In December 2016, 21 young people from 17 countries climbed up the hills of Panchgani carrying with them their own cultures, identities, convictions, and stories. They were strangers to the next three weeks as much as they were to each other. The lingering cold welcomed them as they arrived at the Initiatives of Change Center Asia Plateau, accompanied by the yet unfamiliar feeling of the adventure lying ahead.

The Caux Scholars Program - Asia Plateau (CSP-AP) is a yearly academic residential program that offers an opportunity for individuals from any part of the world to gain insights and hands-on experience in conflict transformation, justice, and peacebuilding. Held in a Center surrounded by majestic mountains and incredible scenery, the program not only encourages a critical analysis of the world and its many issues, but demands an equally critical examination of oneself.

This year’s scholars came from countries as far as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Cameroon, Russia, and Ukraine; and as near as the Philippines, South Korea, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Nepal, and from within India itself. Many are professionals with their
own passions formed and practiced; they work in the fields of journalism, human rights, humanitarian work, theatre, film, health, education, and corporate social responsibility. While the rest are students who have just as much fire in their hearts for their advocacies—gender racial, and economic equality, peace, children’s rights, right to education, sustainable development, and free expression.

It is in this diversity and energy that the facilitators—professional academics from different specializations, worldviews, and experiences—shaped the space for a free and open exchange of ideas; something that characterized CSP-AP. Dr. Ashok Xavier and Dr. Florina Xavier from Tamil Nadu, India brought their experiences from working with Sri Lankan refugees and mediating between conflict-torn communities; Dr. Patrick McNamara from the United States approached his every lecture with a perspective on sustained dialogue and power dynamics; Kirsten De Mello and Merwyn De Mello carried with them their own experiences with the many forms of justice; and Sri Mayasandra’s rich exchanges with the world brought the Caux Scholars Program to India three years ago.

Inside the classroom and throughout the grounds of the IofC Center, the scholars learned about key topics including: Identity, Conflict Analysis, Sustainable Development, Peace and Conflict Transformation, Strategic Non-violence, Transitional and Restorative Justice, Trauma Healing, Theater, and Self Care. Learning was both inventive and interactive: from your traditional class discussions, and individual reporting, to the less traditional roleplay, debates, and simulations, to the even more unexpected outdoor games, arts and crafts, and songs. Conversations over tea breaks, exchanges during hikes up to the table top, and banters over table tennis games among scholars and facilitators were as much part of the learning experience in the program as the scheduled lessons.

“My greatest takeaway from CSP-AP is the happy marriage of critical thinking and creative thinking. I have become more open to ideas, irrespective of whether or not they are similar to mine.”

- Anando, India
Two benchmark sessions define academic learning in CSP: Conflict Where I Come From (CWICF) and Field Visits. Conflict Where I Come From (CWICF) is a space for the scholars to share their experiences and insights of a conflict close to their hearts. It is a session dedicated to learning from each other's stories. This year, each scholar's CWICF presentation gave us puzzle pieces to their own lives, and bridges connecting their own personal conflicts to those of the society they live in. One scholar from India talked about her battle with the stigma associated with her choice of work, another discussed the parallels of her own life with the changes in her home country of Ukraine. One scholar bravely shared her story of the Rwandan Genocide, and another of her unpaid employment caused by the economic crisis in Zimbabwe. Scholars bared their everyday struggle at work when a human rights worker talked about the extrajudicial executions in the Philippines, a refugee worker talked about Lebanon's role in the Syrian refugee crisis, and a corporate social worker talked about the rights of indigenous people in India.

“...I learned that conflicts are always complex and that there is always a need to do analysis of the possible factors involved as well as the different ways of seeing and embodying justice. Beyond this, was the realization that transformation begins with personal transformation. I asked myself, ‘To what extent do I send out ripples of peace or conflict?’” -- Sarah, United Kingdom

The Field Visits on the other hand, are sessions dedicated to learning from the stories of the communities and the people living in them. Over two days, the scholars visited the community of Ambeghar, the school of Rayat Shikshan Sanstha, and the community of Vivar which Gram Pari—an initiative of IoC India—has worked to develop. During these visits, the scholars interacted with the local residents by exchanging conversations; sharing a walk around the village; and cooking, eating, and working the fields together. The residents also assisted the scholars as they practiced the different tools for Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA). It was during these field visits that the theory of peacebuilding and the idea of conflict were grounded in actual human experiences.
In addition to these key sessions, several components made CSP-AP even more impactful this year. Due to unfortunate circumstances (that later served to bring the scholars closer), and subsequent adjustments to the program following it, this year’s scholars ended up learning about trauma healing by experiencing it through an arts and crafts session. The scholars sat together in circles to create a patchwork with styrofoam and old cloth depicting the stories of who they are. Each line drawn reflected a moment remembered, and each cloth chosen with a purpose found. The artworks inspired the scholars to put their stories on paper and create a book of their lives. The book, now published, was made after several writing workshops initiated and facilitated by the scholars themselves. It aims to be a source of strength and inspiration, as well as, a constant reminder of a journey shared together. The other component was a theatre day which was included only this year: One day was dedicated to movement, voice, and storytelling exercises aimed at instilling trust and foregoing inhibitions. This culminated in a playback theatre performance by the scholars—simulating an approach to trauma healing.

"In CSP-AP, I learned to acknowledge the power of storytelling, and the necessity of creating these safe spaces where people practice the art of listening; which, in turn, can empower both the listener and the storyteller.”
- Vijayendra, India

“The sessions on inner governance, understanding the self, and practicing mindfulness brought the program home for me. I learned to bring all that I’ve gained in harmony with the way I think and live.”
- Sahar, Afghanistan

The Caux Scholars Program is part of the IoC community. And this is reflected not just in the delivery of the program, but in the lives of the scholars while they were in Asia Plateau. One of the first things the scholars were introduced to was a practice called Quiet Time. Held for an hour every morning, this session is a space and time for the scholars to listen to their thoughts, reflect on their lives, and take a moment to understand themselves. There were sessions on yoga, immersion in nature, the meaning of Christmas, gratitude and reconciliation, resolutions, and simply sharing stories. The second practice the scholars were introduced to at the center was community service that included wash-up and service during meal times. This work was done in teams and shifts that gave the scholars an opportunity to work not only with each other; but also with participants from other programs. Lastly, no occasion was celebrated without the IoC family gathering together. Be it over singing carols on Christmas night, or dancing around the bonfire on New Year’s Eve, holidays were always spent in celebration with and of each other:
Much more can be said about the Caux Scholars Program - Asia Plateau; the trips to Mahabaleshwar and Pune, the dance parties, the night walks, the alumni, the nature, the monkeys—each one a reason that makes it worth living and reliving. But out of all these possible reasons, what makes CSP-AP distinct, different, and truly outstanding, is simply this: it is given shape and life by stories—of IofC, of Asia Plateau, of the facilitators, and of the scholars. It is a space that transforms the stories carried by every individual involved into knowledge, inspiration, and examples. It encourages the scholars to use their culture, identities, convictions, and their everyday realities as resources to advocate and build peace in their own societies, communities, and selves.

“It isn’t only change that starts from ourselves, but also action. This is what CSP gave me. I always thought that for change to happen, groups must be formed and people must be mobilized to work together towards a goal. Little did I understand that change has less to do with numbers but more about positive intentions. If others aren’t doing it, I can.”
- Angelique, Rwanda

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