

SDG Graduate School Colombia: Building peace through research



Engaged in discussion with the Colombian ambassador to Berlin, Hans-Peter Knudsen Quevedo (4th from left), at a summer school: doctoral candidates of the SDG Graduate School Colombia on an excursion to Berlin

The SDG Graduate School run jointly by universities in Bonn and Bogotá not only contributes to sustainable development and building efficient and cosmopolitan universities: it also addresses key issues in Colombia. The country has been suffering from armed conflict and its consequences for almost 60 years.

'Transdisciplinary' is a term Eva Youkhana uses repeatedly: according to her, it is essential to the work of the bilateral Graduate School that is being established by the Centre for Development Research (ZEF) at the University of Bonn and the Institute for Environmental Studies (IDEA) at the National University of the Colombian capital Bogotá (UNAL). The Graduate School is dedicated to implementing the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Eva Youkhana is Professor and Head of the Graduate School at ZEF. Launched in October 2018, the Graduate School supports six new doctoral students from Colombia each year. Working in groups of three, they conduct research into questions relating to the environment, peace and development, on which they produce a short paper in addition to their doctorate. The programme involves doctoral candidates from the fields of engineering, sociology, agroecology, political science and geography. 'In our interdisciplinary collaboration, we also reflect critically on our research and how we generate knowledge,' says Youkhana.

'That's what transdisciplinary means. In this way, we go beyond mere collaboration between different disciplines and enter new territory – as difficult as it is to cross the boundaries of your own research subject.' The Graduate School is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through the DAAD.

Promoting internationalisation

In the early summer of 2019, the doctoral candidates came to Bonn for a summer school at ZEF to engage in further networking, learn about geographical information systems and gain further qualifications in understanding literature and statistics. They also completed a course in political economics according to the 'degrowth' model – a development concept that goes beyond growth. In their interdisciplinary studies, participants are able to benefit from the fact that the ZEF doctoral programme has been in place for 20 years.

Acknowledging different approaches

It is also important to respect and include other methods of attaining knowledge, says Youkhana. Different models of development are influenced by political and economic interests, and these have to be made visible, she adds. Youkhana says it is also important to support those who are most affected by the development processes, such as indigenous groups and Colombians with African ancestors who were abused as slave labourers in the coal and precious metal mines in earlier centuries. Their descendants account for up to 20% of the country's population of some 49 million. Eva Youkhana says that the universities in Colombia involved in the Graduate School have just celebrated the 250th anniversary of natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt at a DAAD alumni meeting: Humboldt himself denounced slavery and the environmental destruction caused by mining in the early 19th century and saw how all this was linked to human rights violations against indigenous groups.



For Professor Eva Youkhana, it is important for cooperation in the SDG Graduate School to be transdisciplinary, i.e. to transcend disciplinary, linguistic and national boundaries

Knowledge transfer in both directions

Youkhana describes the collaboration across disciplinary, linguistic and national borders as supportive and friendly. And the knowledge transfer works in both directions, too: 'We experiment together.' In this way it is possible to develop participatory monitoring of environmental processes, she says.

The Graduate School is using this approach to work on key issues facing the country in the north-west of South America, which has been suffering from an armed conflict and its consequences for almost 60 years. Colombia continues to build a fragile peace: after decades of civil war, the government concluded a treaty and a parliamentary agreement in 2016. In 2016, the then President Juan Manuel Santos was awarded the

Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to promote understanding. According to observers, the future depends on whether Colombia can alleviate social inequality and promote equal opportunities in education.

Pioneer in sustainability

At the same time, environmental issues have traditionally had a key role to play in Colombia: it is the country with the second highest level of flora and fauna diversity in the world, and it formally established a constitutional commitment to sustainable development in 1991. Colombia has to reconcile this focus with its economic development and the export of goods as diverse as cut flowers, coffee, precious stones and coal. Because of its wealth in raw materials – especially coal and oil – the country has the third largest economy in Latin America after Brazil and Mexico. By integrating the SDGs into national strategies, Colombia is claiming a pioneering role for itself, says Dorothee Schwab, who is responsible for the DAAD Graduate Schools. As such, the theme of this particular Graduate School – the Doctoral Studies Support Programme on Environmental Peace-Building and Development in Colombia – fits in well with the total of seven Graduate Schools that serve to promote the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. Germany and Colombia agreed on an alliance dedicated to peace and sustainable development in 2018.

Colombia is considered a boom country in higher education: student numbers are growing rapidly and have increased fivefold in the last 20 years. Colombia's education system was shaped in the 1930s by two Germans, Fritz Karsen and Leopold Rother: they promoted the foundation of the University of Bogotá, the Graduate School's partner institution. To this day, German educational programmes are held in high esteem in Colombia. This facilitates the partnership between the two universities.

Wolfgang Thielmann (9 July 2019)

FURTHER INFORMATION

Colombia

[DAAD overview of education and research in Colombia](https://www.daad.de/de/laenderinformationen/amerika/kolumbien/ueberbildung-und-wissenschaft/)

[<https://www.daad.de/de/laenderinformationen/amerika/kolumbien/ueberbildung-und-wissenschaft/>]

[Overview of DAAD activities in Colombia](https://www.daad.de/medien/der-daad/analysen-studien/laendersachstand/kolumbien_daad_sachstand.pdf)

[https://www.daad.de/medien/der-daad/analysen-studien/laendersachstand/kolumbien_daad_sachstand.pdf]

Bilateral SDG Graduate Schools

[The programme and funded projects](https://www.daad.de/sdg-kollegs)

[<https://www.daad.de/sdg-kollegs>]

[The Doctoral Studies Support Program – Environmental Peace and Development in Colombia](https://dssp-colombia.org/)

[<https://dssp-colombia.org/>]