



NEWSLETTER SPRING 2020

*Integrating knowledge and skills to prepare
a new generation of development practitioners*

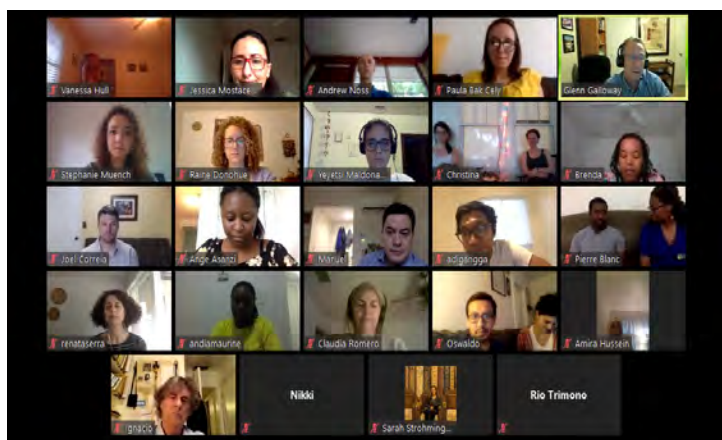


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Edited by Yeyetsi Maldonado and Andrew Noss

Director's Note: Glenn Galloway

Greetings from the University of Florida's Master of Sustainable Development Practice (MDP) Program. It is striking to reflect that each one of you who scans through this newsletter is experiencing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic that has had and is having major repercussions in our program and other MDP programs around the world. Briefly, I list here an overview of measures taken to ensure the program proceeded without interruption and without sacrificing its academic quality:

- Faculty quickly made a transition to teaching online using Zoom and other online tools. The speed with which this transition was undertaken was remarkable.
- 12 students made online presentations and defenses of their capstone field practicum projects. The online format made it possible for colleagues, family and friends to patch into the presentations from different parts of the world, leading to a larger than anticipated number of people taking part in these important events.
- We came together remotely for a graduation celebration, with the participation of graduating students, first-year students and faculty. Although we could not be together physically, it was an important moment to reflect on experiences, accomplishments and friendships made and to be grateful for the shared journey undertaken over the past two years.
- First-year students were forced to face major disruptions in their summer field practicum projects, either shifting to collaborative projects with local organizations or adjusting research methods to make possible the collection of information remotely. A few students have opted to carry out their field practicums next summer.

As Director to the MDP program, I have been extremely grateful to our students and faculty who, in



the face of the current crisis, have displayed a high degree of resilience in order to adapt. At present, faculty members have begun sharing measures taken to sustain the academic quality of the MDP and other programs and to ensure that students have opportunities to take part in co-curricular activities that enrich their educational experience.

Current events associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread protests against racial inequality and injustice have served to validate the conceptual underpinnings of the MDP program. The interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary nature of development challenges have been made apparent by the spotlight on complex linkages among factors and conditions related to health, poverty, social and cultural contexts, the economy and the environment, among others. The importance of capitalizing on the best scientific and empirical knowledge to guide societal policies and decisions is accentuated each day, as are the risks associated with deliberate decisions to ignore this knowledge or worse yet to deny its validity. The interconnected nature of our world and the need for cooperation to respond to global challenges are placed in stark relief each day. Without question, humanity must understand that we have a shared responsibility to address problems such as poverty, food security, education, environmental degradation, social inequality and justice and to strive for a

Director's Note: Glenn Galloway (cont.)

brighter future for our planet threatened by climate change and human conflict.

Throughout the current crises, highly deserved recognition is being given to the frontline healthcare providers and workers who provide us with food and other commodities and services necessary for everyday life. These people, throughout the world, who perform heroic work each day are termed "essential", as they should be. The same could be said of development practitioners who devote their lives to help address important challenges facing humanity. It is exciting to realize that over 5,000 people have earned the MDP degree and are working in diverse development contexts around the world, including the United States.

Here, I would like to congratulate our recent graduates who carried out exciting, high quality, capstone projects (see page 7). I'm sure I can speak for faculty and administrators who support the program when I express pride in their completion of the MDP program and wish them much success as they embark on the next stage of their careers. I would also like to express solidarity for a Spring 2020 MDP graduate from the University of Minnesota, Soren Stevenson, who joined other peaceful members of his community to protest the brutal killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and to express support to the Black Lives Matter movement. Sadly, while exercising his civil right, Soren became a victim of police brutality when he was shot in the eye by a rubber bullet. As a result, his eye suffered irreversible damage and he has undergone several surgeries. Anyone wishing to provide some support to Soren for his medical expenses can do so here: [Police Violence Recovery Fund for Soren.](#)

Now, I would like to convey heartfelt thanks to core and affiliate faculty who teach engaging classes and mentor/advise MDP students while they navigate the program. I would like to extend my appreciation to the Center for African Studies and the Center

for Latin American Studies for their essential support to the MDP program. Of special note, the Center for Latin American Studies spearheaded an effort to provide emergency funding to students experiencing financial hardships brought on by the COVID-19 crisis. This generous support has allowed them to move forward on their summer field practicums and is greatly appreciated.

