

## Green-Watch's Interview with Samita Mandjee



Over the course of the Winter 2023 semester, the Sustainability Ambassadors team, Green-Watch, set off to discover and interview Concordians who are actively contributing to sustainability at the university and beyond. Our goals with this interview series are to learn about the people behind the initiatives, spark conversation around sustainability, and inspire others to take action however they can.

We had the absolute pleasure of meeting with Samita Mandjee for our second interview: the Executive Director of CEED Concordia, natural and zero-waste cosmetic business owner, and Concordia alumni! We hope you enjoy learning about Samita's work, journey from intern to executive director at CEED, and path in sustainability!

## What drew you to work with a non-profit like CEED?

I was studying liberal arts and later switched over to geography. When I started studying at Concordia, I also started working with Greenpeace. I learned about fundraising as well as a lot of other things. I then worked with Équiterre, another environmental NGO. I came across the internship for [CEED](#) in 2018. It was a perfect opportunity since I was graduating, and I didn't have any plans for the summer. I did the [environmental sustainability](#) project with CEED. From there, I got accepted into another internship in Jamaica. I got to travel and experience diverse cultures and mindsets.

When I returned from Jamaica, I was a bit unsure of my path, but I continued working in local organizations specifically for the environment, such as with Éco-quartier. I learned a lot, including how to make cosmetics there. That's how I started my journey with herbalism and making my own products.

In November 2020, I saw the job opening for Internship Coordinator at CEED and became a full-time staff member. I had kept in touch with the organization, but I was not really involved, so I just applied thinking it was a great fit. I felt comfortable in the position because I knew most of the staff in Uganda, many people working for CEED, as well as the Concordia community. It just felt very natural and comfortable. I learned while doing virtual internships during the pandemic, which was rough, but we made it.

I was the only other full-time staff member alongside the executive director at the time, Hawa Keita. She taught me many things: how to develop the programs, work with the interns, be adaptable, etc. I was her right-hand. It was a natural continuation when her contract ended [to take over as Executive Director], and she told me she thought I would be a good fit. I was scared at first because I had never seen myself doing this job. Ultimately, she reassured me, and I ended up taking the position.

## What was it like starting your business from scratch and competing with businesses that are not zero-waste?

I also started my business, [Ayata Botanix](#), in 2020 when we were all lost and didn't know what to do. It just made sense to me that and it worked out because one of the first events CEED worked on after I was hired was a virtual market for BIPOC entrepreneurs or small businesses. I thought that I should launch something so I could also participate in the event. Two weeks before the application deadline I worked on an Instagram page, took photos of products I had already made, and designed a logo with a friend of mine. I launched the page the day before the deadline, and I got in. It was awesome, that market really helped me!



## How did online internships work during COVID?

It was incredible how we designed it. We had interns in Uganda and here at Concordia. It was a tech-ed internship. We did workshops for high school students in Uganda, teaching them computer basics in Word, Excel, ICT, and coding. We had four groups of interns working within those four departments. They would develop the workshops together. The day of the workshops, the Ugandan interns would

do on-site supervision while the Canadian interns were on Zoom, interjecting, preparing exercises, and more. Interns were still able to develop relationships with each other, build good connections and gain teaching experience.

However, it was hard because sometimes we would have connection issues in Uganda. We had to be patient. We had no choice but to adapt. Virtual internships also allowed us to expand and work with other countries. Due to the pandemic, we had a virtual internship in Colombia, and another in Senegal.

### **Did your environmental background prepare you for working now with more community oriented, social, and technology focused work or did you pick up the necessary skills from previous projects?**

Well, a bit of both. The internship in Jamaica also involved a lot of community work, which made me realize that the environment is not the *only* aspect of sustainability that is important. I also learned a lot about entrepreneurship, especially when I launched my business, and how it can help young people achieve remarkable things like self-sufficiency and self-sustainability, an essential aspect of our work here at CEED. I just had to go with the flow and learn on the job. I still focus on environmental sustainability because that's my passion and what I love doing, but as Executive Director, one must touch a bit on everything.

### **How does CEED work with Concordia?**

CEED Concordia was founded in 2006 as an NGO by two Concordia students – one Ugandan and one Canadian – who were really passionate about the Gulu community in Uganda, which was facing war with the Lord's Resistance Army's insurgency. There were several refugee camps and already a lot of NGOs present to help with recovery. These two students went to visit this community, realized there was still loads to be done, and founded CVAP – the Concordia Volunteer Abroad Program. CVAP allowed Concordia students to go to Uganda and work on different community projects. A few years later, we changed the name to CEED.

