



Engage**SDGs**



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EngageConnect Special Edition
Celebrating EngageSDGs Story (2023-2026)

obreal SARUA

What a journey !

As EngageSDGs moves towards the conclusion of its three-year journey, this special edition of EngageConnect gives us an opportunity to do something important: to stop for a moment, look back, and celebrate what we have created together.



In December 2023, we began with ambitious ideas:

- Could universities in the SADC region strengthen their contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals by working differently with communities?
- Could we move beyond consultation and outreach towards genuine participation?
- Could communities become partners in knowledge creation rather than simply recipients of university expertise?
- Could we develop practical tools that would help universities make this shift?

Almost three years later, we have much to celebrate.

EngageSDGs has grown from an idea into a body of evidence, a practical framework, six real-world pilot projects, a digital academic ecosystem, a regional capacity development programme and an expanding network of people committed to participatory engagement.



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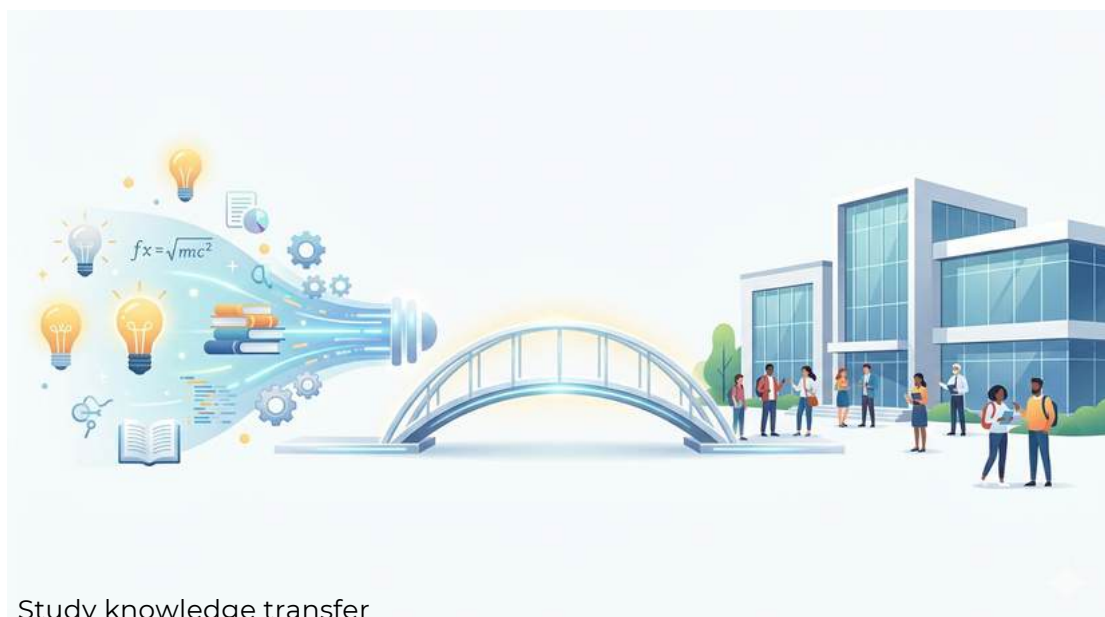
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This is the EngageSDGs story taking us from ideas to impact.

At the heart of EngageSDGs has always been a simple but powerful proposition: What if universities did not simply work for communities, but worked with them?

That question led us first to investigate what was already happening. Through the Situation Analysis, the project examined Participatory Approaches across community engagement, teaching and learning, and research. The work provided the evidence base from which the rest of EngageSDGs could develop. It showed both the enormous potential of participatory approaches and the realities institutions face when trying to implement them.