In this edition of the newsletter, Dr. Claudia Romero graciously agreed to take part in an interview in our Faculty Spotlight. In the interview, Claudia takes us on an engaging, retrospective overview of the academic, professional and personal journey she has undertaken to shape her current interests and practice. She emphasizes the importance of finding meaning in one's life pursuits and how work in "sustainable development" creates opportunities to bring science to bear on the great challenges facing humankind. It is precisely the desire of MDP students to make a difference that has resulted in Claudia forging a strong connection with the program. I am extremely grateful to Claudia for her close association with the students she mentors in our program.

I would like to express my appreciation to Yeyetsi Maldonado who took leadership in the development of this newsletter and carried out the Faculty Spotlight interview with Dr. Romero. Many thanks for your efforts!

I would like to end by drawing attention to the fact that the MDP program is completing its 10th anniversary. The intention was to celebrate this milestone, bringing faculty, students, alumni, partners and others together to look back on what has been accomplished, what we have learned and what we can do better in the future. For now, I wish to sincerely thank everyone who has contributed to the MDP program, its students and alumni.

Please keep safe and healthy as we navigate the current crisis!

Spring 2020 Poster Session - Fieldwork Festival 2020

Thanks to Catherine Tucker, Patricia Alba and the Center for Latin American Studies, the 2020 Fieldwork Festival and Poster Session was held online from April 15-21, using UF Google Drive.

Twelve Cohort 9 students presented posters at the festival, based on their summer 2019 field practicums.

We want to applaud all our students for their excellent posters and participation in this new format of the Fieldwork Festival.

The posters are available [HERE](#)

Congratulations to the MDP poster winners:

1st Prize MDP

Manuel Morales

"Human-Wildlife Interactions in the Sangay-Podocarpus Connectivity Corridor, Andes of Southern Ecuador"

2nd Prize MDP

Rio Trimono

"Innovations for smallholder dairy producers in Nepal"

Honorable Mention

Stephanie Muench

"Evaluation in the dissemination of livestock innovations in Rwanda"

Summer Field Practicums

The COVID-19 pandemic required that MDP students introduce changes in their Field Practicum (FP) plans. Some students changed their FP sites and host organizations, while others initiated data collection in Gainesville, with the hope of fitting in an abbreviated site visit at a later date. The resilience and flexibility exhibited by the students during this challenging time was appreciated by all.

Name	Theme	Region/Country	FP Placement
Maurine Andia Akifuma	<i>Documenting the Impact of the East Gainesville After-School Science Club Program</i>	Gainesville, FL	Cultural Arts Coalition (CAC) / UF Center for African Studies
Ange Afurawa Asanzi	<i>Alachua County Truth and Reconciliation Initiative</i>	Gainesville, FL	Alachua County / UF Oral History Program
Caroline Baylor	<i>Program Monitoring and Evaluation Research</i>	Winter Haven, FL	UF Engineering School of Sustainable Infrastructure and Environment (ESSIE)
Raine Donohue	<i>Understanding the Costs and Benefits of Multi-Stakeholder Value Chains: A Case-study in the Brazilian Amazon</i>	Belém, Pará, Brazil	Union for Ethical Bio-Trade (UEBT) / Natura
Amira Hussein	<i>Strengthening Social Enterprises' Contribution to Sustainable Development through Impact Measurement and Management in East Africa</i>	Philadelphia, PA	B-Lab Global Partnership Department
Brenda Lugano	<i>Lamu Coast Conservation</i>	Lamu, Kenya	World Wildlife Fund - Kenya
Yeyetsi Maldonado	<i>Importance and Benefits of Charcoal for Rural Families in Mexico</i>	Veracruz, Mexico	Centro de Investigaciones Tropicales, Universidad Veracruzana

Summer Field Practicums (cont.)

Name	Theme	Region/Country	FP Placement
Nikki Picon	<i>Sustainable Intensification and Gendered Social Dynamics in Ethiopian Households</i>	Tigray & SNNPR, Ethiopia	Africa Research in Sustainable Intensification for the Next Generation (Africa RISING)
Madison Smith	<i>6 Feet Under: Understanding Human Dimensions of Conservation Burials in Alachua County</i>	Gainesville, FL	Prairie Creek Conservation Cemetery (PCCC)



• 2020 – 2021 Field Practicums

MDP Graduates Spring 2020

While spring is a time to celebrate the accomplishments of our graduating students, this year celebrations were carried out remotely through computer screens. Indeed some students departed early from Gainesville to enter into quarantine in their home countries, while completing coursework online. We are proud of our new graduates and wish them great success in their careers. Here, we provide information about each of our graduates, members of their supervisory committees and the topic of their capstone field practicums.



