



Engage**SDG**



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EngageSDGs Newsletter: April 2026

 **OBREAL**  **SARUA**

Upcoming UCC Ireland Study Visit

Background

According to Erasmus EngageSDGs project proposal calendar, the year 3, is pencilled to have two study visits from SADC Universities to their counterparts in Europe. The first EngageSDGs Study visit has already successfully taken place in Barcelona, Spain on 19-21 January 2026. It is against this backdrop that we are excited to announce second study visit upcoming, at University College Cork, Ireland, starting on 26 May 2026. The study visit will be for 1.5 days while the other 2 days will be utilised for Partners Planning and Review Meeting.

It is our profound hope that the visit will foster meaningful exchange, peer learning and renewed collaboration, and that your time at our University in Cork, Ireland will be both professionally enriching and personally rewarding. The interactive Hybrid sessions (in person + online) is projected to have 20 SADC representatives (in person), EU partner hosts and partners as well as additional online participants.

The Erasmus EngageSDGs project's central focus is on enabling SADC universities to select and apply contextually appropriate participatory approaches that strengthen local engagement in teaching, learning, and research. This is achieved through knowledge exchange, capacity development, pilot projects, and strategic collaboration between African and European partners.

The event has a dual purpose:

1. Case-based learning and validation.

The visit provides a learning immersion hosted by University College Cork (UCC), where partners engage with real-world case studies of participatory approaches and engaged scholarship. The aim is to benchmark, validate, and strengthen EngageSDGs outputs, about the IPF, digital ecosystem, and institutional engagement models—through exposure to applied practice.

2. Project planning and updates.

The visit also functions as a focused working platform to complete the project, ensuring that all deliverables, milestones, and engagements are finalised, evidenced, and aligned. This includes closing gaps (especially WP6), consolidating outputs, capturing all activities, and starting preparations for a coherent, audit-ready final report.



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Hosted by OBREAL and the University Collage of Cork, the visit brings together representatives from SADC partner institutions for:

- Focused discussions on the practical application of participatory approaches in higher education engagement.
- A symposium on PAs for engagement featuring European and African case studies, pilot reviews, and approvals for adoptions.
- Short study visits to selected EU partner institutions in Ireland to observe innovative practices in teaching, research, and community partnerships.
- Joint planning sessions to review project progress, refine the Integrated Participatory Framework, and prepare for Year 3 activities, including the capacity development programme and wider rollout to SADC universities.

Integrating structured workshops, field visits, and collaborative planning, the UCC study visit aims to deepen mutual understanding between EU and SADC partners, strengthen the project's knowledge base, and ensure that the tools and frameworks developed are grounded in practical, real-world experiences.



Anticipated outcomes from the event:

- IPF, participatory approaches, and digital ecosystem further validated and refined through UCC case studies Improved ability to apply participatory approaches and SDG engagement
- Deliverables and milestones discussed and finalised, including WP6
- Final activities discussed and agreed
- Discussion of project legacy



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Activities Outside Study and Planning Meetings

Cork is a vibrant city with a rich history, world-class food, and a rebellious spirit. Often called "The Real Capital," it offers a blend of narrow 18th-century alleys, grand cathedrals, and a thriving modern arts scene. We trust visitors will enjoy



The essential landmarks

1. The English Market: Cork's most iconic food destination, this Victorian indoor market has been trading since 1788. It's a sensory feast of local artisan cheeses, fresh seafood, and traditional spiced beef. It is highly recommended to visit in the morning to see the traders in full swing.
2. Blarney Castle & Gardens: Located just 15 minutes from the city, this medieval stronghold is world-famous. Climbing to the battlements to kiss the Blarney Stone is a rite of passage, said to grant the "gift of the gab" (eloquence). The surrounding Rock Close and poison gardens are equally enchanting.
3. St Anne's Church & Shandon Bells: Known as the "four-faced liar" because its four clocks rarely agree, this 1722 church allows visitors to climb the tower and ring the famous bells yourself. From the top, you'll get the best 360-degree panoramic view of the city's hilly skyline.

Historic and cultural gems

1. University College Cork (UCC): Often voted Ireland's most beautiful campus, you can walk through the riverside limestone quadrangle and visit the Honan Chapel, famous for its intricate mosaic floors and stained glass.
2. Elizabeth Fort: A 17th-century star-shaped fort that offers a fantastic (and free) vantage point over the city. It played a huge role in the Siege of Cork and provides a deep dive into the city's military past.
3. The Glucksman Gallery: Located on the UCC grounds, this award-winning contemporary art space is worth visiting as much for its bold timber architecture as it is for its rotating exhibitions.
4. Saint Fin Barre's Cathedral: A stunning example of French Gothic architecture with three soaring spires. Look out for the "Gold Angel" on the eastern roof legend says he will blow his trumpet to signal the end of the world.

