

# Accra 2005

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## Challenges and Learning in West Africa

A master's course can be much more satisfactory if it comprises a concrete experience that stimulates even more debate and learning. The opportunity given to the DAP, ESD, UDP and UED students in the 2004/2005 academic year was one of those indispensable experiences to exercise the skills we acquired and strengthened during the year. The destination was the Accra Metropolitan Region, in Ghana, West Africa. As expected, both academic and personal skills were involved, in a situation handled professionally by staff, students and local people. Besides being an academic exercise, the outcomes and proposals put forward by the students could foster real interventions. The challenge faced by the students was to devise strategies aimed at the improvement of the living conditions and livelihoods of three urban or peri-urban communities according to the terms of reference of the exercise. Given the growing number of students and the changing global and local realities, every year the tasks are being altered and improved. The students were divided into four groups, each with a different assignment. As in previous years, in their separate groups students were invited to elaborate an integrated strategy for the regeneration of James Town, a neighbourhood in the heart of 'Old Accra' and home to the original settlers, the Ga people; to produce an integrated development strategy for the indigenous village of Gbawe, taking into account the integration of the area with Greater Accra, the needs of the indigenous community and the need to address conflicts emerging specifically at the peri-urban interface; and, finally, to identify a strategy designed to promote local economic development in Ashaiman, a major informal/semi-formal settlement in the Tema District, and its integration with the economy of Greater Accra Metropolitan Area as a whole, keeping in mind the links between the formal and the informal sector. Additionally, this year another intervention in Ashaiman had its inaugural launch, whereby students explored the challenges and opportunities underlying the promotion of pro-poor partnerships aiming at the improvement of housing and infrastructure.

The four groups devoted a full month to the fieldtrip activities, including a previous preparation and initial diagnosis, with seminars, research and group debates; a 10-day intensive fieldwork; and a post-trip period to refine and conclude the proposals. In the field, the scheduled activities – such as meetings with officials, researchers, activists and traditional chiefs - were much enriched with walks through local markets and dispossessed communities and informal talks with organised men and women. The receptiveness and seriousness displayed by the people we met was notable, and could only benefit the whole process.

All the activities were closely related with the content and philosophy of the DPU courses. Therefore, theories, values and assumptions debated throughout the first and second terms could be affirmed, challenged or at least reflected upon. Moreover, the whole process not only demanded intellectual ability but also gave the opportunity

to improve other academic and practical skills, such as pursuing research, writing reports and giving presentations.

In addition, inter-personal skills were essential in every single action and there was the opportunity to significantly enhance them through practice: from exercising groupwork with colleagues from different backgrounds and holding points of view, to practicing negotiation skills with other stakeholders and undertaking interviews with or consulting local people.

The opportunity of this exercise in a country overwhelmed by inequalities both at distributive and institutional levels, faced also by most nations in the world, is outstanding. More could be written, demonstrated and explained. However, this experience cannot be appreciated only from books or journal articles. Undoubtedly, a one-month involvement might not disclose the whole picture. However, the lessons learnt at both academic and personal levels are remarkable and will never disappear.