Paula Bak Cely

Specializations: Sustainable Business Consulting, Marketing and Communication; Latin American Studies; TCD

Committee: Claudia Romero (Biology), Wendy-Lin Bartels (Forest Resources and Conservation), Renata Serra (African Studies)

Capstone Field Practicum: *"Perceptions of Power among Family Farming Stakeholders in Mato-Grosso, Brazilian Amazon"*



Adi Gangga

Specializations: Gender, Intersectionality, Value Chain Analysis, TCD

Committee: Claudia Romero (Biology), Rebecca Williams (Latin American Studies)

Capstone Field Practicum: *"Peste des Petits Ruminants (PPR) Vaccines Value Chain in Nepal: A Gendered Perspective"*



Mackenzie Goode

Specializations: Natural Resource and Wildlife Management, African Studies, TCD

Committee: Cheryl Palm (Agricultural and Biological Engineering / Sustainable Food Systems), Vanessa Hull (Wildlife Ecology and Conservation), Brian Child (Geography / African Studies), Daniel Rubenstein (Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Princeton University)

Capstone Field Practicum: *"Underlying Social Conflicts Drive Human-Wildlife Conflict in Laikipia County, Kenya"*

MDP Graduates Spring 2020 (cont.)



Christina Joy

Specializations: Entrepreneurship, Social Impact and Sustainability, African Studies, TCD

Committee: Sarah McKune (Environmental and Global Health / African Studies), Kristin Joys (Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation), John Kraft (Finance, Insurance and Real Estate)

Capstone Field Practicum: *"Building a Bridge: Private Education, NGO Governance, & School Sustainability in a Rural Tanzanian Community"*



Manuel Morales Mite

Specializations: Environmental Education and Communication, Latin American Studies, TCD

Committee: Vanessa Hull (Wildlife Ecology and Conservation), Brian Child (Geography / African Studies), Bette Loiselle (TCD, Wildlife Ecology and Conservation)

Capstone Field Practicum: *"Human-Wildlife interactions in the Podocarpus - Sangay Conservation Corridor, Andes of Southern Ecuador: A Socio-Ecological and Geographic Characterization"*



Jessica Mostacedo Marasovic

Specializations: Hydrologic Policy and Management, Climate Science, Latin American Studies, TCD

Committee: Stephen Morgan (Food and Resource Economics), Ignacio Porzecanski (School of Natural Resources and Environment), Robert Knight (Florida Springs Institute), Angeline Meeks (Florida Springs Institute)

Capstone Field Practicum: *"Assessing Agricultural Production and Water Resources Conservation in the Florida Springs Region"*



Gustavo Prieto Rodriguez

Specializations: Value Chain Analysis, Facilitation Skills, Latin American Studies, TCD

Committee: Pilar Useche (Latin American Studies / Food and Resource Economics), Glenn Galloway (MDP)

Capstone Field Practicum: *"Perceptions and Impacts of the EU Cadmium Regulation on the Colombian Cacao Value Chain"*

MDP Graduates Spring 2020 (cont.)



Weston Stitt

Specializations: Value Chain Analysis and Supply Chain Management, Tropical Agriculture, Latin American Studies, TCD
Committee: Catherine Tucker (Anthropology / Latin American Studies), Claudia Romero (Biology), Shoana Humphries (Green Value)
Capstone Field Practicum: *"Value Chain Analyses for Sustainability in the Honduran Coffee Sector"*



Rio Trimono

Specializations: Climate Science, TCD
Committee: Renata Serra (African Studies), Sebastian Galindo (Agricultural Education and Communication)
Capstone Field Practicum: *"Innovations for Smallholder Dairy Producers in Nepal: A Study on the Adoption and Dissemination of a Mobile App Feeding Support Tool and Mastitis Control Technologies"*

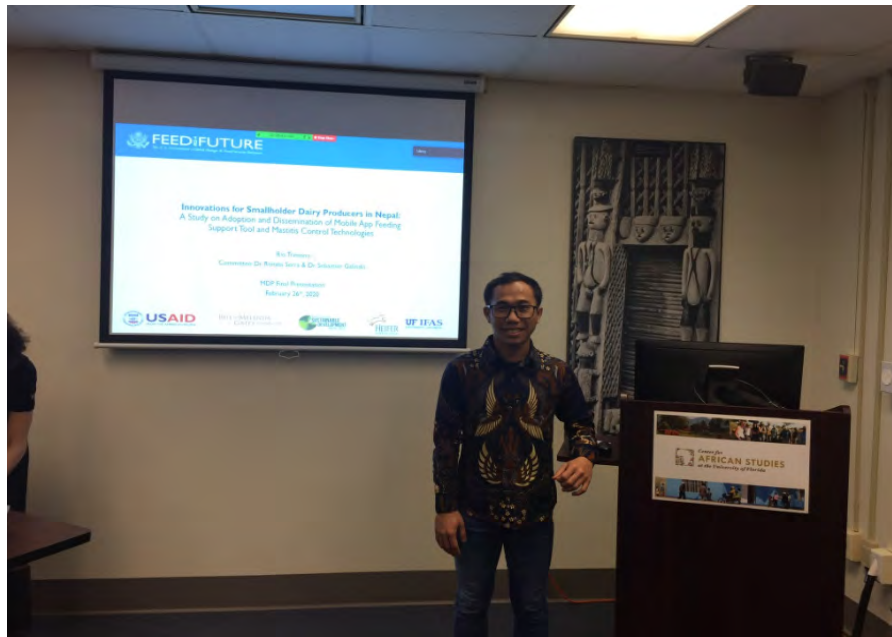
Sustainable Development Practice Certificates Spring 2020

Beatrice Pierre, MSc (Family, Youth and Community Sciences)

Natasha Joseph, MA (Latin American Studies)

Final Presentations

This year's final presentations and defenses were a challenge to our students, however, they succeeded in presenting their Field Practicum results in person and via Zoom. Once more, the MDP program is proud of the resilience exhibited by our students and their exemplary capacity to fulfill program requirements in an effective way.