**And that raised our next question:
How do we turn that knowledge
into something universities can
actually use?**



Study knowledge transfer



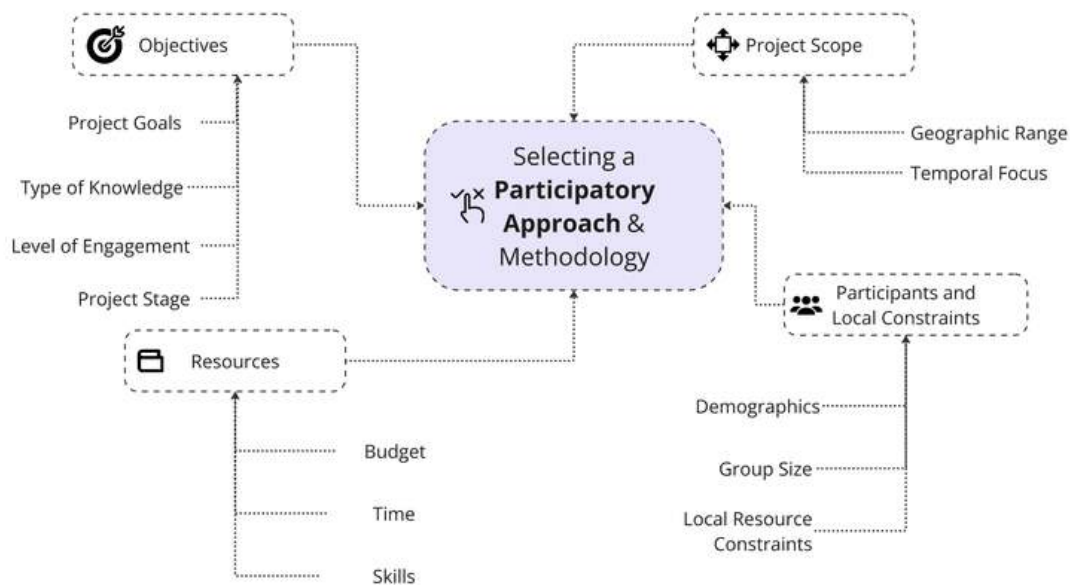
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From evidence to a practical framework

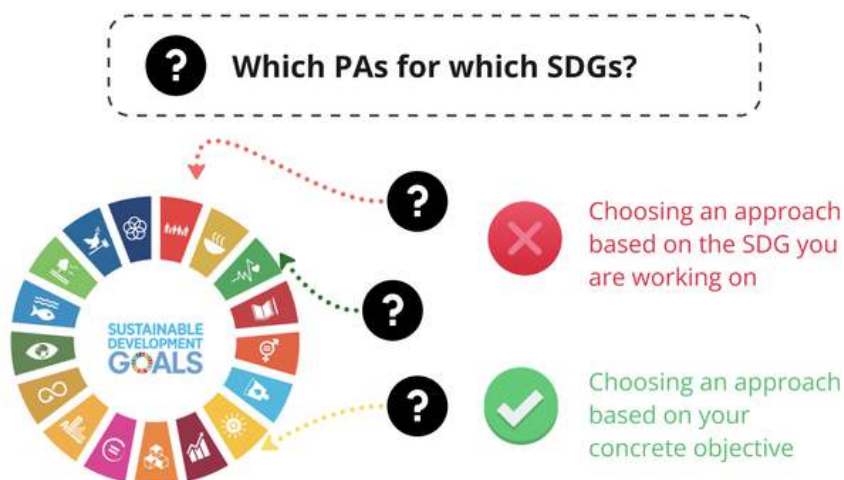
The answer became one of EngageSDGs' flagship achievements: The Integrated Participatory Framework (IPF).



<https://engagesdg.softtr.app/>

The IPF moved the project from understanding participatory engagement towards supporting its practical implementation.

Rather than prescribing a single "best" participatory approach, the framework recognises that context matters.



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Different communities, problems, institutions and SDGs require different forms of participation.

The framework therefore helps practitioners think about their objectives, available resources, participants and local constraints, and the scope of the initiative before selecting an appropriate approach.

By March 2025, the IPF prototype was available for exploration and peer review and brought together structured knowledge on more than 25 participatory approaches and methods, including Citizen Science, Participatory Action Research, Living Labs, Community-Based Participatory Research and Science Shops.

But we did not want EngageSDGs to remain a theoretical project. It was time to put participation into practice.

Six pilots. Three countries. Real communities. Real challenges.

Across South Africa, Mauritius and Zambia, six institutional pilots became the testing ground for the ideas being developed through EngageSDGs.

The projects took us into very different contexts and challenges, from education and youth empowerment to climate resilience, flooding, carbon footprints, agriculture, food security and community well-being. United in the approach.



Communities were not simply sources of data. They became participants in identifying challenges, sharing knowledge, understanding their environments and developing responses.

The pilots gave EngageSDGs something that no theoretical framework alone could provide:

The real SADC experience of participatory engagement in action

They also taught us that participatory engagement can be rewarding, complex and sometimes messy.

- It takes time.
- It requires trust.
- It requires universities to listen.
- And it requires us to recognise that valuable knowledge does not reside only inside universities.

That learning became an important contribution to the next phase of the project.



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Learning together across regions

EngageSDGs has never been only about producing deliverables.

It has also been about creating spaces where people can meet, question, debate and learn from one another.

Our consortium meetings, study visits, mini-conference, SARUA Conference participation and Interregional Dialogues have connected colleagues from SADC and Europe and allowed the project to learn across institutional, national and regional boundaries.

