
ISID FIELD RESEARCH AWARD REPORTS

This summer, ISID gave Field Research Awards to MA and PhD students to support their research or dissertation projects related to international development studies. Here are the first three reports from students who have returned from the field.

Abe Solberg, MA student, Geography

Research Topic: 'Exploring livelihood change in a rural upland Hmong village in Yunnan, China'

The aim of my MA project was to see if Hmong livelihoods in a rural upland village in Yunnan, China have changed over the last 20 years, and how and why livelihoods have changed. Preliminary results indicate that, in the village, Hmong livelihoods, while still largely based on semi-subsistence agriculture, increasingly rely on remittances from wage labor in Eastern cities.

Between May 25 and August 30, 2017, thanks to a ISID Field Research Award, I had the opportunity to (1) enroll in five weeks of intensive one-on-one Mandarin Chinese courses; (2) conduct seven weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in a rural village in Southwestern Yunnan, China; and (3) travel to Vietnam to meet with key informants and compare Hmong villages across state lines. The language courses were instrumental in increasing my language ability, and although the majority of interviews were in the local Hmong language, the courses allowed me to converse casually and to build relationships with informants.

After completing the language courses, I traveled to a rural Hmong village in Wenshan prefecture, Yunnan, China to conduct ethnographic research. Throughout the span of seven weeks, I conducted over 40 in-depth interviews, 10 oral-history interviews, and several informal focus groups. During my fieldwork, I lived with a local family and worked with two research assistants. While in the field, I also participated in the rice planting, corn harvesting, and alcohol production processes. We also traveled to four neighboring villages to compare how location, infrastructure, and government initiatives have impacted livelihoods of local villagers. Toward the end of my fieldwork, I traveled to Wenshan City, Yunnan to interview Hmong migrants and entrepreneurs.

I also had the opportunity to travel to Sapa, Vietnam to interview key informants. This was a valuable opportunity to compare how Hmong culture and livelihoods manifest themselves across state lines. It was also an opportunity to see how hemp is used in Hmong livelihoods in Vietnam, because hemp cultivation is illegal in China.



*Rural upland Hmong village in Yunnan, China.
Photo credit: Abe Solberg*

Mélie Monnerat, PhD student, Geography

Dissertation research: 'The price of spice: how high value non-timber forest product commodity chains influence ethnic minority livelihoods in northern Vietnam'

The ISID Field Research Award supported my preliminary field research in Vietnam in the summer of 2017. My research aims to investigate the complexity of cinnamon commodity chains. Specifically, I examine nodes along the chain originating with ethnic minority cultivators in upland Northern Vietnam to global consumers, and I explore the roles of ethnicity, agency, social networks, and trust at each node to understand the benefits and drawbacks for the individuals involved.

I had the opportunity to meet and work with my research lab's institutional partners from Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment (HUNRE); to travel to rural areas where I met with cinnamon farmers, traders, and ethnic minority individuals; to interview spices traders in markets across the capital city of Hanoi; and to conduct research at key documentation centers.

I joined my PhD committee member Dr. Annuska Derks (Zurich University) on a research trip to Yen Bai Province and conducted interviews with farmers and ethnic minorities involved in cinnamon production and trading. Yen Bai Province is the largest national producer of cinnamon in Vietnam. With Dr. Derks, we conducted interviews with district and commune officers, Yao farmers involved in cinnamon production, cinnamon traders, and workers. We also had the chance to visit a family-run cinnamon plantation.

These and other solo rural fieldtrips were highly valuable in expanding my knowledge and understanding of the core aspects of my research. In addition, I scheduled research sessions at two key documentation centers: the Hanoi National Library and the Vietnam Academy of Social Science (VASS).

This trip to Vietnam gave me a chance to meet and build connections and friendships with Vietnamese researchers working on similar research topics, and with other foreign PhD students working on spices and commodity chains in Vietnam. The chance to network with other researchers in my field was valuable and exciting.



*Kinh ladies trimming cinnamon branches further used to make cinnamon oil.
Van Yen district, Yen Bai, Vietnam, June 2017.*