We look forward to this visit being yet another successfully milestone towards the completion of year 3, wherein, the project will be fully delivered and commissioned.



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WP1: PROJECT MANAGEMENT, COORDINATION AND REVIEW

WP1 continues to provide the governance and coordination backbone of the project. At this stage of implementation, the focus is not only on keeping activities on track, but also on ensuring that project learning, reporting, quality processes, and partner coordination are brought together in a coherent way as EngageSDG approaches its final year. This is especially important as the project seeks to embed participatory approaches more firmly in higher education institutions and to ensure that outcomes remain relevant beyond the funded period.

A key priority under WP1 is the Interim Review

(<https://saruaarsa.sharepoint.com/:f/s/EngageSDGProjectWorkspace/IgDpFx1NXku1QpUVn41Q-xgfAau2s0ge7YhlJC3uAOWqcRE?e=648qGI>).

Normally, this milestone provides an opportunity to take stock of progress made to date, assess whether deliverables and milestones are on course, identify gaps or risks and clarify priorities for the project implementation. It allows partners the partnership reflect on what has been learnt so far and what adjustments may be needed to strengthen delivery, especially in relation to capacity development, institutional uptake, and sustainability. This review will therefore be critical in guiding the final phase of EngageSDG.

Most critically, we are awaiting the next tranche of funding. As part of this, we need all partners to add the work they have done because of the project. We can also add these interventions on our showcase website: <https://engagesdg.sarua.africa/>.

Interim review confirms strong progress, while highlighting priorities for the next phase
The EngageSDG interim review found that the project has made substantial progress in its first two years. Key achievements noted include the development of the Integrated Participatory Framework (IPF), completion of the State of Play Report, the establishment of quality assurance systems, the launch of six pilot projects, and the design of the capacity development programme for HEIs across the SADC region.

The review found that the project is strongly aligned with regional higher education and sustainable development priorities, and that the overall project architecture is coherent and promising. At the same time, the review identified several areas requiring focused attention, including financial sustainability beyond the current funding period, stronger evidence generation and monitoring, broader geographic and linguistic inclusivity, and the activation of the Community of Practice as a sustainable regional network. The review confirms that the foundations of the project are strong, while underscoring the importance of completing the next phase with strategic focus and clear evidence of uptake and impact



WP 2: EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

The North-West University continues to make significant strides in community engagement through its Siyakhula-Sibasha Science Shop project. This initiative, titled "Reimagining Community Education Post-Covid-19: Mobilising Youth as Community Assets to Reduce the Educational Divide in a South African Township," ran from 2023 to 2025. It focused on empowering NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth by equipping them with practical skills in entrepreneurship, career guidance, digital coding, food security, and health and well-being. These skills enabled them to mentor other young individuals in their communities, fostering a cycle of positive development.

The project's methodology is rooted in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), emphasizing co-creation with NEET youth, NGOs, and researchers. This transformative approach has been instrumental in building trust and community ownership. The initiative aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), with additional contextual alignment to SDGs 1, 5, and 16.



Key impacts observed include a significant shift from feelings of overwhelm to pride and accomplishment among participants, as evidenced by SenseMaker data. The project has successfully demonstrated a "Skills → Confidence → Livelihood Action" pathway, with participants expressing sentiments such as: "I didn't believe in myself before, but now I know I can build my future," and "This project showed me that my story matters and that I have something to give."



International Recognition: Barcelona Conference Keynote and Presentation

In January 2026, the EngageSDGs project gained international recognition at the **1st International Congress on Committed and Critical Education in Barcelona**. Prof. Lesley Wood delivered a keynote address, where she highlighted the project as a prime example of participatory approaches in her discussion. Concurrently, a presentation was given on the analysis of a Science Shop utilizing PALAR as part of a CBPR approach, showcasing the profound impacts on participants' lives and their empowerment.



Knowledge Sharing: Faculty Leadership Training

Further disseminating the project's insights, some slides from the Barcelona presentation were incorporated into a Faculty Leadership Training session at the North-West University on March 26, 2026. This training, conducted for the Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences (FEMS), aimed to share the valuable lessons and methodologies learned from the Engage SDG project with academic leaders.

