

IHRP Final Report

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My internship placement this summer was at Conectas Direitos Humanos (Human Rights), an NGO located in Sao Paulo, Brazil. With a strong team of seasoned human rights activists and other interns, I spent 10 weeks working on the *Foreign Policy and Human Rights* project. This project was created back in 2005 when a number of human rights activists at Conectas realized that Brazil, a democratic nation since the mid-1980s and in a position of high influence around the world, particularly within the Global South, was not living up to its international promises. For instance, despite being a member of the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS) and publicly adhering to the Covenant Against Torture in 1989, prisoners in Brazil are regularly tortured, beaten and even killed. This project leverages the media, partnerships with other NGOs and external international mechanisms, such as treaties and political relations, to pressure the Brazilian Government for change.

My work at Conectas consisted of a number of both short and long term assignments, all of which had in common the goal of strengthening the *Foreign Policy and Human Rights* project and furthering its mandate. When I first arrived, I was entrusted with the responsibility of preparing a comprehensive report on Zimbabwe's interaction with the United Nations system. This year, the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) will be conducting the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Zimbabwe, a process by which other member states of the HRC have the opportunity to examine a country in order to identify areas of improvement and/or encouragement. Because Conectas gained experience in the past from the Brazilian UPR, they are paying a visit to NGOs in Zimbabwe in order to advise them on how they can utilize the review for their advocacy efforts. With my goal being to work for the United Nations after graduation, this project was very important to me as it allowed me to study in detail the various mechanisms put in place by the UN to ensure human rights are upheld around the world.

In June, I had the opportunity to attend a two-day conference hosted by Conectas titled "Emerging Democratic Powers: Civil Society Engagement in Foreign Policy and Human Rights". Participating in this conference were human rights activists from all over the world, working for recognized organizations such as Amnesty International, Southern Africa Litigation Centre and the Brookings Institute. The purpose of this conference was to bring together and engage a diverse group of civil society actors in a discussion on what strategies may be devised to pressure their governments to honor their international human rights obligations—thereby aligning their nation's foreign policies with its internal reality. I took part in this conference by documenting the particulars of their discussions, specifically the challenges and opportunities that faced the respective nations of the present activists. Having had the chance to engage with the present individuals, I learned more about their specific projects and the ways in which they were using foreign policies to tackle human rights issues. To conclude, I prepared a detailed memo on the event, which was then distributed to both the participants and donors of the conference.

Upon my supervisor's request, I attended a seminar in Sao Paulo titled "Iran's Role as a Regional Power" delivered by the Iranian Ambassador Mohsen Shaterzadeh at the School of Economics of Sao Paulo's Getuilo Vargas Foundation. The purpose of the seminar was to discuss the Iranian perspective on important events in the Middle East and Central Asia as well as what the future relations between Iran and Brazil are shaping up to be, giving me the chance to gain valuable insight on the state of relations between the two countries.

My major project at Conectas, however, involved preparing a comprehensive research report on the World Health Organization (WHO), which I presented to the entire office on July 20th. Conectas currently works with a number of NGOs that specialize in matters concerning health and they want to be able to use the international mechanisms offered by the WHO in their advocacy efforts. However, they lacked knowledge of how the WHO—the largest health related international organization—operates with respect to global health matters. It was thus my responsibility to prepare an 80-page report that essentially served a crash-course purpose for Conectas, particularly the team engaged with the *Foreign Policy and Human Rights* project. In preparing this report, I not only engaged in in-depth research but also met with specialists on the matter to conduct interviews.

My experience at Conectas was, in one word, amazing. Working with the organization gave me the chance I previously never had to work on human rights issues in an international setting. Aside from this experience greatly honing my research skills and teaching me more about the UN system, it was more importantly able to open my eyes to an alternate avenue for protecting human rights. Being a law student, I had naturally decided that my chosen path would involve utilizing the judiciary. The *Foreign Policy and Human Rights* project taught me, however, that one cannot always rely on the country's legal system to be the ambassador of change. There are many countries around the world, such as Brazil, which witness on a daily basis a growing gap between their government's external promises and the nation's internal reality. And in many such cases the judiciary becomes an inadequate and ineffective medium for change. This is the very reason why so many NGOs such as Conectas have sprung up all over the world, trying to seek out and apply political and, if need be, commercial international pressure in order to advance human rights.

And thus it became apparent to me this summer how important it was to gain an understanding of the dynamics and political agendas that underpin international relations if one is to use such means to advocate human rights. I can safely say that my experience at Conectas is what inspired me to fill out a rush application for the MGA offered by the Munk School of Global Affairs and pursue it concurrently with my JD. I learned that for me to pursue the line of work I have described, it was essential for me to gain an education on international relations, the global economy and global civil society.



