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October 2026

Universities, Communities and Sustainability
EngageSDGs Partners Learn from UCC's Living Laboratory

Obreal SARUA



Bridging Local Realities and Higher Education Transformation

How can universities become more responsive to the communities they serve? What role can higher education institutions play in advancing sustainable development? And how can participatory approaches help address complex societal challenges?

These questions were central to the EngageSDGs Study Visit, Partner Planning and Review Meeting, hosted by University College Cork (UCC), Ireland, from 6–9 October 2026.

Bringing together partners from Southern Africa and Europe, the visit created an opportunity to learn from UCC's sustainability practices, explore community-based research in Cork, share experiences from partner pilot projects and reflect on the future of the EngageSDGs initiative.

Funded by the European Union through the Erasmus+ programme, EngageSDGs promotes participatory approaches to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), strengthening the capacity of universities in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region to collaborate with communities, inform policy and contribute to sustainable development.

As the project enters its final phase, the Cork gathering provided an important opportunity to connect practical experiences with institutional transformation and consider how the project's resources, partnerships and lessons can continue beyond its formal lifecycle.

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Learning from a University-Wide Commitment to Sustainability

The visit opened with reflections on the role of universities in advancing the SDGs and the importance of translating sustainability commitments into institutional practice.

In his opening remarks, Prof. Stephen Simukanga of the Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) emphasised that universities have a vital role to play in addressing global challenges, but cannot do so in isolation.

Inequality, climate change, public health, youth opportunity, social cohesion and sustainable livelihoods require collaboration across institutions, communities and national boundaries.
He also highlighted the significance of the SADC higher education system's endorsement of the EngageSDGs framework and the opportunity to extend its principles across broader regional networks.

Sustainability in practice at UCC

Participants were introduced to UCC's sustainability journey through presentations and guided campus experiences. Dr. Maria Kirrane, Head of Sustainability and Climate Action, outlined how student activism, research, institutional leadership and operational practices have contributed to embedding sustainability within the university.

UCC's approach draws on frameworks including the international Green Flag Programme and AASHE STARS, providing mechanisms for assessing and improving environmental and social performance.

The university also operates within Ireland's public-sector climate obligations, including a target to reduce absolute greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030.

One particularly interesting example was UCC's approach to energy management. Through a departmental energy-budgeting initiative, units are encouraged to reduce energy consumption, with savings reinvested in eligible green initiatives. This illustrates how financial and institutional systems can be used to encourage more sustainable behaviour.

For visiting partners, these examples demonstrated that sustainability is not simply a policy statement. It requires governance structures, incentives, participation and ongoing institutional commitment.

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Experiencing Sustainability Beyond the Classroom

The study visit extended learning beyond meeting rooms and presentations, allowing participants to explore the relationships between environmental responsibility, biodiversity, education and place.

Guided by JP Quinn, Head of Visitor Services, delegates explored UCC's green campus and biodiversity initiatives, including its arboretum and approaches to campus tree management.

Participants learned how the university has incorporated more natural landscapes, including wildflower meadows, into its grounds while balancing biodiversity objectives with campus safety and maintenance requirements.

The programme also included a visit to the UCC Green Campus Community Garden, where discussions explored biodiversity, food systems, wellbeing and the educational value of green spaces. Prof. Barbara Doyle Prestwich, Head of Plant Biotechnology, shared insights into the university's work in this area.

A guided Anthropocene Walk, led by Dr. Ger Mullally and Dr. John Barimo, invited participants to consider humanity's relationship with the environment through an interdisciplinary exploration of history.

These experiences created space for reflection and informal exchange, reinforcing the value of experiential learning in helping participants connect sustainability principles with everyday institutional practice.



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Delegates take part in an interdisciplinary learning experience exploring environmental change, sustainability and humanity's relationship with the planet.



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Participatory Approaches in Action: Learning from Knocknaheeny

A central theme throughout the week was the importance of working with communities rather than simply developing solutions for them.

The GreenInCities initiative in Knocknaheeny, a historically disadvantaged area in northwest Cork, offered a practical example of how universities, local authorities, community organisations and residents can work together to address complex urban challenges.

Dr. Siobhan O'Sullivan and Dr. Elizabeth Folan O'Connor of UCC's School of Applied Social Studies, together with Eleanor Muhan, Senior Executive Engineer at Cork City Council, presented experiences from community-based participatory research and urban regeneration.

