



Engage**SDG**



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EngageSDG Newsletter
November 2025

OBREAL SARUA

EngageSDG: Entering the Final Year with Focus on Impact and Legacy



As EngageSDG enters its final year, 2026 is focused on strengthening visibility, sharing results, and deepening regional engagement across the SADC higher education sector. This year's communication efforts will highlight the outcomes of the participatory pilot projects in South Africa, Mauritius and Zambia, showcasing how universities are partnering with communities to address SDG-linked challenges. Key tools developed through the project (The Integrated Participatory Framework (IPF) and the Digital Academic Ecosystem (DAE)) will be promoted widely as regional public goods designed to support long-term collaboration and knowledge co-production. A major focus in 2026 is the rollout of the Capacity Development Programme, which will train staff from 20 SADC universities. Watch out for more information soon.

A significant development in 2026 is the formal launch of the SARUA Community of Practice on participatory engagement. We will be issuing calls for membership, profiling early adopters and promoting the value of peer learning, shared resources, and ongoing collaboration. Regular updates, short feature stories and quarterly webinars will help us nurture a sense of belonging and sustained participation among the members of the Community of Practice.

EngageSDG 2026 Meeting Dates

Monthly Work Package Leads Meetings

January 28
February 25
March 25
April 29
May 27
June 24
July 29
August 26
September 30
October 28
November 25
December 30

EXCO Quarterly Meetings

Q1
Monday, January 26
Q2
Wednesday, April 1
Q3
Wednesday, July 1
Q4
Thursday, October 1

Weekly Work Package Meetings

Please Note: Work package leads will set up their own weekly meetings with their work packages or according to how they decide



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Event Photos:



EngageSDG at the G20 Africa Social Summit: Advancing a Regionally Owned Digital Future



Digital Transformation at SARUA and a member of the EngageSDG team, Abri Hoffman represented both SARUA and EngageSDG at the G20 Africa Social Summit roundtable on “Digital Pathways to Inclusion: Leveraging Online and AI-Enabled Education.” In that forum, Abri underscored a core principle that resonates deeply with EngageSDG’s vision: Africa’s digital and AI future cannot simply be imported as a ready-made package, but must be built through its own universities, research centres and regional collaborations. Highlighting universities as hubs of innovation, governance expertise and cross-border coordination, Abri argued that digital inclusion must be systemic—encompassing not only access and literacy, but also the design of platforms, policies and AI systems that work for the most vulnerable users from the outset, rather than retrofitting equity at the end of the process.

This intervention aligns closely with EngageSDG’s objective of developing university capacity in the SADC region for participatory approaches to knowledge production in pursuit of the SDGs. The programme is constructing an Integrated Participatory Framework (IPF) and a supporting digital academic ecosystem to enable decision-making, capacity development and collaboration among higher education institutions around community-engaged, participatory practice. Abri’s contributions at the G20 thus positioned EngageSDG not merely as a project on engagement, but as part of the broader digital infrastructure required for an equitable, sustainable transformation of higher education in the region.

For EngageSDG, participation in the G20 Africa Social Summit carries strategic significance. It connects the programme’s work—such as its focus on digitally enabled teaching, learning and assessment; its emphasis on co-produced knowledge; and its ambition to build a sustained regional community of practice—with global debates on AI, digital inclusion and higher education reform. By bringing a SADC and EngageSDG perspective into a high-level policy arena, Abri helped to articulate the need for African-owned platforms, low-data AI solutions and open, collaborative digital ecosystems that serve as regional public goods rather than proprietary products. The G20 setting, in turn, opens new possibilities for partnership, resource mobilisation and recognition of EngageSDG’s work, reinforcing its role as a catalyst for a regionally grounded, participatory and digitally empowered higher education sector in SADC.

