

Final Report

Student Study and Research Stay at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Lisa Buchmann

Freie Universität Berlin

MA Environmental Policy and Planning

November 2016 – January 2017

Coming from an environmental background and often being surrounded by people with similar attitudes towards sustainability issues, one main reason for me to participate in the University Alliance for Sustainability was to step out of the ‘green bubble’ and experience life outside of it. I was excited about seeing how a culture and society so different from ours deals with the great number of environmental and social challenges we are facing today. My time at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJI) in Israel provided me with the opportunity to do so.

Although the main purpose of my stay was a research internship at the Geography Department, in the end my activities at HUJI turned out to be much more versatile than that.

DIM2SEA (A Dynamic Integrated Model for Disaster Management and Socio-Economic Analysis) – the project I was part of – deals with the topic of urban resilience to large-scale disasters. In the course of my internship, I mainly worked on a socio-economic analysis of the Metropolitan Area of Haifa, using GIS. By looking at the extent to which different parts of the city and different population groups are susceptible to hazards such as sea level rise, fires or tsunamis, I contributed to the project’s overall goal of generating an analytic framework for evaluating, planning and mitigating possible impacts of large-scale disasters, both natural and human induced. Besides witnessing the everyday work in an international research team, I was given the opportunity to attend several scientific conferences (i.a. the Annual Meeting of the Israeli Geographical Association in Tel Aviv). Moreover, certainly unfortunate but at the same time a valuable experience for the project, the Haifa fires in November 2016 provided me and my colleagues with the chance to do hands-on research in the field.

Head of the project and my primary contact at HUJI was Prof. Daniel Felsenstein. He welcomed me warmly and was very keen on introducing me to faculty members and other people at university, which made it easy for me to feel part of the ‘community’.

Due to the flexibility of my work in the project, I had plenty of time for further activities. Thus, I took several courses at the Hebrew University, both related and unrelated to my field of studies such as seminars on Food Policy, Environmental Policy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. But more importantly, the paper on the role of student participation in promoting sustainability, that I wrote as part of my UAS scholarship, opened up great opportunities to indulge into the university's student life and to get to know environmental organizations on and off campus. I conducted various interviews with students committed to sustainability and attended their group meetings. In this context, I was involved in discussing the current divestment campaign of the university's chapter of Green Course, Israel's largest environmental volunteer organization.

After all, working on the paper turned out to be very enriching and interesting and provided me with a nice overview on the perception and nature of sustainability in Israel respectively the HUJI. Although today, 30 years after the Brundtland report has been published, sustainability is on everyone's lips, it is still a very ambiguous term with many different interpretations. The research showed that in a country such as Israel, sustainability often has to compete with other (more pressing) issues such as national security or water scarcity. It further reaffirmed my impression that it is important to have committed key figures in order to promote sustainability.

The most challenging part of my research stay was probably the language barrier. Sometimes it was hard to find relevant information in English, particularly about local initiatives. Although I started to learn the language, my Hebrew skills have not developed fast enough to be able to tap into Hebrew sources. However, in the end this just turned out to be a minor issue as people were very open-hearted and willing to help translating. In general, interaction with people from university was easy and inspiring. Apart from the DIM2SEA research team, which consisted of a very nice bunch of PhD and Master students, I was in contact with several other Israeli students from the courses I participated in as well as members of the initiatives I visited. Another interesting acquaintance I made was Dr. Meni Neuman, manager of the Botanical Gardens on the Hebrew University's Har HaTsofim campus. He was very helpful and supportive in developing my research on student participation and has a vast knowledge of environmental sustainability issues.

Overall, my stay at HUJI was enjoyable and rewarding. It reminded me of the fact that sustainability, although sometimes used inflationary, is still an ambiguous term and a very relevant topic. Understanding this reinforced my decision to study Environmental Policy and Planning and encouraged me to be more committed to promote sustainability. Moreover, working in the research project helped me developing my scientific and GIS skills, both very useful for my upcoming Master's thesis.