Looking beyond physical infrastructure

The work in Knocknaheeny demonstrates the importance of approaching regeneration holistically. Rather than focusing exclusively on physical infrastructure, the partnership considers the area's social, economic and environmental needs through a Social, Economic and Environmental Plan (SEEP).

Participatory evaluation has helped identify community priorities and support local service providers in accessing dedicated funding. The work presented included more than €870,000 in community funding secured through these processes.

The approach recognises that lasting regeneration depends on understanding lived experience, strengthening local capacity and ensuring that residents have a meaningful role in shaping development.



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Art, youth agency and community identity

The discussions also highlighted the contribution of arts-based research and youth-led creative initiatives to community empowerment.

Through collaborations with local spaces such as The Cabin Studio, led by artist Gary McCarthy, young people have used music and creative expression to challenge negative perceptions of their neighbourhood and build community pride.

Projects such as the track The Spark illustrate how creative platforms can amplify local voices and demonstrate the potential of youth-led initiatives to reach audiences far beyond their immediate communities.

Making nature part of the conversation

As part of the wider GreenInCities project, running from 2024 to 2027, UCC and Cork City Council are working with European cities to explore nature-based solutions to urban sustainability challenges. In an area with limited tree canopy cover, the initiative brings community knowledge and environmental considerations into the design of urban spaces.

Activities include participatory co-analysis and co-design workshops, the use of the Scottish Place Standard Tool, rain gardens incorporating crushed demolition materials and installations designed to support biodiversity.

An important principle is the recognition that nature itself must be considered in decisions about urban development. This broadens participation beyond human stakeholders to include the needs of local ecosystems and other species.

The experience offered an important connection to EngageSDGs: sustainable development becomes more meaningful when local knowledge, community priorities and environmental realities shape the solutions being pursued.

Showcasing Innovation Across the EngageSDGs Partnership

The Pilot Projects Showcase provided an opportunity for partner institutions to present their work, reflect on lessons learned and demonstrate how participatory approaches can be adapted to different institutional and community contexts.

Using the project's Integrated Participatory Framework (IPF), partners explored challenges ranging from campus sustainability and youth development to urban flooding and climate-resilient agriculture.

Although the projects differ in their focus and setting, they share a commitment to involving stakeholders in identifying problems, developing responses and learning from the outcomes.

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University of Mauritius: Promoting Heat Health and Climate Adaptation

Focus: Community engagement and passive, nature-based solutions

The University of Mauritius presented a pilot addressing the health and environmental implications of rising temperatures under climate change.

The initiative brings communities into the process of understanding heat-related challenges and developing practical responses suited to local conditions. Through co-analysis and co-creation, the project explores low-cost interventions, including roof shading, to improve indoor thermal comfort.

Monitoring indoor temperatures helps assess the effectiveness of these interventions, while community participation supports locally informed approaches to climate adaptation.

The pilot demonstrates how participatory research can connect climate science, public health and practical interventions, helping communities explore affordable ways to respond to increasing heat exposure.

North-West University (NWU): Mobilising Unemployed Youth as Community Assets

Focus: Youth empowerment and educational support

NWU presented an initiative engaging young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) in community-based educational programmes.

Using Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), the project supports young people in developing the skills and confidence to contribute to their communities. Participants receive training to become mentors and facilitators, helping deliver after-school programmes for younger learners.

The initiative positions unemployed youth as active contributors to community development rather than simply as recipients of support. By creating opportunities to build employability, leadership and educational support skills, the project illustrates how universities can connect participatory learning with local needs and youth empowerment.

University of Technology Mauritius (UTM): A University Journey Towards a Net-Zero Community

Focus: Campus sustainability and climate action

UTM's pilot explored how universities can strengthen their sustainability practices through carbon-footprint assessment, community participation and behaviour change.

The initiative combines Green Campus activities with efforts to engage students, academic staff and support staff in identifying opportunities to reduce environmental impact. Sustainability ambassadors and climate-literacy activities help build awareness and encourage members of the university community to take an active role in climate action.

The project highlights the importance of treating campus sustainability as a shared institutional responsibility. By combining environmental assessment with participation and practical action, UTM is working towards a more sustainable campus community.

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University of the Western Cape (UWC): Participatory Approaches to Sustainable Development in Local Communities

Focus: Community SDG literacy and local development

UWC presented an initiative focused on strengthening community understanding of the Sustainable Development Goals and connecting them with local development priorities.

Through capability-based participatory workshops, the project creates opportunities for community members and organisations to explore the SDGs and consider how they relate to their everyday experiences and development needs.