We wanted to show our commitment to the Gulu community by building a permanent area for our interns to stay, so a few years ago, we built a compound in Gulu. We built it with a lot of sustainability practices in mind as well; there are rainwater catchments, solar panels, and it's made of locally sourced materials.

Since 2016, we have had five main pillars of projects that we work on: entrepreneurship, media and advocacy, video documentary, technology education, and environmental sustainability. We're currently trying to merge some of them together.

This summer is the first time since 2018 (when I was there) that we're going back to Uganda with Canadian interns because of an Ebola outbreak and then the pandemic. We're really excited, it's been a long time now. This year is pivotal.

### **Are CEED internship projects permanent or do they change on a yearly basis?**

That's what's great about CEED and why I really love this organization: we never really break the projects. They continue year after year. For example, every year with the youth entrepreneurship project, we select around ten businesses to go through training on capacity-building and how to launch your business. Through a competition, three winners are chosen and given funds to help get off the ground. We always keep in contact and follow-up with the businesses that won. We have a whole

team in Uganda that can go and check-in. Another example, within the environmental sustainability project, we plant trees. The Ugandan team goes out in the field and checks on them.

There's always continuity in that sense, since with each new cohort that comes in projects are renewed. We don't start from scratch; we build on top of something. It's always much simpler for the interns; they can see what was done in the past, take inspiration, then build on and add their own creativity to take on the project.



### Is the online internship you mentioned in Colombia ongoing?

Unfortunately, no, because that was a grant that we got from Le Ministère des Relations internationales et de la Francophonie. The [project](#) was focused mostly on BIPOC women entrepreneurs. We had ten entrepreneurs from Colombia and ten from Canada. The two groups exchanged on the barriers and difficulties they'd faced, and also opportunities they'd had as BIPOC entrepreneurs. There was also the capacity-building component. Selected entrepreneurs went through training, depending on their level, in terms of finance, marketing, website management, etc.

In parallel, we had interns undertaking a research project on this whole program. They were exploring what were the barriers for women entrepreneurs, and especially for visible minorities. In Quebec, it's mostly the Black, Indigenous and people of color; in Colombia, there's a lot of Afro-Colombians and Indigenous Colombians. There was one research project in Colombia, one in Canada, and one comparative. We were able to draw recommendations from there to see how we can help women entrepreneurs to progress and what can be put in place by both government and local entities to help them progress. I learned a lot as the coordinator and from participating in the exchanges with the women entrepreneurs.

Actually, from this project came a video documentary, called *Femmepreneur*, that involves both the women entrepreneurs in Colombia and Canada talking about their challenges. It's a trilingual documentary. We have the first screening very soon, April 11<sup>th</sup> at Concordia. We're really excited. It's neat because we have both a record of what was done for our project and something bigger to show to people. Video documentaries are a big part of what we do here at CEED.

*This interview was unfortunately only released after the premiere. If you were not able to join April 11th stay tuned for when *Femmepreneur* goes public!*

### Through all your travels and internships, can you recall any experiences that were especially impactful?

Well, I'm not from Canada, so first moving here was a whole unique experience. But yes, after traveling to different countries, I've learned a lot. We are so privileged here for things like water, transportation, food, education — and that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are so many things that we have access to that are hard to obtain in other countries. I've noticed water access in particular.



This has been a big issue in Uganda, especially due to climate change; the rain patterns and seasons are not the same. It's a landlocked country, they rely on rain for everything. There are rivers and lakes, but still, you have to make do with what you have. Also in Jamaica, even though it's an island, water is so expensive that accessing drinking water is quite difficult.

Even my own access to opportunities. The fact that I have a full-time job and can still launch a side business and only doing it when I have time is really a privilege. If I were in any other country, I would need to focus 100% on that in order to survive. Things like these are eye opening for sure.

### Did you face any challenges transitioning from intern to Executive Director at CEED?

From intern to internship coordinator, I had to really change my perspective. As an intern, I would look up to my internship coordinator and ask so many questions, it was a different relationship. I had to learn how to become an authority figure, how to run activities and check-ins with the interns to make it feel lively and be available for them. Having been an intern myself I think helped me to see what they needed and made the transition a more natural process. It was easier to understand their perspective. It was challenging at first, but you learn and go with the flow.

Transitioning from internship coordinator to Executive Director... I think I'm still transitioning, it's really hard. There's a lot of things that I lack in my personal education; finance is not my strong suit at all, and it's a big part of being ED. It's still something I'm learning. The same goes for HR and dealing with all the Quebec regulations, documentation, taxes, etc. You learn on the job. Of course, there are roadblocks, but I also have the board of directors as support. They're a valuable resource to have.