Spring 2020 Awards

We would like to extend our congratulations to our students who were recipients of prestigious awards during the past semester.



Raine Donohue and Ange Afurawa Asanzi

Ruth McQuown Awards from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Center for Women’s Studies and Gender Research.

This award recognizes academic achievements and contributions to the community, in the scholarly and activist traditions of the late Dean McQuown.



Nicole Picon

Boren Awards in Africa

Amharic in Ethiopia (via Academy of Ethiopian Languages and Cultures at Addis Ababa University)

Master of Sustainable Development Practice, CLAS

The Boren Awards grant scholarships and fellowships to students who would like to study languages and cultures of regions important to U.S. national security interests. After completing a long-term study abroad program and graduating from UF, each student will work for the federal government for one year.



Paula Bak Cely

TCD Practitioner Experience Grant

“Perceptions of Power among Family Farming Stakeholders in Mato-Grosso, Brazilian Amazon”

The TCD Practitioner Experience Program assists students in gaining practical experience by providing funds to support short-term professional activities that complement academic training.

Students Outside the Classroom

Many MDP students carry out activities outside the classroom, at times as graduate and teaching assistants and other times in service to the broader community. In this way, students take full advantage of their time in the program to gain experience and enhance their professional development.

Cohort 9

Adi Gangga: Gender and Development Working Group Coordinator, IDRC project

Christina Joy: Project Youth Build Alachua County

Colleen Abel: Graduate Assistants United – Graduate Assistant; Coalition of Immokalee Workers

Haaris Saqib: Agricultural Education and Communication Graduate Assistant

Manuel Morales: Latin American Studies Graduate Assistant

Paola Bak: REPOAMA (Rede de Produção Orgânica da Amazônia Mato-grossense = Network for Organic Production in the Mato Grosso Amazon)

Pierre Will Blanc: Teaching Assistant – Haitian Creole, IDRC project

Stephanie Muench: Field and Fork Food Pantry

Cohort 10

Andia Akiufuma: Teaching Assistant – Swahili; Africa Choir

Ange Asanzi: Gender and Development Working Group Coordinator

Caroline Baylor: Engineering School of Sustainable Infrastructure & Environment Lab

Catherine Hart: UF IFAS Family Nutrition Program – Public Health Specialist for Northeast Florida

Madison Smith: Office of Sustainability Intern

Nikki Picon: Feed the Future Lab Intern

Sarah Strominger: Program Assistant Director - Office for Global Research Engagement in UFIC

Yeyetsi Maldonado: MDP Graduate Assistant

Students Outside the Classroom (cont.)

Weston Stitt's experience with the TCD Practitioner Experience Grant

I traveled to the Copán Department of Honduras to reconnect with the host organization and the coffee cooperative I worked with during my MDP field practicum in the summer of 2019. The purpose of my return to Honduras was to present updated results to the cooperative and to lead a workshop training session for small coffee farmers and cooperative representatives. The workshop aimed to inform and educate the participants on how best to adopt a financial analysis tool. From February 28 to March 5, 2020, I performed two presentations, participated in multiple meetings, and helped facilitate the first phase of expansion for the Green Value Tool for Simplified Financial Analysis (GVT). I also reconnected with associates, entrepreneurs, and coffee producers who I had interviewed during my field practicum.

In Copán I traveled to Las Capucas, where the coffee cooperative COCAFAL is located. During my field practicum, I had interviewed over 40 COCAFAL stakeholders throughout their value chain. I went with my supervisor, Michela Accerenzi, the regional coordinator for Fundación ETEA, which is one of the supporting organizations. After a day of traveling through the community, reconnecting with acquaintances, and visiting coffee farms to observe the progress of various projects, I presented my updated findings to the directors at COCAFAL.

I was able to convey updated results clearly and expand on many of my initial ideas. There were also key theoretical concepts I introduced to support my findings that I was unable to include in a presentation of preliminary results to the board last August. The cooperative members and board of directors also asked clarifying questions that I did not consider when writing my report. Ultimately their questions helped me improve my final report and the deliverables I had yet to submit to organizations for whom I was consulting.



On Tuesday, March 4, 2020, I facilitated a training workshop for 18 coffee farmers and coffee cooperative technicians on the GVT (Photo). The training was organized and supported by Fundación ETEA and was co-led by Michela Accerenzi. The workshop started with a brief presentation on my experience with the GVT for a coffee farm in Honduras and a background on the GVT and relevant case studies. I explained theories driving the tool's success and key financial concepts associated with its operation, and then facilitated activities in which groups of 3 worked through a fictional example and collaborated to enter data into the tool. Throughout the exercise, Michela and I worked with the groups on questions they had about the multi-step process so they could successfully finish the activity. We then opened the workshop for a discussion on the analysis of their results, followed by a lengthy discussion in which participants could ask questions and voice their opinions or criticisms of the tool. Participants' questions and feedback were constructive, and overall, we felt it was a good experience for them. A representative from each of the coffee organizations (cooperative or association) agreed to be part of the next phase.