Upcoming Engagement: Rhodes University Community Engagement Conference

The NWU team is also preparing for the Rhodes University Community Engagement (RUCE) Conference 2026, scheduled for May 5-7, 2026. The conference, themed "International Community Engagement Conference: Reparative Futures For The Cultivation Of Humanity," will feature two significant contributions from the NWU team:

- Presentation A33: "Relational Resilience: Ubuntu-Informed Community-Engaged Research with NEET Youth" by Lesley Wood and Bibi Bouwan (Day 2, 09:45, Venue 3).
- Presentation A50: "Community engagement and Fractured Ubuntu: A Reflexive Account of a Doctoral Research Journey in Community Based Research" by Nosipho Nxumalo (Day 2, 11:30, Venue 2).

During their presentations, the team will also actively promote the IPF, further extending the reach and impact of their collaborative efforts.



References

1. [Siyakhula Sibasha Science Shop celebrates the learning and development of all participants](#) - NWU News.
2. [RUCE Conference 2026](#) - Official Conference Website.
3. [CEConferenceProgrammeprogrammedraft61.pdf](#) - Rhodes University Conference Programme.



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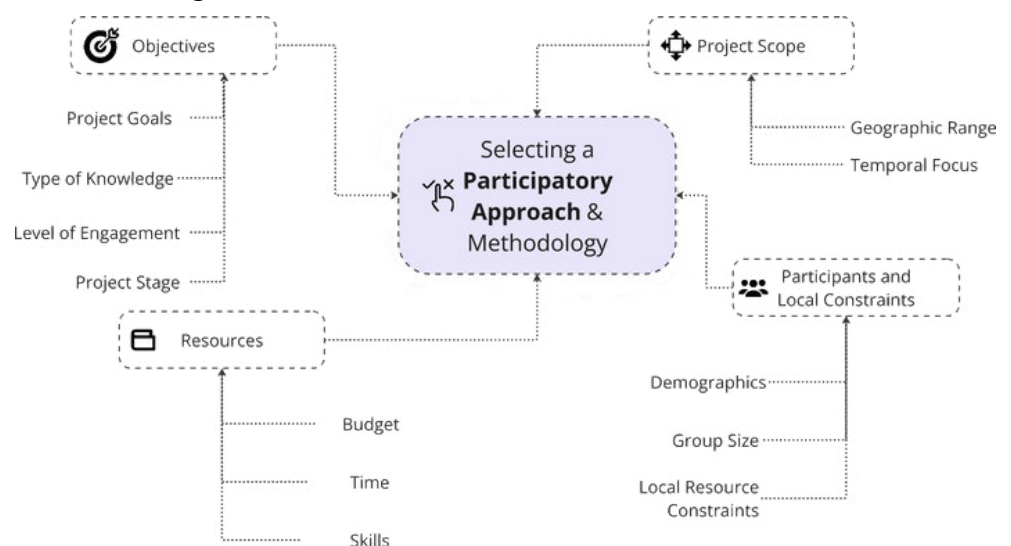
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WP3: IPF PILOT TESTING STRENGTHENS THE PLATFORM FOR WIDER USE

During February 2026, EngageSDGs completed pilot testing of the Integrated Participatory Framework (IPF) tool to assess its usability, relevance, and readiness for broader application.

The pilot included guided user testing, semi-structured interviews, and a synthesis of user feedback with earlier expert input. Findings showed that the tool is already providing value by helping users think more systematically about who to engage, why, and which participatory methods are most appropriate for their context. At the same time, the pilots identified practical improvements relating to accessibility, visual accuracy, recommendation filtering, and stronger contextual responsiveness. In response, the project team implemented several high- and medium-priority changes, including fixing navigation bugs, migrating the database to improve uptime, updating SDG colour alignment, and increasing font size for readability. The pilot highlighted future enhancements such as adding videos, strengthening ranking and filtering functions, integrating stakeholder analysis tools, and enabling user-contributed resources. The pilot confirmed that the IPF is a credible and useful tool in its current form, while also providing a clear roadmap for future refinement and expansion.

The IPF pilot report adds another important dimension: Social transformation also depends on giving practitioners useful tools to make better decisions about participation. The report notes that the IPF helped users think more systematically about who to engage, why, and which methods were appropriate in context. That matters because social transformation requires not just good intentions, but better ways of structuring participation so that engagement is thoughtful, inclusive, and suited to local realities.



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WP 5: Pilot Project Implementation Insights

Work Package 5 has successfully gathered all pilot project implementation reports from the SADC partner universities. These reports provide valuable reflections on the implementation process, detailing challenges encountered, highlighting the strengths of the initiatives, and suggesting alternative approaches for future activities.

