of a “financial management system”. Young women are grouped to establish a mini-pooled fund such that personal connections could lower the default risk. However, other secondary research gave me new questions on the fund administration and moral hazard in borrowing.

As far as what I observe in the historical fund management record, it shows that even persuading existing participants to save more is difficult, because people may not have much income left after

deducting daily expenses. More importantly, many participants are also not finding this mutual fund option attractive, as compared to the more flexible local electronic payment network (M-Pesa), where access to their funds is not subject to the mutual group agreement.

### **Feeling political challenges first-hand**

It was also a thrilling experience to live in Nairobi during the 2022 Kenya General Election. As one of the most dynamic East African democracies, the political contest attracts much international attention. With the history of election-related violence, there was a widespread fear of similar tragedies again. I recalled the discussion of African politics by Martin Meredith and Jeffery Herbst, which I referenced back in a tutorial essay. It does occur to me that there has been a heavy emphasis on racial politics. However, the leading candidate in the 2022 Kenyan General Election sets out a social economic class-based voting campaign. In terms of the actual outcome reported, it does appear the broadly based candidate with social economic agenda leads in the election.

After the official election bureau declared the winner, there was a public outcry about the runner-up's strongholds. Because of the memories of contentions over election integrity, the election bureau takes an extremely complicated foolproof method of paper verification and electronic data transmission. Since the voter breakdown is available for each constituency, I was able to analyse the distribution of demographics and geographies. Hence, it does not surprise me when Kisumu, one of the runner-up's strongholds, has some of the most intensive confrontations surrounding the election.

Also, even among the local people, there is widespread doubt about the incumbent administration. Public officials have been associated with allegations of fraud and bribery. It appears to me that the local administration is at the risk of a vicious cycle: corruption hinders economic activities; the decline in tax revenue further limits compensation for public officials; the administration is even more prone to turning a blind eye to corruption because of the low compensation.

Upon visiting the local museums and understanding the local narratives about Kenyan independence, my pre-mature thought is that the Kenyan transition to independence in the 1960s was not an entirely perfect process.

Firstly, racial tensions abound, and despite that, there is no apparent difference in the local language. Elected representatives tend to (or at least are perceived to) favour their tribes after victory. This led to increasingly adversarial politics, akin to a zero-sum game.

Secondly, the public adopts much hesitation towards political participation except for the election months every five years. Electoral politics remains exclusive to the selected few with sufficient wealth. Campaign advertisements and local versions of material incentives are all costs during the preparation, further prompting future rent-seeking to recover the costs after the victory. On my first day of arrival in Nairobi, I have already been greeted by the extra-large banners and posters along the highway. They were so widespread that I could spot almost ten of them in one minute time.

Thirdly, like many other policies around the world, electoral politics is highly personalised with images of candidates dominating any poster with only a minor mention of the party name.

All these traits make it political candidates hard to compromise, resulting in often political deadlock after every election. Other stakeholders, like foreign missions and grassroots leaders, attempt to build trust in the election. But the candidates are not in the position to straightforwardly accept the result, because they and their loyalties have too much personal stake in the leadership post.

Regarding the local perception of politics, hope for change is not very common, especially among the younger generation. This could partially explain the lowering voter turnout rate among the youth.

### **Connecting different sectors for diverse perspectives**

Through my internship experience, I was also able to connect to fellow individuals also working in the charity and NGO sectors. Through discussing with my peers working on United Nation impact evaluation projects and other social enterprises, I could forge new opportunities for knowledge sharing. For example, understanding the metrics of evaluation could support my organisation to draft a more precise proposal.

My honest impression of the NGO sector is that funding mechanisms shape the operation of small-scale organisations. Because of the shortage of international donors, their main fundraising approaches are through responding to open calls for proposals. This means that many small organisations struggle to balance their organisational objective and real-time fundraising needs.

Hence, funders would benefit with much more social impact if there is a prior need assessment for their funding. This is especially true when some of the funder's priorities may not immediately link to the short-term objectives of the recipients. For example, although climate risks have cost the world with food shortages and more frequent and more extreme weather events, the short-term priority remains unemployment and immediate worries about corruption.

Meanwhile, I exchanged my perspectives with friends working at a larger institution like the United Nations. It does occur to me that there is an institution-wide preference to prioritise national agencies in social impact projects.

### **Coincidentally attending the African Regional Climate Change Forum**

Earlier at the start of the year, I was involved in the youth ambassador program under Global Alliance University on Climate (GAUC), which has 15 global member universities including the University of Oxford. During the project period, I was connected to students from Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Upon the end of my internship with CoWA, I received the exciting opportunity to meet regional academics working on climate change at the forum.

During the forum, I had conversations with delegates from across the African continent. The forum highlights their research progress in biodiversity conservation and climate risk management. My understanding of these issues was staying at the surface level, with ad hoc research upon encountering any new concept. Listening to deep talks about the different climate projects brought me fresh insights into the progress in the field.



At the end of the forum, it turns out that my scope of understanding enlarges from the East African region to the greater continent, including West Africa and South Africa. After the discussion sessions, I understood that much of the field is still up for research. For topics like carbon accounting, there is already a high industrial demand for compliance purposes. Yet, the methodologies behind this could

still be debatable. This dynamic field greatly interests me. In my second and third-year studies of economics, I would seek to explore the economic topics around climate.

Despite the international communities hoping to support the balance between economic growth and climate mitigation & adaptation, what the ordinary people see as the regional priority is still about bringing better economies and generating higher income. The issue of climate is yet to be truly popular and influential.

### **Ending**

My two months in East Africa have been thoroughly rewarding and full of adventure. It has been an opportunity for me to learn regional history from local lenses and dig deeper into the challenges in political processes.

Many interesting ideas are coming to my mind during this trip that encourages my further readings during term time. As a whole, the experience working in Kenya gives me fresh insights about the angle I want to pursue in development economics.