The Interregional Dialogues were particularly important in taking these conversations beyond the consortium.



On **20 May 2025**, our second Interregional Dialogue was hosted at Unicaf Zambia and online. Institutional leaders, academics, students and civil-society actors from Africa and Europe came together to consider how participatory approaches could strengthen community engagement and accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

The project also used the **SARUA Conference in May 2025** to extend the conversation into the wider regional higher education community.



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And sometimes the smaller gatherings mattered just as much. Looking back on 2024, EngageSDGs described it as a packed year involving two partner meetings and a mini-conference, with the Mauritius meeting providing important clarity about the Situation Analysis, SDGs, IPF and Digital Academic Ecosystem.

Barcelona: moving from development to legacy

January 2026 marked another important moment in the EngageSDGs journey. This marked a transition, albeit we needed to do this online.

We were no longer simply asking what we wanted to develop. Increasingly, we were asking: What have we learnt? What works? What needs to change? And what should remain after EngageSDGs ends?

Across three days, participants engaged in workshops, case studies, community dialogues and reflective discussions. The visit deliberately moved from exposure and comparison towards synthesis and project-level decision-making.



EngageSDGs was entering its final phase with the focus was increasingly turning towards impact and legacy.



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We deliberately did not want another webinar where hundreds of people quietly watched PowerPoint presentations.

- Participants engaged.
- They debated.
- They responded to polls.
- They questioned existing practices.
- They explored Participatory Action Research, Community-Based Participatory Research, Living Labs, Citizen Science and other approaches.
- And they considered what all of this means for their own institutions.

The question running through the programme captured the essence of EngageSDGs: *What if communities didn't simply participate in university projects... what if they became co-creators of knowledge?*

EngageConnect: Telling our story as it happened

And, of course, there has been EngageConnect.

What began as a way of keeping consortium members informed became a running story of the EngageSDGs journey.

Our newsletters have celebrated milestones, introduced colleagues, shared Work Package progress, announced events, reflected on challenges and documented the gradual development of the project. The July 2024 edition, for example, was already reporting developments in governance, the Situation Analysis and the early work towards the Integrated Participatory Framework. In September 2024, EngageConnect even became a capacity-building tool in its own right through a special Microsoft Teams training edition designed to support Teams as the project's central communication, collaboration and project-management environment. Through 2025 and into 2026, EngageConnect continued to record a project that was steadily moving from development towards implementation, impact and legacy.

This special edition now brings that story together.

What are we most proud of?

It would be easy to measure EngageSDGs only by its deliverables. But its real story is bigger.

- We have created a regional evidence base.
- We have developed an Integrated Participatory Framework.
- We have tested participatory approaches through six SADC pilots.
- We have created a Digital Academic Ecosystem.
- We have developed learning resources and a Capacity Development Programme.
- We have brought together hundreds of academics, researchers, leaders and practitioners.
- We have created opportunities for exchange between Africa and Europe.
- We have documented the journey through EngageConnect.
- And we are creating the foundations for a Community of Practice that can continue the conversation after the project ends.



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The project's final-year planning already places particular emphasis on peer learning, shared resources, continued engagement and the Community of Practice as mechanisms for sustaining participation.

From Timeline to Tangible Outputs

The EngageSDGs timeline shows our progressive journey from 2023 to 2026. But what does that journey look like in concrete, usable resources? Below is our **Deliverables Snapshot**, representing the formal reports, frameworks, and digital platforms now available as regional public goods:

Deliverables snapshot



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From ideas to impact... and now to legacy

Perhaps the most important thing we have learned is that participation is not a methodology that can simply be added to a project.

- It is a different way of thinking about the relationship between the university and society.
- It asks universities to listen differently.
- It challenges assumptions about who holds knowledge.
- It requires academics and communities to learn from one another.

And it reminds us that the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved by universities, governments, communities or civil society working alone. They require us to work together.

That is the legacy we hope EngageSDGs will leave.

Thank you for being part of the story



No project like this is created by one institution, Work Package or person. It is created through hundreds of contributions, large, small, all part of the journey.

To our consortium partners, Work Package Leaders, project teams, universities, researchers, students, reviewers, speakers, facilitators, community partners and everyone who has joined one of our workshops, dialogues, pilots or events:

Thank you for ideas, questions, challenging each other, sharing expertise

And thank you for helping us turn an idea into something that can continue to make a difference.

From ideas to impact: Celebrating the EngageSDGs story

We started with an idea. We built it together. Now we take it forward.

<https://engagesdg.sarua.africa/>



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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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