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7th Summer School Reflective Magazine 2026

WHEN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH MEETS VISIONARY THINKING!



Insights and Reflections from the 7th UNESCO Chair Gulu Summer School at African Rural University

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February, 2026

When Participatory Action Research meets Visionary thinking!

Insights and Reflections from the 7th UNESCO Chair Gulu Summer School at African Rural University, Uganda May 26 - 31, 2025.

February, 2026

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Message from The Editors

Maaike van der Sluijs & Robert Jjuuko

When people from different cultures gather!

What happens when people from different cultures gather? Do they listen, learn, share stories, and act together? Do they exchange knowledge and perspectives? This reflective magazine grew out of such a gathering. In May 2025, the Summer School "Women-Led Change: Community Engagement and Rural Development in Uganda" was held at African Rural University (ARU), in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair of Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work, the University of Groningen and Gulu University.

For one week, students, teachers and professors from Uganda, the Netherlands, Germany, Turkey, India, Nigeria and South Sudan gathered on ARU's campus in Kagadi. During this week, we learned about participatory action research (PAR) and the visionary approach (VA) of African Rural University in order to better understand the topic of women-led change in Uganda. Guided by the principles of PAR and ARU's visionary approach, we stepped outside the classroom, into communities. We had the chance to listen to women leading change in Uganda, and in turn, we learned to see research as a practice rooted in relationships, dialogue, and shared transformation.

The reflections and insights that you are reading in this magazine are written by participants, as well as facilitators of the Summer School. The synthesis of the insights and reflections in this magazine can be framed in the context of the convergences and tensions arising from the intersection of VA and PAR, thus the title "When participatory action research meets visionary thinking." Relatedly, we recognise that on the second day of the summer school, ARU posted an intriguing linkedin post titled What happens when participatory action research meets visionary thinking? The backgrounds of the writers of this magazine stretch across continents, disciplines, and generations. Their voices are distinct, yet connected, for instance:

- a teacher in training contemplating how to apply the visionary approach on his career;
- a professor explaining how a wooden Ugandan doll got a place in her family in the Netherlands;
- a PhD student reflecting on how the Summer School challenged her to rethink the ways in which research, leadership and community engagement intersect.

Together, these stories remind us that learning is not simply a one-way transfer, but a circle of exchange. Learning happened as much in conversation and exploration as in structured sessions. It flowed between Ugandan and international participants, between theory and practice, between vision and reality.

This magazine is a collective achievement, and we wish to extend our heartfelt thanks to all who made it possible.

We thank the writers who generously shared their reflections, insights and lived experiences. Our appreciation also goes to those who supported the writing process by reviewing contributions, offering feedback, and helping refine each piece. Their thoughtful engagement ensured that the voices represented here ring clearly and authentically.

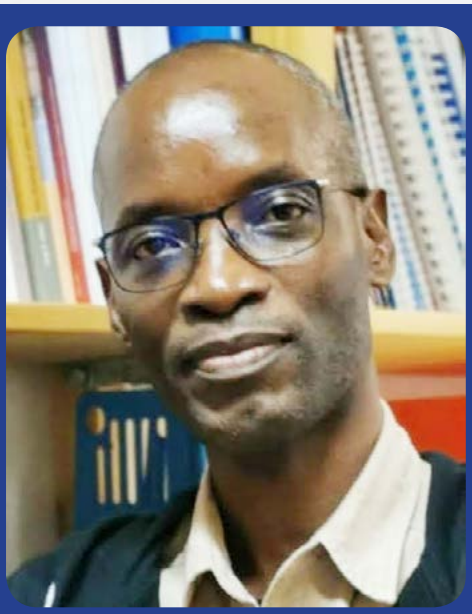
As you read, we invite you to join this circle. Reflect on your own context, your classroom, workplace, community or home. Where does participatory action research live in your daily life? How can a visionary approach help you see new possibilities for change, however small?