The team has also conducted nearly all planned one-on-one meetings with the SADC universities, which have proven instrumental in discussing implementation experiences in greater detail and clarifying aspects of the reports. Updated versions of these reports are anticipated within the next 10 days, following these discussions.

In a move to foster peer learning and exchange, a cross-review process has been proposed among the SADC universities, encouraging them to review and comment on each other's reports. This collaborative approach aims to stimulate feedback across different pilot experiences. The consolidated reports are expected to be shared with European partners by the end of the month, seeking their feedback and suggestions on the application of the IPF.

WP6: Developing Capacity in Participatory Approaches

Work Package 6 is nearing completion of its online course for deliverable D6.1, focusing on the creation of a Capacity Development Programme. This comprehensive course is designed to introduce participants to key elements of Participatory Approaches, covering a wide range of topics including:

- What are Participatory Approaches and Why Are They Important?
- How do Participatory Approaches support the SDGs?
- Universities as anchors for Sustainable Development in the SADC Region
- A Paradigm Shift Toward Distributed Expertise
- Building Relationships for Participatory Approaches
- The Engaged University model
- Citizen science and living labs
- Co-creation workshops and collaborative design methods
- Challenges and strategies to overcome them
- Monitoring and evaluating impact
- Case Studies for the SDGs in the SADC Region
- Resources and Tools for Participatory Approaches (including the EngageSDGs IPF)

The course is set to launch in May 2026, welcoming participants from various SADC institutions. It will offer both practical and theoretical insights into participatory approaches, complemented by case studies drawn from the EngageSDG pilot projects. Following the course, a synchronous online workshop (deliverable D7.1) will be held for SADC senior officials to collaboratively explore and discuss the strengths of participatory approaches for integrating and promoting the SDGs. This primarily asynchronous and adaptable course is envisioned as a scalable, regionally relevant capacity development programme, ready for local and regional implementation to best serve SADC communities interested in promoting the SDGs through participatory methods.



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WP 7: COMMUNICATION, DISSEMINATION AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

WP7 is gaining traction as the project expands its outward-facing activities and prepares for wider sector engagement. Recent and planned activities show a growing emphasis on dissemination, dialogue and collaborative learning. These include:

The June 2026 **virtual capacity development workshops** on (1) *Participatory approaches* and (2) *the Integrated Participatory Framework (IPF)*, both of which are designed to strengthen institutional capacity and practical application of participatory approaches for SDG action in SADC higher education. The capacity development workshops are aimed to provide a capacity development programme for higher education leadership and staff from 20 higher education institutions in the SADC on the use of participatory approaches for local engagement, enable higher education leaders within the SADC to incorporate participatory approaches into policies and strategies related to the SDGs and broader sustainability goals include, in the wider project target group, leadership, academic and professional support staff at HE institutions within the SADC as the first and main beneficiary group.

This will take place over two consecutive workshops:

Workshop 1 - from talk to transformation (participatory approaches for SDG action in SADC higher education) and

Workshop 2 - from framework to practice (applying the integrated participatory framework (IPF) for SDG action in SADC higher education).

The target audience for the EngageSDG capacity development programme is higher education leadership, academic staff, and professional/administrative support staff from 20 SADC higher education institutions (i.e. likely participants about 110 academic staff and 30 administrative staff benefiting from the capacity building programme in Year 3).



WP7 is also closely linked to the development of the SARUA Community of Practice (CoP) on impactful participatory approaches towards SDG implementation.

The CoP is intended to become a sustained regional space for knowledge exchange, peer learning, co-creation, and collaboration among academics, practitioners, community partners, and policymakers. Its purpose is to connect, capacitate, and catalyse SADC higher education stakeholders so that participatory approaches can be strengthened and scaled across institutions and local contexts.

