Three theses from Leuven awarded Development Cooperation Prize

A thesis for the South

In the exotic environs of the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, the annual Development Cooperation Prize was awarded this past spring. This prize is awarded to students and young academics who have written a master's or doctoral thesis that delivers an important contribution to development in the South. The intention of the initiative is to stimulate the winners to stay engaged in international development. Three of the twenty prize-winning works were completed in Leuven.

Tim Vuylsteeke

Pieter De Corte (Belgium)
Belgian winner Pieter De Corte (24) graduated last year from K.U.Leuven as a bio-engineer in land and forest management, and is now following a master's programme in advanced studies in agricultural economics at Louvain-la-Neuve. Says Pieter: “My MA thesis was framed within a project to research the long-term impact of various agricultural techniques on the corn and wheat farmers in the Mexican plateau. To this end, all possible combinations of parameters were tested on test fields, such as crop type, rotation / monoculture, ploughing / not-ploughing, leaving straw on the fields or using it as livestock feed, so as to discover what procedures offered the greatest chance of a high and stable harvest.”

“I myself was busy with a portable sensor that measured the ‘performance’ of plants, an index that gives a good picture of the ultimate yield. In this manner, I can also monitor the crops during the season — a harvest figure always only takes account of the ultimate yield — whereby I can check what the critical moments were for the plants on the different test fields. An advantage of my research is that the results can also be used in other fields with a similar soil in a quasi-identical climate, such as the Ethiopian plateau, for example.”

“It is my dream later to lead and coordinate a development team, but I do not know if I ever will. On your own, you can indeed make a small difference, but the actual problem is at a much higher level, namely the multinationals that exploit small farmers. Thus, the investigation of sustainable techniques for small-scale agriculture and the sensitization of Western consumers are also important.”

Moses Isabirye (Uganda)
In February 2005, Moses Isabirye (42) finished a doctorate in applied biological sciences at our university, with the title “Land Evaluation around Lake Victoria: Environmental Implications of Land Use Change.” Says Moses: “For my thesis, I carried out a diagnosis of the problems in and around Lake Victoria, the largest lake in Africa. I was especially interested in the environmental risks of small Uganda agricultural firms. Much more investigation must be carried out, but thanks to this prize, my work has gained some extra publicity, and thus many more people will have access to it. Moreover, it is important that policy makers can begin with the results of my research.”

Moses carried out a considerable amount of his doctoral research while in Leuven. How does he look back at this? “Well, I found it fantastic in Leuven. Leuven was — and is still — my home away from home.” All foreign prizewinners may stay in Belgium for one week at no cost, but I immediately chose to stay there for seven more days. I will largely spend them in Leuven with friends, professors, ex-fellow students …”

Danny Rejas (Bolivia)
Says Danny (38): “I first studied agriculture in Cochabamba, in my homeland, but that programme particularly emphasized production and yields, which did not suit me. For that reason, I also studied biology afterward. Halfway through the 1990s, thanks to a development project in Leuven, I could follow a master's programme, after which I again received a fellowship and could begin my doctorate in 2000.”

“I researched the workings of the food chain in tropical alluvial lakes: what eats what, how quickly, and what sorts of energy do fish use? If we gain insight into this, we can ensure that the fish catch — which provides an important part of the food supply in tropical regions — can be pursued in a sustainable manner. I carried out the field work for my thesis in Bolivia, while most of the analysis was done in Leuven.”

“Studying in K.U.Leuven was the most enriching experience in my life, both academically and personally. I loved the international atmosphere that surrounded the city, and made life-long friends. For this reason, I am doubly happy that I have won this prize: not only does my work earn recognition, but I can also return to your country, and breathe in the atmosphere of the good old days.”

http://www.devco.prize.africanumuseum.be