We argue that this magazine is not simply a record of the summer school proceedings, it is a collective reflection on what happens when people come together with openness and curiosity. It is a testimony to women-led change, to learning across differences, and to the transformative power of vision and participation. We hope it challenges you, inspires you, and invites you to ask: What change can I lead, and with whom?



When Visionary Approach Meets PAR: Appreciative Inquiry finds a home

Robert Jjuuko & Maaike van der Sluijs



Robert Jjuuko



Maaike van der Sluijs

"Identifying a problem statement was quite challenging for me since I was in the creative orientation of making visions, not identifying problems"

This quote from one of the summer school participants highlights an apparent tension in the conceptualisation of Visionary Approach (VA) and Participatory Action Research (PAR). During the summer school, the participants and the facilitators had moments of intellectual arguments about how the two approaches would work together. In our view, this conceptual tension is understandable and may even be fruitful. In this short article we propose that Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers the possibility to accommodate the methodological tensions between VA and PAR.

First, let us state the focus of each of the three approaches (VA, PAR & AI) in the context of this article and the 7th edition of the summer school at the African Rural University. VA is linked to holistic community development as a guiding philosophy. The approach emphasizes teaching how to think; rather than what to think, promoting community involvement, and reducing hierarchies. Creating a vision for the future and establishing concrete steps of how to achieve the vision are central to VA. There was consensus among the participants that the approach supports women-led change initiatives at ARU and its partner institutions. PAR is an action-driven research methodology aimed at achieving collaborative change in communities by community members as co-researchers and active agents.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) focuses on identifying and consolidating community strengths, including assets, knowledge and other resources as a basis for community development. It is thought to ground visionary aspirations and goals in existing strengths and translate them into

actionable steps. The AI process is commonly structured around a methodology known as the 4-D cycle, which systematically guides individuals or organisations through a strengths-based positive change process.

Second, we acknowledge that there could be challenges in integrating the visionary orientation of VA with the problem-solving focus of PAR. A couple of times, summer school participants, particularly those from ARU, said that they noticed a conflict between future-oriented aspirations of VA and the diagnostic nature of PAR. While the opening quote is drawn from the summer school evaluation document, there are several from the recordings of the summer school sessions. For instance, as the participants were being prepared for field work, one of them remarked *'my worry is that our participants in the field are used to a visionary approach but our research questions are in problem solving. How shall we merge the two orientations?'*

Third, we propose that AI can serve as a facilitating approach to bridge the methodological tension between VA and PAR. Moreover, a section of PAR and AI scholars converge in acknowledging the beauty of highlighting 'strengths' in different research and practice contexts, see, for example:

> *Be more appreciative and positive than critical. Marshall and Reason say action research must be 'dancing in beauty rather than fighting ugliness'.* (Boog et al., 2008, p25)

> *Appreciative Inquiry [AI] offers a robust and empirically supported approach to promoting organizational adaptation and thriving.* (Mather, 2023)

> *Appreciative Inquiry [AI], [which] complies with most of the principles of participatory action research (*Demeshane & Nel, 2018, p2*)*

> *Shifting attention from a 'problem-centric' to a 'possibility-centric'* (Rutherford, 2024, p94)

Finally, we propose that once provided a home, AI can resolve the methodological tensions by harnessing collaborative, action driven change processes which honour existing resources including resilience and agency. The 4-D cycle of Appreciative Inquiry can merge visionary thinking with action research imperatives. The discovery stage identifies strengths and achievements or successes through participatory inquiry. At the dream stage, participants envision a positive future based on the identified strengths and successes. The design phase translates the vision into actionable plans and goals; while these plans are implemented and evaluated during the destiny phase.

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The 7th Summer School at the African Rural University

Josje van der Linden



The UNESCO chair on Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work, based at Gulu University, has a tradition of organising summer schools on themes related to its mandate. The first summer school took place at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, to which the chair is also linked. The theme was 'Youth, education and work in (post) conflict areas'. The succeeding summer schools took place in Gulu University, Uganda.