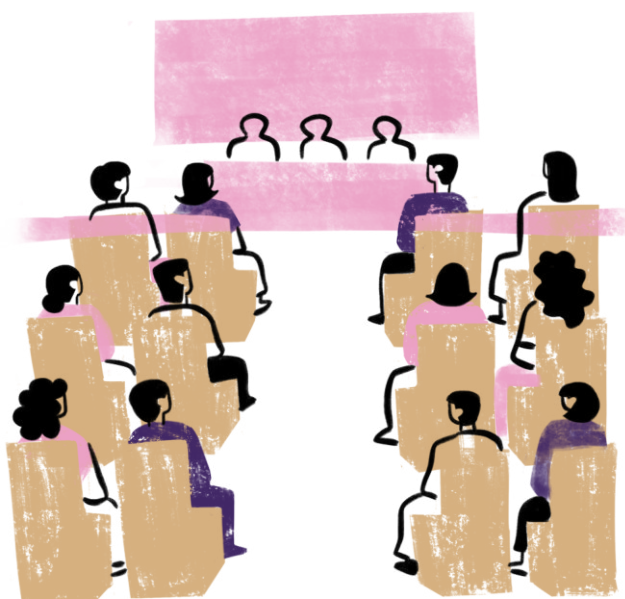


Another major WP7 milestone is the planned **EngageSDG Conference**, which is positioned as a bridge between project implementation and long-term sectoral uptake. The conference is provisionally titled From Participation to Impact: Universities Co-Creating SDG Solutions in the SADC. Participatory Approaches, Knowledge Co-Production and the Engaged University. We envisage a two-day virtual conference:

Day 1: Evidence, learning and sense-making where we focus on understanding participatory approaches and SDG engagement in the SADC

Day 2: Practice, power and sustainability where we change focus to doing participation well and at scale.

The conference will disseminate findings from the State of Play analysis, introduce and validate the Integrated Participatory Framework, showcase pilot projects, address the challenges and ethics of participatory practice and formally launch the Community of Practice. To participate in the CoP, please register using this link: [COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: Impactful Participatory Approaches towards SDG implementation – Fill out form](#)



In this sense, WP7 is not only about visibility, but about creating the platforms, networks, and momentum needed for system-level change. The wider dissemination agenda also aligns well with the broader SARUA Conference 2026 theme, From Innovation to Transformation: Scaling and Rethinking Higher Education Towards Social Justice and Sustainable Development, which emphasises stronger regional collaboration, knowledge exchange, institutional transformation, and alignment with the SDGs. As part of the conference, Prof René Pellissier will host a virtual workshop From supervisory practice to societal impact & social transformation. The workshop emanates from some of the learnings in participatory approaches, targeting researchers in SADC HE.



TOWARDS LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability of EngageSDG matters because meaningful social transformation cannot be achieved through short-term project activity alone. The project is laying foundations for a longer-term shift in how higher education institutions engage with communities, use participatory approaches, and contribute to the SDGs. Sustaining the project's tools, partnerships, learning processes, and regional networks beyond the funding cycle is therefore essential if EngageSDG is to leave a lasting legacy of more engaged, inclusive, and socially transformative higher education in the SADC region. As we move forward, WP1 and WP7 will remain central to the success of the project. WP1 must ensure that the interim review is completed and that the consortium remains aligned, reflective, and responsive as it enters the next phase. WP7, meanwhile, will continue to drive visibility, stakeholder engagement, dissemination, and sustainability through workshops, the conference, and the emerging Community of Practice. That means that WP1 and WP7 ensure that EngageSDG not only delivers on its objectives, but leaves a regional legacy in participatory, SDG-responsive higher education.

In the context of EngageSDG, **social transformation** refers to a meaningful change in how universities, communities, and other stakeholders work together to address real social challenges through the SDGs. It is not only about producing knowledge, but about changing relationships, practices, capacities, and decision-making so that higher education becomes more relevant, participatory, and responsive to society. Social transformation is not a separate add-on in EngageSDGs, it is the thread that runs through the whole project. It sits in the project's purpose of making universities more societally responsive, in its participatory methods of co-producing knowledge with communities, in its pilots that address real development challenges, and in its long-term aim of creating sustained change in how higher education contributes to the SDGs. Within EngageSDGs, this means that universities move beyond conventional, top-down academic approaches and become more engaged institutions that co-create knowledge with communities. The project is built around participatory approaches precisely because these methods encourage dialogue, inclusion, co-creation, and shared ownership of solutions. In that sense, social transformation is about shifting from universities doing work for communities to working with communities on issues such as climate resilience, quality education, sustainable cities, health, and food security.

The pilot projects show what this looks like in practice. They involve farmers, school communities, unemployed youth, households, students, and local stakeholders in identifying problems, shaping responses, and testing solutions together. The IPF provides a guideline on how this can be done under different conditions. This is socially transformative because it strengthens agency, builds local capacity, and creates more contextually grounded forms of knowledge and action. It helps universities become institutions that contribute more directly to inclusion, empowerment, and sustainable development in their surrounding societies.

In conclusion, for EngageSDGs, social transformation means changing how universities relate to society. It means building more inclusive and participatory ways of working, where universities, communities and partners jointly identify challenges, co-create knowledge and develop solutions that are locally relevant and aligned to the SDGs.



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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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