

Autumn Jeter
Global Development Studies '24

2023 Aigrain Global Scholarship Report



GLOBAL STUDIES PROGRAM

Through the generous support of the Aigrain Committee I participated in research in collaboration with students at Vietnam National University (VNU). This program, in partnership with the study abroad UVA in Vietnam, was a four-week exploration focused on creating policy to influence development in a complex biophysical-economic system. The program was influenced by a recent proposal to connect the city of Hanoi to the Hong River via an island, called “Banana Island.” Banana Island, located within a floodplain, contains nearly all of Hanoi’s green space and multiple communities living in informal housing. Despite being prone to flooding and containing a wealth of greenery in one of the world’s hottest cities, developers are creating large scale plans for the island, ranging from skyscrapers to golf courses. These plans have sparked debate over what development should prioritize... the economy, environment, or the people? I approached this research seeking to answer the question: **“Can policy incorporate the community of Banana Island to influence development plans for coastal resilience, locally concentrated economic benefits and improvements to the quality of life for local residents?”**

Throughout the program we took part in excursions to orient our perspectives on local political, environmental, and economics dynamics. To do this, we explored Bat Trang, Moc Chau, and Ha Long Bai. Our first tour was to Bat Trang, a local village specializing in ceramics, here we observed the importance of clay to the local community. In Bat Trang, clay is relied on as one of the largest sources of economic revenue for the community. We then went to Moc Chau district in the Son La province to the East of Hanoi. We hiked the mountainous area surrounding Moc Chau, this experience gave me a stronger understanding of relationships between Vietnam’s Indigenous population, the H’mong, the land, and economy. In Moc Chau, the government has put pressure on the Indigenous H’mong people to market their culture as a way of generating

income. Inside the village, there way many stalls that marketed H'mong traditional outfits to foreigners as part of a cultural experience. It was difficult for me to make sense of these exchanges in Moc Chau as they reminded me of the negative relationships settlers built between Indigenous peoples in the United States. It surprised me to see communities within the same country have such drastically different ways of supporting themselves where the H'mong's economy focused on a cultural experience and in Bat Trang the community was focused on profiting off the resources of their environment. Lastly, we attended a weekend cruise on Ha Long Bai to consider downstream implications within the Hong River. I observed the impacts of waste mismanagement within water-based tourism. Through my observations I learned the abundance of waste generated through tourism is failing to preserve the aesthetics of the UNESCO world heritage site and destroys the valuable ecosystem services of the environment. My field trip to Bat Trang, Moc Chau, and Ha Long Bai helped shaped my perceptions of the implications different forms of tourism have in Vietnam. I learned that economic opportunity is important for improving the quality of life for locals but that autonomy and systems thinking cannot be separated.

In order to approach my research question I needed to not only develop an understanding of local dynamics, but also develop my quantitative skills. I approached this by developing my skills in managing and displaying quantitative data through applications such as Excel Microsoft and GIS (Geographic Information Systems). To do this, I collected observations from the field and created maps that displayed informal communities, hazardous areas, and informal land use. To collect this data, I bicycled roughly 30 km, identifying these landmarks around the island. The purpose of this exercise was create visuals and graphs that we could include in our final policy briefing to communicate problem areas on Banana Island.

The third week, we worked in teams focusing on further developing our research. During the week, my research partner Hai Yen showed me her favorite sites around Hanoi. We shared street food such as chicken feet, snails, and soup and watched the lowering of the flag at the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Our focus during this week was approaching our research with co-design methodologies and community engagement. In order to go beyond the language barriers that existed between us we sketched out multiple design plans for tourism on Banana Island. Using this method of co-design allowed us to collaborate more efficiently where both of us were equal collaborators. One of the biggest challenges our team faced was related to the lack of community data. Our team quickly realized that there was a lack of both quantitative and qualitative data available related to the community living on Banana Island. To determine what improvements of quality of life look like on Banana Island, it was crucial that we develop an understanding of the local community. We overcame this lack of data through community engagement where we met with community members living in informal housing and sought to fill gaps in our understanding of their quality of life. Through engagement we were able to determine the community's perception of development, their perceptions of how they want to be included in the participation process, what is currently impacting their quality of life, and what improvements can be made to their quality of life. Another challenge for our team was time, where we felt like collecting information to fill in community data gaps was a continuous process. We approached this by incorporating a model into our policy that aids the government along with developers to collect this information themselves. This gives those creating development plans, who are often international developers, tools to have their projects influenced by local knowledge.

We spent the last week of our research refining our presentations by learning from Vietnamese anthropologists and journalists to effectively communicate results in order to

persuade audiences. Throughout the week my team created a policy brief that introduced the need for community involvement based on our own data revealing the gaps in their participation, a model to approach community-oriented economic development through community engagement, and a model to approaching development with green infrastructure techniques to improve coastal resilience. We presented our findings and policy proposal to local news outlets at the end of the week in hopes of influencing the local community and government.



VNU-USSH student Ha and I at the Museum of Ethnology.