The 'lifelong learning youth group' established after the first summer school in Gulu is one of the outcomes of these summer schools. In the group, young people discuss their experiences and support each other in finding a way to sustain themselves and their families.

Thus, youth entrepreneurship became an important theme in the subsequent summer schools. Each summer school counted on participants from African Rural University (ARU). They participated actively and told enthusiastic stories about their university, an all women university.

At ARU, students are trained in playing a role in the communities. When ARU offered to host a summer school, we were happy to accept, expecting to learn a lot from their higher education approach. In this way, our focus changed slightly: from the experiences of the youth, to exploring how higher education can support the youth.

Together with the ARU staff and prospective participants, we co-created the summer school objectives under the theme 'Women led change: Community engagement and rural development in Uganda' By the end of the summer school, participants were expected to:

- Demonstrate understanding of ARU's community projects and their effect on social entrepreneurship and community development as informed by ARU's unique philosophy to enable them to integrate elements from it into their own practice;
- Acquire new perspectives, theoretical knowledge, and practical skills focused on women-led community development, action research and change within the context of a cross-cultural understanding of feminism and female empowerment;
- Create strong networks and collaborative partnerships, through meaningful interaction and mutual learning, so as to provide a basis for possible future initiatives.



Based on these objectives, a programme with on campus activities and fieldwork was developed. Each morning started with taking part in the 'foundation course' (part of ARU's approach), then either interactive lectures and group work on campus or fieldwork in surrounding communities, concluding with presentations on different topics related to the theme. Forty participants from different universities in Uganda, Europe and Asia shared six days of learning, discussing, and also socialising on the campus of ARU.

The evening programmes organised by the participants consisted of a variety of activities including local language training, training on CV writing, Indian dancing, aerobics, and mountain climbing.

This calls for more! There is more to learn and share! The UNESCO Chair team has embarked on designing the 8th summer school, which will also be hosted by ARU, focusing on Women and girls' education and work transition. More time for fieldwork and reflection will be allowed.

For more information about the 8th summer school, click *https://www.rug.nl/education/summer-winter-schools/yew/* See also *https://www.rug.nl/research/nieuwenhuisinstitute/education-in-culture/unesco/* for information on the UNESCO Chair Gulu.



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- **How can Participatory Action Research serve to develop appropriate support?**

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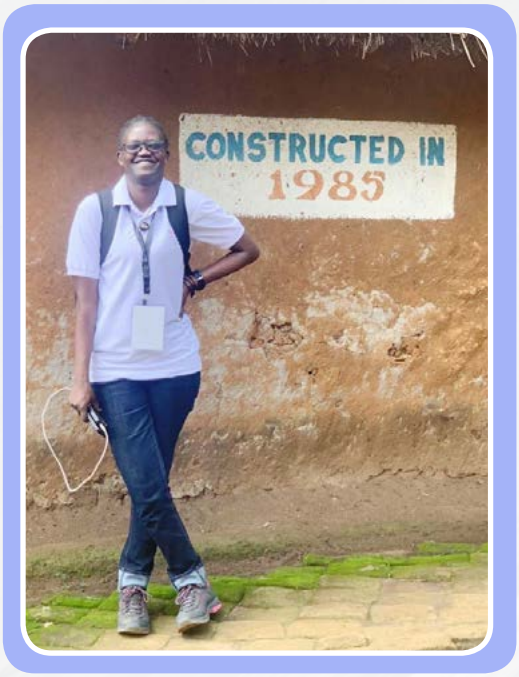


Between Vision and Reality:
Women-Led Change in Rural Uganda

Scovia Adrupio

When I joined the UNESCO Chair on Lifelong Learning summer school at African Rural University in May 2025, I was excited for several reasons. First, this was not the first summer school I was attending under the UNESCO Chair, and from previous experiences, the summer schools have always been worthwhile moments of learning, relearning, and even unlearning. Second, for this particular summer school, I anticipated an opportunity to attend in a different capacity: as a PhD student. With the summer school's theme aligning directly with my research project, I looked forward to testing the waters and getting initial on-the-ground voices of the work I had theoretically done so far in my PhD journey.