MDP Alumni Update

Nazmi Ahmed (Cohort 7)

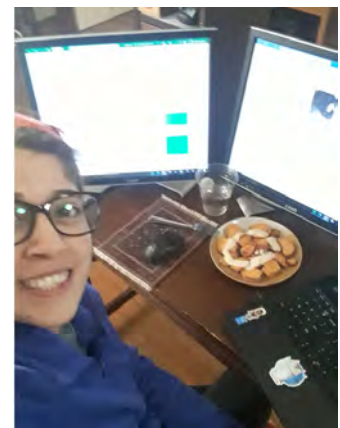
Nazmi Ahmed moved to Arlington, VA, and has been working at the General Services Administration as a Program Analyst since August 2019. She accepted this offer as part of the Pathways Recent Graduate Program and GSA's Emerging Leaders Program. This is a rotational program where she has the opportunity to work in different offices before she places in a specific office. She plans to focus each rotation on sustainability issues such as energy, buildings, and transportation but has the opportunity to learn new topics such as the federal budget and congressional affairs. Her projects so far include Buildings and Health initiatives, GIS Mapping of Assets, and Electric Vehicle Workplace Charging Best Practices. Wanting to stay connected to the Sustainable Development Goals, Nazmi applied and was selected for the SDSN Local Pathways Fellowship which focuses on Sustainable Development Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities. She is planning to focus her project on Washington D.C. and urban resilience.



Nazmi's South Florida self has survived a very mild winter in VA / DC with her fiancé, Zachary Levitt (UF MALAS). She has a great network of UF & MDP friends in this area with whom she enjoys hiking and sharing a nice dinner. Nazmi is still dancing her heart out and cooking delicious recipes but has picked up other hobbies like biking, meditation, and yoga to calm her mind during the unfolding pandemic.

Grace Palacios (Cohort 7)

Grace Palacios currently works from home in Arlington, VA providing support to the United States Forest Service (USFS) International Programs (USFS-IP), in the implementation of field activities; and to the Amazon Conservation Association (ACA), in the Monitoring of the Andean Amazon Project (MAAP).



MDP Alumni Update (cont.)

Carlita Fiestas (Cohort 8)

Supporting Food Systems in Southeast Florida since December 2019, Carlita Fiestas serves as the Food System Specialist for the UF/IFAS Extension Family Nutrition Program (FNP) covering Broward, Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie Counties. The mission of FNP is to help limited-resource families in Florida access more nutritious food choices on a budget and adopt healthier eating and physical activities to reduce the risk of obesity and chronic disease. Part of Carlita's role is to expand availability of fresh and nutritious food by supporting local and regional producers and sustainable agricultural systems. Carlita works with local farmers in SE Florida to promote Farm-to-School initiatives through the consumption of FL grown produce. She coordinates outreach events to promote agricultural and nutrition knowledge in schools.

As the Food Systems Specialist, Carlita spends most of her time at work visiting and supporting edible gardens in limited-resources communities. Supporting edible gardens is what motivates Carlita at her job as she believes edible gardens are an amazing tool to educate kids and adults not only about nutrition but also about the environment and natural resources. Most of Carlita's work relies on local partnerships and networking, thus she is applying the skills she acquired during her leadership classes while doing MDP to successfully collaborate with local organizations. Carlita's current position nicely integrates the four pillars of MDP: Health Sciences (nutrition), Natural Sciences (edible gardens), Social Sciences (SNAP-eligible population) and Management (program evaluation).



In this picture, Carlita is providing herbs and garden materials to chef Carla from Love and Hope in Action (LAHIA) in Stuart, Martin County. LAHIA provides several social services to the homeless population in Stuart. Herbs will be used by students in LAHIA's culinary program and in meals provided to homeless people.

MDP Alumni Update (cont.)

Paula Bak Cely (Cohort 9)

I am working with Alcozer Law Firm supporting the asylum application process for immigrants from Latin America to the US.

I am also part of RedLRA, a Colombian consulting company that captures projects and develops them.

And I will be working as a consultant for an impact evaluation project with the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Livestock Systems, under the management of Dr. Renata Serra and Dr. Erica Odera.



Mary Vasilevsky (Cohort 8)

After the MDP program, I started working for Florida Green Construction, a local Florida-specific construction company with a mission to deliver sustainable, healthy-to-live-in, hurricane safe, and truly affordable homes to people across different walks of life. The company was one of the first in Florida to deliver hurricane, tornado, and fire resilient structures to Florida in 2007 after witnessing the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina and Charlie.

I am currently the sustainable development coordinator at the company, working with non-profits and other organizations to make our communities more resilient, and this technology more accessible. With partners in our region, we collaborate on contextual sustainability efforts within development, create pertinent education materials, and conduct specialized outreach with our communities.

The MDP program taught me the significance of context, the skills to develop strategic monitoring and evaluation methods when creating strategies, and most importantly, how to leverage actionable change by serving the community. I appreciate the faculty, staff, students, and friends who took the time to teach me and learn with me.



MDP Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Claudia Romero

Good afternoon, Dr. Romero. I want to thank you for accepting the interview for the MDP Newsletter. We are interested in knowing more about your path and what brought you here.

