

### **Janneke Simpson – Panama, Summer 2013**

In July 2013, I spent 3 weeks in Panama. I spent a week in Panama City doing research for my dissertation. My dissertation will hopefully look at the economic impact of the land titling project in the Darien Province. The Darien Province is the southern part of Panama and is also the most underdeveloped part of the country. Panama City is an economic hub in Latin America especially with the wealth brought in through the canal activities, but the Darien Province is mostly jungle. There is one road, the Panamerican Highway, that goes from Canada all the way down the tip of Argentina but it stops in Yaviza in the Darien before starting again in Columbia. After Yaviza, some communities live far removed in the jungle. The great asset that is the jungle is also a great problem because of deforestation. I managed to meet up with a few people from the UN a couple of times and spoke to community leaders from indigenous communities who have been greatly affected by deforestation and have lost out in the land titling process.

The second part of the trip was spent in Yaviza on a Human Rights Brigade organised by Global Brigades. The aim of the trip was to bring legal advice to isolated communities. We were involved in a local school where we taught the children about their human rights but also had debating classes and seminars on drugs and alcohol. We also ran seminars for the adults of the community on marriage, divorce, child custody and child support. In this poor part of the world, women were often left to bring up the children on their own and men very rarely stayed around to provide for their family. Panama has therefore developed very interesting laws to deal with this. For example, Panama recognises common law marriage unlike the UK. If a man and a woman have lived together for 10 years as a married couple but without being married, then when they split up the courts can marry them and subsequently divorce them so as to protect the wife from being left with nothing. We also ran legal clinics where people could get advice on the procedures involved in settling their case. During our trip, the charity took on 2 cases that they my donations will support through the courts. We went to visit the people involved in their houses which made us all very humble as it made us all realise how lucky we were.