A key component is the co-creation of accessible learning materials, including children's books and educational games. The initiative also engages with early childhood development and community organisations, recognising the importance of making sustainability education relevant and accessible to different audiences.

By bringing communities into the development of learning resources, the pilot demonstrates how universities can support local knowledge-building and create opportunities for people to engage with the SDGs in meaningful, practical ways.

University of Zambia (UNZA): Safer Urban Schools Through Community-Led Flood Resilience

Focus: Climate resilience and disaster preparedness

UNZA's pilot addresses flood risks affecting schools in vulnerable informal settlements, where flooding can threaten safety, disrupt education and place additional pressure on communities.

The project brings together university expertise and local knowledge through school flood-risk assessments, participatory consultations and emergency preparedness planning.

The initiative also explores school safety and greening interventions, linking disaster preparedness with opportunities to improve school environments and strengthen community resilience.

By involving affected communities in identifying risks and developing responses, the project illustrates how participatory approaches can support more context-sensitive disaster planning and help schools prepare for climate-related challenges.

University of Lusaka (UNILUS): Climate-Resilient Agriculture Through Participatory Knowledge Exchange

Focus: Climate-smart agriculture and smallholder farmer resilience

The University of Lusaka presented a pilot supporting smallholder farmers in strengthening their resilience to changing climatic conditions.

The initiative promotes sustainable agricultural practices, water conservation and crop diversification while encouraging knowledge exchange between farmers and the university.
This approach recognises that farmers bring valuable practical experience and local knowledge to discussions about agricultural adaptation. By creating opportunities to share this knowledge alongside research and new techniques, the project supports the development of approaches that respond to local conditions and farming needs.

The pilot highlights the potential of participatory knowledge exchange to strengthen agricultural resilience, support sustainable livelihoods and contribute to food security.

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Shared Lessons Across the Partnership

Together, the six pilots demonstrate the breadth of participatory approaches being explored through EngageSDGs. Although their priorities differ, each initiative connects university knowledge with the experiences, capabilities and priorities of the communities it serves.

Several common lessons emerge:

- Participation strengthens relevance: Involving communities and stakeholders helps ensure that interventions respond to real needs and local circumstances.
- Knowledge is shared: Universities, community organisations, young people, farmers and other stakeholders all contribute expertise that can strengthen development initiatives.
- Practical action matters: From roof shading and educational resources to flood preparedness and sustainable agriculture, participatory approaches can connect learning with tangible interventions.
- Local solutions support broader goals: Initiatives developed in response to specific community challenges can contribute to wider progress towards the SDGs.
- Institutional partnerships create opportunities for learning: Sharing experiences across countries and universities enables partners to reflect on what works, what needs adaptation and where further collaboration is possible.

The showcase reinforced a central message of EngageSDGs: universities can make a meaningful contribution to sustainable development when they work alongside communities to co-create knowledge, develop locally appropriate solutions and strengthen the capacity for lasting change.



Partner institutions share experiences and lessons from participatory initiatives addressing sustainability challenges across Southern Africa

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From Project Outputs to Institutional Change

Alongside the study visit, partners participated in planning and review sessions focused on progress, outstanding deliverables, final reporting and the long-term use of EngageSDGs resources.

Led by Prof. René Pellissier of SARUA, together with Kibrome Haile of OBREAL Global, the discussions considered how the project's outputs could remain accessible and useful to universities after the formal funding period.

The Integrated Participatory Framework and Digital Academic Ecosystem

The Integrated Participatory Framework provides a structured resource for practitioners seeking to incorporate participatory approaches into teaching, research, institutional planning and community engagement.

Supported by the project's Digital Academic Ecosystem, the framework and associated resources are intended to help users identify approaches and tools suited to different contexts, including varying group sizes and literacy levels.

The discussions reinforced the importance of maintaining access to these resources and supporting their use beyond the project consortium.

Building capacity through flexible learning

The EngageSDGs Capacity Development Programme, developed under Work Package 6, combines a synchronous one-day masterclass with five self-paced online modules.

The modules address areas including situational analysis, participatory frameworks, institutional design and lessons from the partner pilot projects.

The programme offers a flexible route for higher education practitioners to develop their understanding of participatory approaches and consider how these can be applied within their own institutions.
Its endorsement by the SADC Technical Committee on Higher Education represents an important opportunity to extend the programme's reach across the region.