I studied Biology at the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Colombia, and did a short training in coral reef ecology with the University of Texas in Jamaica. I ended up working in conservation of protected areas in Colombia, essentially as a biologist, with the government and NGOs and then I moved back to the management side working for the Ministry of Environment in the Colombian Government. It was a great opportunity when the protected areas were taken over by the Ministry of Environment from the Ministry of Agriculture; it helped position protected areas in a broader and more prominent spot. There have always been people who did not benefit much from protected area creation in and around these areas. During the 80s and the 90s there was a lot of violence in Colombia; a bunch of my friends were threatened or assassinated because we worked on protected areas. I decided that I needed to do something different and applied for a Fulbright scholarship to get my Master's degree. That is how I came up here to UF and completed my Master's and then my PhD.

What did you do for your Master's and PhD?

I am a biologist by training, but I was very interested in applied conservation, economics, politics, and policy. After all the work I did in protected areas in Colombia as a biologist, I did not consider them as exclusively fenced-in hotspots of biodiversity or of any other biophysical or cultural attribute, but tried to make them play a more active role in regional development and connect them to development. This idea was in a way a precursor to the concept of environmental services, or in other words, figuring out how local conservation could translate into benefits at broader scales that would in turn revert back to those with more direct stakes in local conservation.



The concept of environmental services was not fully formalized at that moment. In my mind, all these areas were important and were created because of what they had, but they should also generate opportunities for those communities that were evicted from protected areas, or that lived nearby. How can we make those bridges possible? Before I first came to UF, I had been writing a lot of policy documents on how to make that happen. The government produces a political and socio-economic agenda every couple of years, and we were trying to insert those protected areas and conservation, and more generally environmental issues, into that development agenda. When I came here, I decided I had had enough of that: I did not want to do more blah blah and I wanted to go back to science. My research for my Master's and PhD was pure research—very robust biological, physiological, and evolutionary research—but the questions that I pursued were not grounded just in curiosity: I wanted to look at questions that could solve problems. I was looking at the applied side of the question but anchored in the best science possible.

MDP Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Claudia Romero (cont.)

For my Master's, I worked with local communities in the Talamanca Mountains in Costa Rica. The Talamanca Mountains are 3000 meters above sea level, and they have a beautiful oak-dominated forest. Several agencies had run experiments there and I was looking at the impacts of logging on a range of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) that are valuable for local communities. I was looking at two sides of a question: first the compatibility of logging and NTFP harvesting in the forest, but also how the communities could manage them and not destroy the resource base. I did that research to develop a management plan and it was pretty cool because at the end it was approved by the Costa Rican Ministry of Environment as a management plan for the species and my thesis was published by CATIE.

I did not start my Ph.D. right away: I took a year off with my family in Africa, specifically Zimbabwe, and had the opportunity to work with an interdisciplinary team looking at the range of impacts of harvesting baobab bark. Around 90% of family income in that part of the country came from the crafts they made with the bark of that tree, so we were looking as a group at sustainability and management questions. But there was no basic information to create a management plan. And then I realized "oh my gosh, no one has worked on bark physiology, bark evolutionary ecology, nothing", so I looked at the different evolutionary patterns of responses of tree stems to damage in several places. It is a very applied question because some people want to kill the trees when they do thinning and other people do not want to kill or damage trees when they log or harvest bark, so looking at the impacts of disturbance in that particular region was important. That was my PhD that had a strong physiological and evolutionary component. Then I totally switched gears after my PhD and never worked with bark anymore.

Sometimes our path just guides us to different outcomes. How did you get involved with the MDP program?

Initially, I was a witness to how it was conceived and developed, and I had been working in other projects with some of the TCD and Center for African Studies faculty who created the program. It was really interesting for me because, at the end, it reflected what to me is the most important role of research: to make a change. It is not that we cannot spend our time to answer questions, but at the end, I have always been intrigued by how we can make a difference and change the world. Pure science has a limitation, especially when the questions are just based on curiosity, and I like to push for change. I started to interact more with students because we had created a working group on Tropical Forest Policy and Economics that, by the way, has met weekly for eleven years now, to look at the different incentives and mechanisms that promote forest conservation and management in the tropics, and more generally, at drivers of deforestation and forest degradation. Then some of the MDP students started to take our class and meeting these students created a personal link. I knew the director of the program and other people through the years, because earlier on I had worked on a couple of projects through the Center for African Studies, but the point of interaction has been through the work of some of the students in the past couple of years.

What does sustainable development mean to you?

Well, that is a very tricky question, because it has been defined in so many ways by so many people, at so many times. I had the fortune to take the last class that Buzz Holling taught at the University when I was a graduate student, and he was an intellectual architect of the adaptive management concept, which is a systems concept that lays out

MDP Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Claudia Romero (cont.)

cycles of change this system undergoes. You can talk about plants and species if it is an ecosystem; a socio-ecological system is much broader, it includes institutions, rules, knowledge, histories, and all the things that shape the interactions in the system. This approach was an important advance for my brain: everybody was talking about adaptive management and wanting to do systems thinking, but what was missing to me and really got lost and still is somehow, is the issue of experimentation. This can be summarized in learning by doing: you do something, you fail, then you learn and do it differently. But I think that combining the way you are learning things with experimentation, so that you control and know what your change is, helps you process information in a systematic way, then there is room for learning and for adaptation in a transformational way. The alternative is randomly changing what you initially tried without internalizing that information in an iterative way and hoping that something eventually works one day, without you understanding what made it work, where, and how, and for whom.