SARUA Participates in the Third Interregional Dialogue on Education and Development in Bogotá, Colombia

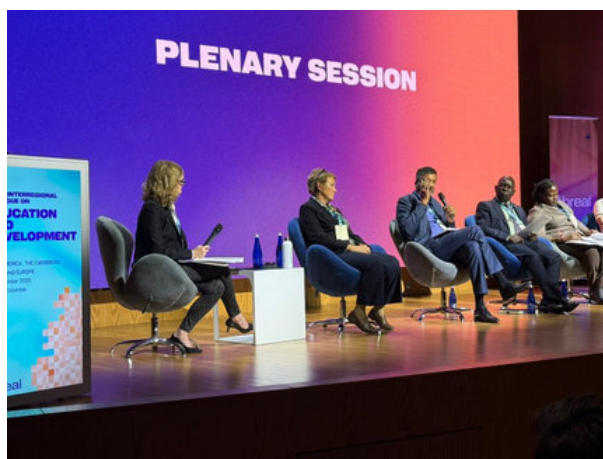
From 3–7 November 2025, SARUA, represented by its Executive Director and EngageSDG EXCO member, Prof. Stephen Simukanga, participated in the OBREAL-hosted Third Interregional Dialogue on Education and Development in Bogotá, Colombia, alongside higher education leaders from Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and Europe.

The Dialogue focused on strengthening interregional cooperation, advancing South–South partnerships, and positioning universities as key drivers of sustainable development.

A key highlight was Prof. Simukanga's contribution to the high-level plenary session, "Universities as Engines of Interregional Cooperation," where regional associations exchanged perspectives on collaboration, innovation, and alignment with development frameworks such as Agenda 2063 and the SADC Protocol on Education and Training.

The Dialogue further emphasised the need for structured, long-term cooperation mechanisms to support joint research, academic mobility, and digital learning initiatives. It reinforced the important role of regional associations, like SARUA, in shaping inclusive knowledge ecosystems and strengthening collaboration between Africa and Latin America/Caribbean, priorities that closely align with the aims of the EngageSDG project.

Event Photos:



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EngageSDG Engage SADC Stakeholders in Cape Town



The EngageSDG project is pleased to welcome Prof. Sannassee Raja Vinesh (Robin), Senior Programme Officer: Education, Skills and Development in the Social and Human Development Directorate at the SADC Secretariat, as a new member of the EngageSDG Executive Committee (EXCO).



SARUA Board Meeting at the University of Cape Town

EngageSDG and SARUA were actively represented at engagements hosted at the University of Cape Town, which brought together key stakeholders from within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), alongside members of SARUA's leadership and partner institutions.

Among the contributors in attendance was Prof. Sannassee Raja Vinesh (Robin), Senior Programme Officer: Education, Skills and Development within the Social and Human Development Directorate of SADC, who has also recently joined the EngageSDG Executive Committee (EXCO). His inclusion in both the engagements and the project's governance structure further strengthens the strategic alignment between EngageSDG and regional priorities.

The engagements also included representation from the SADC Secretariat, notably Ms Dudu Simelane, Director: Social and Human Development and former Head of Strategy, reinforcing the high-level institutional support and ongoing dialogue between EngageSDG, SADC structures and SARUA.

These interactions reflected a deepening relationship between SARUA, SADC stakeholders and partner institutions, within the broader context of advancing higher education, human development and strengthened regional collaboration across the SADC region.

Dudu Simelane is the Director ;
Social and Human
Development at the SADC
Secretariat. She has been the
Head of Strategy



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Work package 4: The Digital Academic System

The Digital Academic Ecosystem (WP4) has reached a significant milestone: the big decisions are now made, the platforms are chosen, and implementation is underway. Earlier this year, the EngageSDG Digital Academic Ecosystem specifications were finalised, providing us with a clear, shared set of principles to guide every digital decision we make. These principles keep us focused on sustainability, open standards, accessibility, mobile readiness, ease of use, and low technical overhead. They ensure the systems we build are practical and future-proof for the region.

A key achievement is the selection and implementation of the Digital Academic Repository. Following a structured review process, Zenodo was chosen as the repository solution for EngageSDG and SARUA. It matched our needs perfectly: no licensing costs, dependable long-term hosting, automatic DOI creation, strong metadata support, and the ability to host both open and restricted materials. The repository is now live, and we are moving into the curation phase: defining collections, preparing simple submission guidelines, shaping metadata practices, and setting up a light gatekeeping process to ensure quality and consistency as materials are added. This will position the repository as a trusted, easy-to-use hub for SARUA's knowledge outputs across the SADC region.