External review and the value of collaboration

External reviewers Andrea Vargiu and Dudziro Nhengu provided feedback on the project's progress and outcomes, recognising the importance of North–South collaboration and the co-production of knowledge.

The discussions also highlighted the need to assess project impact beyond immediate deliverables. Changes in institutional governance, policy, teaching practice and relationships with communities may take time to become visible, but are central to the longer-term value of initiatives such as EngageSDGs.

This perspective reinforces the importance of documenting lessons learned and creating conditions for continued institutional learning.

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Strengthening Dissemination and Accessibility

As the project moves towards completion, partners are also focusing on how its knowledge and resources can reach wider audiences.

Work Package 7 discussions, considered dissemination priorities, accessibility and the continued visibility of EngageSDGs outputs.
Key areas included the finalisation of English transcripts and the development of French and Portuguese versions of core training materials.

Multilingual resources are particularly important in the SADC region, where linguistic diversity can influence access to training and opportunities for institutional participation.

The discussions also explored the role of digital platforms, partner networks and future events in making the project's resources available to a broader higher education community.

These efforts are intended to ensure that EngageSDGs knowledge remains accessible and can support future initiatives beyond the immediate partnership.

Building a Lasting Legacy: What Comes Next?

Throughout the week, partners returned to a central question: how can the relationships, knowledge and institutional commitments developed through EngageSDGs continue after the project concludes?
The Community of Practice (CoP) emerged as an important mechanism for sustaining collaboration and enabling institutions to continue learning from one another.

The proposed structure brings together five interconnected areas:

- Institutionalisation of participatory approaches and sustainability.
- Teaching and learning.
- Research.
- Community partnerships.
- Policy engagement.

Through these streams, the CoP can provide a platform for sharing experiences, exchanging resources and exploring opportunities for future collaboration across institutions and regions.

Partners also discussed embedding the Integrated Participatory Framework within their institutional websites, strengthening formal commitments to sustainability and developing an open-access practitioner book documenting the project's methodologies, pilot projects and lessons learned.

The final dissemination and legacy conference, scheduled for 22 October 2026, is intended to bring together higher education leaders and sustainability practitioners to reflect on the project's achievements and consider its future relevance.

Together, these activities represent an effort to move beyond the completion of project deliverables towards sustained use of the knowledge and relationships developed through EngageSDGs.

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Reflections from the Study Visit

The Cork visit illustrated how international collaboration can create opportunities for universities to reflect critically on their own practices while learning from others.

Several themes stood out across the programme:

Sustainability must be embedded in institutional culture. Policies and strategies matter, but meaningful progress also depends on everyday decisions, governance structures and the involvement of students and staff.

Communities are partners in knowledge creation. Residents, young people, farmers and local organisations hold knowledge that can strengthen research, planning and development.

Participation must lead to meaningful action. Engaging stakeholders is not an end in itself. Participatory processes are most valuable when they influence decisions, shape interventions and support learning.

Context matters. Approaches that work in one setting cannot simply be transferred unchanged to another. Their underlying principles must be adapted to local needs, resources and priorities.

Partnerships are part of the legacy. The relationships developed through EngageSDGs provide a foundation for continued exchange and collaboration beyond the project's formal conclusion.

These lessons reflect the wider purpose of EngageSDGs: strengthening the capacity of higher education institutions to work collaboratively with communities and contribute to sustainable, inclusive development.



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Looking Ahead: From Shared Learning to Lasting Change

As delegates departed Cork, the study visit offered more than an opportunity to observe sustainability initiatives at another university. It created space to examine how institutional practice, community knowledge and participatory methods can reinforce one another.

From UCC's campus sustainability initiatives to the community-led work in Knocknaheeny and the diverse pilot projects across Southern Africa, the programme demonstrated that sustainable development requires collaboration across disciplines, institutions and communities.

As EngageSDGs approaches the end of its formal project period, the challenge is to translate these experiences into continued practice: embedding participatory approaches in university systems, maintaining access to project resources, strengthening the Community of Practice and creating new opportunities for knowledge exchange.

The project may be approaching its conclusion, but the questions it raises remain relevant. How can universities become more responsive to the societies they serve? How can they recognise communities as partners in shaping knowledge and development? And how can collaboration help turn shared ambitions for the SDGs into meaningful action?

The Cork study visit reaffirmed a shared commitment to exploring these questions together, building on the foundations established through EngageSDGs and strengthening the role of higher education in creating a more sustainable and inclusive future.



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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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