To me the question that you asked regarding a definition for sustainable development relies on our collective ability to formalize our learning. Development is contingent on validating those lessons learned through experimentation. If we consider the elements of socio-ecological systems, development is a very broad thing that goes beyond a plan of action: it should also consider the people and the institutions. History matters, conflicts matter, the political economy matters, who has more power, who is making decisions, who always loses. All these elements have been interacting for years, and development also interacts with other elements like geography. This holy grail of sustainable development is perhaps something to which we aspire and can be defined as a common good. Everybody talks about sustainable development as a good thing, but there are many things that are sustained and are very bad: sustained inequality,

sustained misinformation, sustained poverty, and all kinds of things.

In the case of development, I always think about an economist I read way back, who wrote about the dichotomy between economic growth and economic development. Economic growth is just getting more but development has an inner qualification of reducing inequality, power imbalances, and injustice. Personally, I am more concerned about that, in every possible way and at every possible scale, starting from relationships between two individuals, within groups, within families, across families, across organizations, and I feel very deeply about that.

I do not know if I'm answering your question, but I think that sustainable development is a common good that needs to consider justice, politics, and power. And it cannot be independent of history or scales.

You already talked about some of the issues facing sustainable development, but what are the challenges for sustainable development?

Sustainable development is a goal and a process at the same time. Now the concept has helped articulate specific targets for the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), designed for the 2030 agenda. In some cases, the SDG targets seem inaccurate because I have been working in countries in rural areas and the targets are absurd and unrealistic, and I wonder, who actually proposed them? At the end, endorsement of the SDG agenda risks becoming a license for countries to continue doing business as usual and not embracing and investing in the change on the ground that is required. I think that as goals they are fine, in the common good, considering all the things mentioned before, as a process, but we still need to continue re-inventing that process so that actors are accountable for their commitments and that lasting transformation occurs.

MDP Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Claudia Romero (cont.)

For example, there is an SDG about gender, that outlines what it is going to accomplish, and perhaps this set of ideas is going to move us forward. At the end, we always think about the SDGs and sustainable development as something that needs to happen in developing countries but look what is going on in our neighborhoods, in our backyards and in this country. Sustainable development starts with what we eat, how we get to work, the products we buy, the way we relate to people, our compassion, and changing behavior takes time. I really enjoy realizing how much change we can achieve in this business by staying alert, staying awake, working hard, but also by not cutting corners.

It is really interesting what you were saying about the SDGs, sometimes we tend to think that the SDGs are everything in sustainable development. In the MDP core courses we always discuss the SDGs and what they mean to sustainable development and having another point of view is interesting and important.

It says how people look at those things specifically when they embark on their projects, and I am not just talking about MDP, everybody should be looking at those things because there is a commitment that we need to make mean something. For example, in the Philippines every institution of the government needs to spend around 1% of their budget on gender equality issues, but I talked to some people in some organizations and they said “we frankly don’t know what to do”, “we need guidance”. They have good intentions and they are informed about the SDGs, but other people are just not doing anything about those commitments. What we need to do about the SDGs is to make them matter to the people who make decisions, make them actionable in the short-term towards change, and seeing a little progress in some aspects, bit by bit, might make a difference. Now, during pandemic times, that is going to be much more of a challenge and the priorities are going to change, and the

emphases are going to change of course, but I think this is when those things become more meaningful, because they can help not to leave anyone behind: but, unfortunately, we are leaving people behind.

What are the attributes you think a practitioner should have?

Being sympathetic, like you guys. I think that the most important are things like dedication, passion, the understanding that it takes a village, that is, not to have unrealistic expectations of what one person can achieve with one summer in the field but the ability to identify what is needed, who needs it, with whom do I combine efforts to make it happen, and how can I make a difference, and that is why I like MDP so much. I have really enjoyed working with MDP students because they want to make a difference. Since you are a cohort, you hang around like family clusters, but once you are out of the bubble you see that not many people want to do that, sometimes people are just trying to get a degree, or learn something, or answer a question, but not necessarily making a difference, and that makes me respect all of you because you have embarked on this MDP program. I think the program is the ability of students to make a difference. Some of the attributes of course are patience, understanding, being strategic, learning the language, the willingness to be one with the people with whom you are working, to turn into one of your interviewees, to turn into one of your collaborators, to assume their problems and their way of thinking, and translate all this into something that is meaningful. I think it is an amazing, powerful program and I really enjoy working with the students.

One of the main things that made me choose the MDP program was to do something meaningful, something that matters and have some impact on the community.

MDP Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Claudia Romero (cont.)

It is doing something meaningful for someone who needs it and that fills the gap. Another attribute is the ability to identify those gaps to become part of the conversation, become one of those who are at the level and at the place where issues are being discussed, and bringing along a set of skills, vision, and experiences is just priceless. You have not asked me, but one of the things I really like from working with people from the MDP is that first I learn a lot, which is amazing, and second, that I feel I am part of that change; that makes me feel like I was in Brazil with Paula, and in Nepal with Gangga, and in Honduras with Weston, and that means a lot to me!!