### Can you recall a source of inspiration that influenced you to enter the world of sustainability, study the environment, and eventually begin your zero-waste entrepreneurship?

I lived in Réunion Island, which is a French department in the Indian Ocean until I was four years old. After that, we moved to Madagascar – where my parents are from – and then to Canada four years later. Réunion Island is so beautiful; there are so many mountains and forests, and every weekend we'd go out and go explore its nature. I was really young, but I feel like I still have some memories of those experiences. Personally, I always loved the beauty of nature – being near the ocean, mountains, all of it. So that was really inspiring to me for sure. I became even more interested in sustainability after reading books on animal rights and consumption. At around 12 years old, I became vegetarian. From there, I continued doing more research on why it's important to be vegetarian and its benefits for the planet.

### How did you turn your interest in herbalism and natural remedies into [Ayata Botanix](#)?

I was always interested in herbs, herbalism, and natural remedies. When I started working for Éco-Quartier, my colleagues and I had to brainstorm ideas for workshops that we could run to engage with the community. One of them suggested we make seed bombs with herbs and different plants. We tried showing people how to make them at our kiosk. I really loved doing that.

After I finished working with Éco-Quartier, I started looking into creating more of my own products. I started making shampoos, body butters, creams, and balms. When I saw that my shampoos were working very well, I thought, *oh, damn, that's cool!* So, I gave it to my friends and family – they really liked it. I noticed that there were a lot of different companies that were also starting out in the world

of natural cosmetics and so I thought that I could bring my own take on it and create natural cosmetics that were also zero-waste, since that's important to me. I started doing research and learned that I could reduce waste from my products by making them solid instead of liquid.

Becoming more self-sufficient in terms of my own consumption was also important to me. I hate buying products and was never one to buy 10 different types of body lotion for example. My mom was really into that. She would always buy us different products — I would never use them. They would just end up sitting there. This made me want to reduce my consumption.



With this in mind, I had the idea of making one product that I can use for many things; one lotion that I can use for my body, my hair, all of it. I started doing more research on that. Starting the business just kind of happened, especially with the virtual market. When I saw there was this opportunity, I thought, *okay, now I actually have to sit down and have everything ready*. From there, I learned even more about herbalism, and what kind of medicinal products I can make. For example, a pain balm for muscles, or a menstrual balm for cramps, because that's something that I suffer from. I thought, *I'm going to make something for myself, and if it works, I'll just give it to others*. That's usually how I came up with the products I've made: asking myself, *what would I use?* Then, *what can I share with other people?*

So that's my process. I want to keep it minimalistic, have as few products as possible that we use on a daily basis, and that last for a long time. I'm really happy to say that I now don't buy any products. For my kitchen, I don't buy soap, I make my own; all the detergent for laundry; all the cleaning products are my personal care products. It was a goal of mine to stop buying all of these, and it worked out. I actually just learned how to make soap from another woman entrepreneur. I taught her how to make shampoo and she taught me how to make soap — it was really cool.

### That's awesome! So, you're also able to collaborate with other female entrepreneurs?

Yes, for sure. The person who did my logo was a muralist working in front of my house. I just went up to her, we started talking, and she told me about her art. I felt like it was coincidental with what I was doing and what I wanted to achieve. She was able to design my logo, that was a cool partnership we had. Then working with Colombian entrepreneurs, I was able to exchange knowledge with those I met doing the same things as me.

I always love developing partnerships with other entrepreneurs because it's a small community, and I get to learn about the market community in Montreal. I think in the summer of 2021, there were a lot of markets because it was the first year that things opened up again. Many people I met at these markets told me, "I launched in 2020, during the pandemic, and it's my first market too". It was great to meet other entrepreneurs this way, see how we can collaborate, and see each other's creative processes.

### How have you found incorporating your education into your career?

Well, one of my goals when I entered CEED as Internship Coordinator was to do an environmental project. It just so happened that we were more focused on other things, so I wasn't able to create a whole project just around that. However, I feel like throughout these different projects, I would always be the one to ask, "did we think of this sustainability aspect in this event?", or "did we think of having a zero-waste event or project?". I would always think of resources and things that we should keep in mind in order for the event to be zero-waste such as making sure compost was available instead of just throwing food away. I would always bring that element into CEED, and I still do.