On the teaching and learning front, the decision has also been made: Moodle will serve as the Learning Management System for EngageSDG. The platform was selected for its strengths in short- and micro-course delivery, flexibility, scalability, mobile optimisation, and robust learner tracking. A full configuration and architecture specification has been completed, and OBREAL will configure and host the EngageSDG Moodle instance in accordance with those requirements. This includes preparing roles, authentication, course templates, key engagement tools, assessment options, and the general user experience. Moodle is scheduled to be fully ready to accept the first WP6 course by the end of Q1 2026, giving the team ample time for content packaging and quality assurance.

The progress in WP4 also aligns closely with WP3's development of the Participatory Approaches (PA) digital tool. That tool has been built using a cost-free combination of SoftR (free tier) and Airtable. Users enter project details through a simple form, and SoftR displays the recommended PA based on predefined criteria. From there, users will be able to access downloadable PA documents, training materials, and related academic resources hosted across the EngageSDG website, the repository, and Moodle. This approach keeps costs down, avoids heavy technical development, and fits smoothly into the broader digital ecosystem.

Looking ahead, WP4 is shifting from decision-making to refinement. For the repository, this means increasing the number of populated collections, improving metadata consistency, linking repository entries to the SARUA and EngageSDG websites, and preparing user-friendly guidance for contributors. For the LMS, the focus will be on onboarding instructors, testing short- and micro-course templates, and ensuring courses are adapted for low-bandwidth environments and mobile-first learning. The goal is to create digital spaces that feel intuitive and accessible for users across the region.



Integrated
Participatory
Framework



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Work Package 6: Capacity Development Programme

Work Package 6 (WP6) is advancing strongly toward its two key Month-33 deliverables:

D6.1 Final Capacity Development Programme and D7.1 Workshop for SADC Senior Officials, both due 31 August 2026.

The purpose of the programme is: To clearly articulate the foundational elements of Participatory Approaches (PAs) and provide practical, accessible learning resources to support the implementation of PAs for the SDGs across the Higher Education Community (administrative staff, technical staff, faculty, students and community members).

The WP6 team has designed a two-part regional training model that responds directly to the Work Package milestones:

1. A modular online course introducing Participatory Approaches (PAs), the SDGs, tools for participatory research, and SADC case studies.
2. A synchronous training event featuring interactive workshops and practical simulation exercises to apply the EngageSDG IPF.



The online, asynchronous course will consist of:

Module 1: Participatory Approaches

Module 2: Foundations of Participatory Approaches and the SDGs

Module 3: Participatory Methods

Module 4: Case Studies for the SDGs in the SADC Region

Module 5: Resources and Tools for Participatory Action Research (PAR)

This design meets the requirements of MS14, which calls for a reviewed and approved programme design, and MS12, which requires piloting the programme with at least 20 SADC institutions. The finalised training will then be delivered to senior officials as part of D7.1.

WP6 is creating a scalable, regionally relevant capacity development programme that strengthens universities' ability to use participatory approaches and engage communities around SDG challenges across the SADC region.

Pilot Project Summaries

The EngageSDG pilot projects are a key implementation component of the programme, aimed at applying participatory approaches in real-world contexts while generating practical insight, learning, and evidence to inform future scaling across the SADC region. The pilot projects outlined below provide an overview of their objectives, and implementation approaches:



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Title: Climate-Resilient Agricultural Practices through Participatory Knowledge Exchange in Zambia's Agro-Ecological Regions I and II (Focusing on SDG13 - Climate Action, SDG 2 - Zero Hunger and SDG12 - Responsible Consumption and Production)

University of Lusaka

Summary of the Concept Note
Climate change has intensified the vulnerability of Zambia's smallholder farmers, especially in Agro-Ecological Regions I and II, where erratic rainfall, droughts, and declining soil quality are threatening food security and household incomes. In areas like Kasisi, Chongwe District, farmers face increased crop failure and reduced livelihoods due to these changing climatic patterns. Current top-down interventions often fail to meet local needs. This pilot project seeks to address this by empowering communities through participatory approaches that integrate scientific knowledge and local experience. Through co-creation workshops and living labs, the project will train at least 100 farmers in climate-resilient agricultural practices such as drought-tolerant crops, water harvesting, and sustainable soil management. A "Living Lab" will be established at Kasisi Agricultural Training Centre to support grassroots innovation, demonstration, and farmer-led experimentation. By building local capacity and promoting peer learning through farmer cooperatives, the project aims to develop low-cost, practical solutions that strengthen resilience, improve food security, and promote sustainable agricultural production.