I think that is inspiring! I have another question for you, what are you working on right now? What are you doing for research these days?

My work since 2008 (I earned my PhD in 2006) has transitioned into the economics and policy arenas more than ecology. You know, I have been a person who was always jumping between the natural sciences and the social sciences and I needed to make a choice. I found exactly what I was looking for, and I could not find it earlier because it did not quite exist, and this is the field of evaluation of conservation interventions. When I discovered that, it was a serendipitous kind of thing, I just dove deep into it and learned as much economics as I could, in order to ground the skills and the methods. I became an advocate of impact evaluation and of the need to remain robust and remain solid to get the best possible information to assess the impact of these policies and programs that are costing taxpayer money or multilateral aid money. Much has been invested in tropical geographies with few positive outcomes; the land continues to be degraded and burned, and people continue to be poor, marginalized, and displaced: so where did all the money go and what are we doing? In 2008, I started to read about people just “stealing” all these methods from health and education and bringing them into conservation, and I became a fanatic.

Right now, I am working on a project related with that, a TCD project called Governance and Infrastructure in the Amazon (GIA). My mission in GIA is to assess the social learning that occurs in the project, to do an evaluation of social learning, documenting and making visible how individuals that participate in this network are learning and improving their knowledge and also how they may at some point apply that knowledge and make decisions differently. In addition, how do they develop their concepts and frameworks and how do we think about social learning? It is pretty cool because social learning is not something new but it has not been documented in a project like this, it has been documented formally in projects that promote formal education, resource management, especially in conflict scenarios, but not trying to figure out how we, through the implementation of this project, favor and strengthen this community of practice across these four different geographies (Bolivia, Brazil, Peru, and Colombia) and within UF, our team and the greater group.

The other thing I am working on is more complicated in practice: the adoption of evaluation and robust methods in impact evaluation of conservation interventions, particularly the use of theories of change and how they can guide our strategic understanding of both problems and potential solutions. Normally, theories of change describe how we think things work, but we must also make explicit the assumptions and the mechanisms through which we think things work so we can reproduce them and test them and better understand the conditions under which different types of outcomes emerge. This is a tool within evaluation and for me it is really powerful because it can help to characterize a problem, to deconstruct the problem, to understand the drivers, to locate the scales of the local through the global and through time, as well as considering the historical context. The tool can also guide critical thinking around what is possible. It is an actionable concept and helps generate knowledge and in doing so helps generate learning.

MDP Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Claudia Romero (cont.)

I have been working in a project with a team from Australia and the Philippines, this has been really interesting for me, with individual researchers trying to develop the skills in the formulation and use of these conceptual frameworks to do better evaluation and understand better what success is, and why we fail. But it helps to do better research because evaluation is about research as well. This project is multidisciplinary, complex, and applied to systems. It requires that we specify what we do not know: if there is a thing we cannot know, okay, well, just make it explicit, revisit it later on and then continue with what we can know.

These are the two things I am doing and wrapping up work that we have been doing on understanding the impacts of certification systems in four different sectors: agriculture, marine resources, aquaculture, and forest resources. We are trying to figure out what is the next step on that, given there is not much evidence of what we learned; that is why I call myself an advocate of impact evaluation and more generally, an evidence-based researcher.

That is really interesting! I have never heard about theories of change, but the way you describe them, they sound important for conservation efforts.

Absolutely, and I have been running a few sessions about them for the people in the Philippines and even with the people in our project in the Amazon (GIA). It is still an uphill battle but I think so important that you formulate these conceptual models of how things work and then you add the theory behind them, because it is not just arrows and boxes, there is so much room for learning and experimentation. That is adaptive management and that is the process that may lead to sustainable development.

I have one question left before finishing the interview, do you have some advice for MDP students?

I have a lot of advice for the students, but basically work hard and make the best of this opportunity. I mean, it is going to be hard with this pandemic because the dynamics are going to change a lot. You guys are here for two years and the University has a lot of different things going on, not only classes but diverse fields of knowledge: go beyond your comfort zone, push yourself out of what you know. Look at what you do not know, do not be afraid and just go for it. Being in grad school is like being in a bubble, even if you are an MDP student: take advantage of being in that bubble as much as you can to explore. Explore the arts, music, philosophy, literature, explore who is working where, go to seminars, go to different activities. Of course, keep focused and manage your time but get out of your comfort zone.

Another thing is that this bubble is located in a context, and that context is Gainesville. Gainesville is a place that has so many contradictions and we need to get out of our bubble and try to learn about what is going on, what are the issues, what are people's struggles here, what can I contribute to, what can I do to make it different. Talk to the janitors, the bus driver, the people in the store, whoever it is, get those personal stories because an inadvertent relationship with someone might make a little difference in someone's life. Gainesville needs young people from MDP and people who care. Expand your bubble and get to know a little bit of the place where you are, much more than going hiking and the protected areas, get to know the people and their issues, and be engaged and compassionate.

Thank you very much for your words and for accepting the interview.

Spring Socials



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