For me, the educational background has always been incorporated in what I do daily, because sustainability is everywhere; it's something that you have to apply on your own before you can apply it around you and in your immediate environment. It's always in the back of my mind.

Looking back, I think I would have studied something different. Human Geography and Environment was really nice, but I think I would have focused more on environmental geography, or working in nonprofits, because that's really what I want to do now.

**If someone wanted to follow a similar path, what sort of recommendations or steps would you encourage people to take?**

I would say start with research and seeing what you can do in your own environment, because it's not easy for everyone to just say, "okay, I'm gonna be zero-waste". If you live with roommates or family, it can make it hard to impose that. But I would say try and do the things that you, yourself, can do. For example, sometimes making your own products is a lot easier and simpler than you would think.

You have to decide to what level you're willing to go. If it's just composting, or if it's making your own stuff, or if it's actually cutting all waste from your life and buying everything in bulk. Sometimes, these things can cost more money. You have to know what you want to do and then from there, see what you already have in place and work with that.

I would say do some research and talk to people about it. You can learn more and exchange tips and steps.

**We know that at the foundation of CEED's work is bridging is your approach to collaboration and building partnerships**

First of all, I think partners should have a similar mission, vision, and values. In terms of working with people, the approach that *they* have is also important. If they have a community approach, then we would be more likely to work with them. Also, by examining their structure, we will try to see if they have a board of directors, or enough staff to support the project.



For my own business, it's mostly looking for the same thing – seeing if we have the same values. Also, as I'm the only person in my business, when I collaborate with someone, they are usually also the only person. So, it's really a person to person contact and seeing if the vibe is there, if we have a good connection, if we're able to be honest and talk and have similar approaches and values.

### How would you define sustainability?

That's a hard question. We've been using that word for a while, and for so many different things. Anything can be sustainable if you use it as a buzzword and kind of just throw it in; it becomes greenwashing. But for me, sustainability is in the long term – that's really important. You can't just be sustainable in one day. There are a lot of different internal changes that you can do for yourself and for the people around you which can make you sustainable.

You also have to look at the different aspects. Not only is it sustainable environmentally, but does it benefit the community? Is it viable? "Sustainable" is something you have to look at holistically and not just as a little aspect. You have to take into account all the different pillars that go into it.

### Do you have any specific calls to action?

- Start with just seeing what is around you that aligns with your own interests
- Using the resources at your university; there are a lot of organizations that work towards this, there are always different events, entities, or people that you could go to.
- Make a list of things that you want to change in your life and see if that's possible, one step at a time.
- Go vegetarian. It doesn't have to be every day, but you can at least reduce your meat intake because that's a big, big factor.
- Take advantage of Montreal's public transportation. If you live in greater Montreal, it's a bit harder, but these are some easy, small steps.

### How can those interested in CEED get involved with the organization?

We always have different job applications. Pretty much once a year we open various positions. We also work with the [Sustainability Ambassadors Program \(SAP\)](#) to have volunteers helping us with events, research, grant applications. Applications are closed for the internships, but if anyone is interested you can always get in contact with us, and we will see what we can do. When we table you can just come and chat with us. We often have events too, like the [screening](#). You can always reach out, we can organize a meeting, and we will see what we can do. Tell us what you're interested in working on, and then we can go from there.



## The Green-Watch team would like to thank Samita for sharing her work and journey into the realm of sustainability.

### We would also like to thank:

- At the [Office of Sustainability](#):
  - Meredith Marty-Dugas — our astounding SAP leader, advisor, and guide throughout this project
  - Christian Favreau — our engagement extraordinaire, for helping us promote and develop our project
  - Cassandra Lamontagne for being a critical networking connection and helping find a home for the interviews
  - Jessica Krejcik and Faisal Shennib for their contributions to brainstorming in the early stages
- Communications advisor Sylvie Babarik for helping find a home for our interviews
- Claudette Torbey and [Fairtrade Concordia](#) for providing materials and refreshments for our tabling and Sugar Shack Chat events
- Emma Harake and the [SHIFT](#) center for social transformation for helping us host our Sugar Shack Chat Event and weekly learning sessions
- Alexander Oster at the [Dean of Students Office](#) and Rebecca Tittler of the [Loyola Sustainability Research Centre](#) for their help in our search for interviewees
- Coco Mariano and Paige Keleher from [Sustainable Concordia](#) for their guidance on creating social media content and sound recording
- Duha Elmardi of the [Sustainability Action Fund](#) for contributing to project brainstorming and assisting us in the search for interviewees
- Maria and Daniela of [CSU](#) for helping us secure a space for our tabling event



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