Participatory Approaches (PAs) targeted:
Co-creation workshops and living labs

SDGs targeted:
SDG13 – Climate Action
SDG2 – Zero Hunger
SDG12 – Responsible Consumption and Production

Title: Creating Safe Urban Schools through Community Led Natural Based Solutions

University of Zambia

The project aims at creating safer schools during flooding incidents through the use of nature-based solutions co-produced with the community. Flooding is a risk faced by residents of some unplanned settlements in Lusaka. Whilst flooding happens frequently, there have not been adequate efforts to utilize nature based solutions to solve the problem. School safety does not have mandatory guidelines and is left to individual schools. Flooding impacts children as they walk to and from their respective schools but flood response has not focused on equipping school children with the required skills. By engaging school authorities, school children and households (parents), the project will seek to map the areas within communities considered as presenting the highest risk to school children during flooding incidents. The living lab method will be utilised to develop a risk map and also propose solutions.

Collected data on the four pillars of emergency preparedness: emergency planning, preparation measures, safe school facilities, and hazard education and training. Participatory methods will be used to collect data on the four pillars of emergency preparedness which are emergency planning, preparation measures, safe school facilities and hazard education. Due to financial constraints faced by schools and communities the project will seek to propose and devise nature-based solution to these risks.

SDG 11, 6, and 13.

Title: Community-Driven SDG Awareness and Empowerment Workshops: A Participatory Approach to Sustainable Development in Local Communities

University of the Western Cape

This pilot project supports the Engage SDG goal of strengthening SADC universities' contributions to sustainable development through Participatory Approaches (PAs). It addresses the disconnect between global SDG frameworks and local community realities by creating community-based workshops that foster inclusive dialogue, raise SDG awareness, and empower local stakeholders to co-develop sustainable solutions. Using a Community-Based Participatory Action Learning and Research (CBPAR) model, the initiative builds on UWC's strong foundation in community engagement, interdisciplinary expertise, and existing partnerships in disadvantaged communities. The project seeks to create inclusive spaces for dialogue, increase SDG literacy, strengthen community-academic collaboration, and build local capacity for ongoing, community-led development.

Over ten months, the project will implement 6–8 workshops with around 160 participants, facilitated by a team of university staff and students. Workshops will use interactive, locally grounded learning methods and include co-created content to reflect community priorities. Key outcomes include improved SDG awareness, community-led action plans, stronger university-community ties, and a replicable engagement model for the SADC region. Monitoring will combine quantitative and participatory evaluation tools, while challenges like participation, sustainability, and power imbalances will be mitigated through inclusive design, flexible delivery, and community leadership. The project aligns with UWC's long-term strategies and contributes to the broader EngageSDG vision of collaborative, transformative higher education practice across Southern Africa.

SDGs targeted (cutting through emphasis):

- SDG 4 – Quality Education
- SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals
- SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities
- SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities
- SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions



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Title: Re-imagining community education post COVID 19: Mobilizing unemployed youth as community assets to reduce the educational divide in a South African township (SDG 4; community-based research)

North-West University

This community-based research (CBR) project, aims to build capacity among academic researchers and youth to conduct ethical, inclusive, and impactful participatory research aligned with SDGs 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and 4 (Quality Education). Rooted in a transformative Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) model, the initiative engages NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth in Khuma and Fochville to design and implement after-school programmes that support adolescents and enhance the life opportunities of the youth themselves. The project acknowledges the personal assets of marginalised youth and seeks to empower them through research and action that builds confidence, agency, and community resilience. Over three years, the project cycles through understanding learners' needs, co-creating support strategies, and evaluating their effectiveness and sustainability.

The initiative is embedded in NWU's broader institutional strategy to report on and integrate the SDGs into community engagement, with partnerships from township-based NGOs and various university faculties. Activities include training unemployed youth as field workers, conducting research using participatory tools like photovoice and digital storytelling, and collaboratively generating actionable knowledge. The outputs aim to benefit not only learners and NEET youth but also improve local NPO capacities and contribute to a sustainable model for educational support. A key legacy of the project is the planned establishment of a Science Shop—an institutional mechanism that will facilitate bottom-up, demand-driven research partnerships between communities and the university, advancing NWU's commitment to community impact and sustainability.

