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.

**Lou Pingeot, PhD student, Political Science**

Dissertation research: ‘From Protection of Civilians to Policing of Civilians: Haiti’

My PhD research examines the evolution of United Nations-led peace operations, using Haiti as a case study. While the UN Stabilization Mission for Haiti (MINUSTAH, 2004-2017) was ostensibly deployed to prevent a civil war between partisans and opponents of deposed President Aristide, the mission soon identified criminal “gangs” and “bandits” as a threat to stability.
in Haiti, and therefore a threat to international peace and security. In addition to conducting muscular joint military-police raids against gangs, MINUSTAH has focused on support for the Haitian police and the criminal justice system as part of its mandate to strengthen the rule of law and maintain public order.

Thanks in part to the ISID Field Research Award, I traveled to Port-au-Prince in May-July 2017 to conduct interviews with members of MINUSTAH as well as representatives of the Haitian government and of Haitian civil society. As MINUSTAH was preparing to leave, the idea was to get people to reflect on the mission’s 13-year presence in the country in light of the absence of either civil or international conflict, as well as to hear about the day-to-day activities of the mission.

My fieldwork in Haiti allowed me to better understand the discourse, practice, and effects of this new form of intervention. Discursively, MINUSTAH’s intervention was marked by a criminalization of conflict, which de-emphasizes political, social and economic dynamics and equates conflict with breaking the law, therefore calling for punitive responses. In practice, this has led to a “police-ization” of peacekeeping, with an increase in the number of police contingents and a blurring of lines between police and military functions. Concretely, MINUSTAH’s efforts have often ended up equating poverty, criminality and insecurity, thus targeting poor neighborhoods (labeled as “red zones”) and already marginalized populations. In this context, UN peace operations’ efforts to restore and uphold “the rule of law” are far from neutral technical exercises, and may even amount to lawfare using law enforcement to resolve conflicts undemocratically.

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. Anuska 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.

FROM CLASSROOM TO FIELDWORK

Zua is a non-profit organization that uses emerging technologies in microfinance and insurance to disrupt the cycle of poverty. Individuals who depend on agriculture in developing countries are vulnerable to a wide range of climate-induced risks that impede socioeconomic development. Those risks posed by weather can not only trap entire communities in a cycle of poverty, but can also impede farmers from taking risks and investing in measures that could increase their productivity and improve their socioeconomic status. By providing affordable microinsurance to some of the world’s poorest, Zua hopes to equip farmers with the safety nets and tools they need to make life-improving investments in themselves and their families.

Zua was founded by two McGill students, Brenden McKinney and Meagan Prins, and was built on the knowledge they developed through their IDS, economic development, and finance classes. One of the sparks that led to the founding of Zua came from INTD lectures on gender in development and on the critiques of microfinance.

This year, Zua is launching two pilot projects in rural communities in Central Zambia, where it will provide indexed-based rainfall insurance to local farmers. Through the utilization of new technologies, peer-to-peer financing and donations, Zua is able to provide financial services at heavily subsidized prices, enabling the organization to target those most in need of risk management solutions.

To learn more about Zua and their work, please visit their website.