SDGs targeted (cutting through emphasis):

- SDG 4 – Quality Education
- SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being
- SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth
- SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities
- SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities
- SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals



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Title: Community engagement to gather thermal perception in built spaces and community empowerment to promote heat health using passive and Nature-based solutions (NbS) measures

University of Mauritius

One of the prominent impacts of climate change is the progressive increase in ambient temperature, resulting in the impoverishment of the indoor environmental conditions. This has been experienced across Mauritius through increased complaints at work and in households about thermal discomfort, with adverse effects on human health, well-being, productivity and general welfare. This is anticipated to worsen as global warming becomes more severe with increase in carbon emissions. The increase in peak power demand, achieving record levels in the latest summer period in Mauritius, is largely due to excessive heat gains into the building interiors and consequently leading to heavy reliance on air-conditioning. The project aims to gather the thermal perception of communities across the island to be able to understand the extent of the problem, and through workshops explain to community members the underlying reason in view of democratising knowledge about climate change. A more sustainable way to adapt to the increased summer temperatures and associated heat gains is based on a fundamental passive building design paradigm, well-documented in green building design literature. Furthermore, this approach allows vulnerable communities and low income families unable to invest in active cooling systems to cope with this pressing challenge. So a second component of the pilot project is to train community members to empower them to develop simple passive design measures for their specific homes, and showcase through pilot tests the efficacy of these measures. By generating such scientific findings on community perspectives and efficacy of fundamental, low-cost building measures, the pilot project hopes to empower people to take grassroots action to tackle the pressing problem of heat health they are facing.

The PAs targeted are co-creation workshops and real-world labs.

SDGs targeted in the pilot project:
SDG3 - Good health and well-being
SDG11 - Sustainable cities and communities
SDG13 - Climate action

Title: UTM's Community Carbon Footprint Initiative – Promoting Participatory Climate Action

University of Technology Mauritius

The project seeks to advance Mauritius's Nationally Determined Contributions by embedding climate-conscious practices within its own institutional fabric. Centered on the campus of the University of Technology, Mauritius (UTM), the project addresses the twin challenges of operational carbon emissions and limited awareness among students and staff regarding their personal environmental impact. By introducing a participatory model to monitor, reduce, and reflect on carbon footprints, the initiative aims to establish a replicable approach to sustainability leadership in higher education. Ultimately, it aspires to cultivate a culture of environmental responsibility and empower the UTM community as active agents of climate action.

SDGs targeted in the pilot project: SDG 11, 12, 13 and 17

University of Mauritius Pilot Project Progress: Awareness Session

Awareness session for a community at Bois Marchand, Terre Rouge. The community members were presented with Climate change impact on their livelihoods from a heat health perspective. With the knowledge on heat gains into their homes, participants were informed about low cost passive shading measures they can consider to improve thermal comfort. Real world lab implementation of passive measures were discussed with them.

Photos from the session



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EngageSDG - Year 2 Study Visit and Partner Planning Meeting 2026

Location: Faculty of Education, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain.
Format: Hybrid (in-person + online)
Dates for study visit: 19-21 January 2026
Participants: 10 SADC representatives (in-person), EU partner hosts, additional online participants.



As part of the EngageSDG project's continued knowledge exchange and capacity-building efforts, a Year 2 Study Visit will take place at the Faculty of Education, University of Barcelona, in Barcelona, Spain, from 19–21 January 2026. The visit will be conducted in a hybrid format, combining in-person and online participation in order to maximise accessibility, engagement and cross-regional learning.

The study visit will bring together 10 representatives from SADC institutions attending in person, alongside EU partner hosts and additional online participants from across the EngageSDG network



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Work Package Members

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WP3: José Frantz, Althea George, Pearl Erasmus, Lumka Magidigidi- Mathiso, Leo Van Audenhove, Franz-Ferdinand Rothe, Toshima Makoondlall-Chadee, Leo Van Audenhove

WP4: Abri Hoffman, Jackson Phiri, Ackim Zulu, Ramasamy Coolen, Preeya Vijayalakshmee Ramasamy Coolen, Liberty Mweemba, Kibrome Mekonnen

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Thank you to everyone for your hard work and contributions to the project. Let's continue to collaborate effectively and achieve our goals together.



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