What I encountered was a powerful blend of vision and lived reality that challenged me to rethink the ways in which research, leadership and community engagement intersect. The summer school field work required us to use Participatory Action Research (PAR). For me, PAR is not just a research methodology, it is a lived practice of humility, of listening to communities share their visions, and of realising that research is not about extracting truths, but about co-creating meaning. We spent time in the Kagadi district in Southwestern Uganda, engaging with different communities living in rural and urban areas. Each space revealed the tension between visionary aspirations of women-led change and the day-to-day realities that women had to navigate.

One of the most striking insights came from the visit to a rural primary school where we saw how practical interventions such as a water tank and solar panel installations, and provision of school meals three times a week translated into visionary goals of girl-child education into tangible improvements. Enrolment numbers showed more girls than boys in the school, a remarkable achievement in a context where poverty, cultural expectations, and early pregnancies often hinder girls' education. However, this vision rested on the goodwill of parents, teachers, and the community organisations, reminding me that while visions inspire, they require sustained collective action to overcome the pressures of poverty and inequality.

Equally inspiring were the many women-led businesses in Kagadi town centre, from hairdressers, tailors to female electricians. They demonstrated the resilience and innovation of women who have had to forge pathways and spaces in some male-

dominated sectors. Their stories were layered with contradictions: independence alongside vulnerability and empowerment alongside the risk of exploitation. One married woman deliberately bought and registered land in her children's name to protect their future, highlighting both her agency and the precarity of women's ownership rights. For me, these encounters emphasised that women-led change is not a linear success story, but a negotiation between empowerment, agency, and structural barriers.

At a personal level, the summer school was a critical moment, where my academic journey and leadership journey in Rotaract converged. Sitting in households where family visions were elaborated to us, I was struck by the subtle differences in language: husbands often spoke with "I", while wives used "we". This linguistic detail shows the communal and generational focus that shapes women's visions of development. It also echoed my own belief that leadership, especially women's leadership, is about creating space for others and envisioning futures beyond oneself. The summer school left me with several questions to think about: *How do we secure women's economic and legal rights to protect their hard-earned progress? How can research better influence policy to reflect the lived realities of communities? How can men be more actively and intentionally involved in the conversations and works around women's empowerment?* Because at the end of the day, we rely on each other to bind our visions in reality.

Between vision and reality lies the everyday work of women in Uganda, educating children, running businesses, saving together and envisioning futures. My task as a researcher and as a leader, is to honour those realities, amplify those voices and ensure that the visionary promise of women-led change is not only imagined, but sustained.

Deepened Understanding of Engaged Education and Collaboration

Desire Muhindo



Being part of the 2025 Summer School at African Rural University was both a privilege and a learning journey for me. I gained invaluable experiences that deepened my understanding of community engaged education, women-led change, and the power of collaboration.

From the very beginning, I was inspired by the shared vision that guided the summer school. Bringing together diverse participants from Uganda and beyond created a platform for dialogue, learning, and action. The emphasis

on ARU's unique philosophy, which is rooted in the visionary approach, encouraged me a lot. The visionary approach has nurtured me since I was a student at African Rural University up to now.

One of my most memorable contributions was co-creating and leading a drama presentation on the theme group Girls, Community and Education. Our performance, which began with a poem 'Educate a Girl', illustrated the struggles and triumphs surrounding girls' education in rural Uganda. Through role-play, which featured a resistant father, a determined mother, and a hopeful daughter, we dramatized how families and communities can overcome barriers and embrace opportunities for girls to learn skills and transform their futures. This experience reminded me of the power of art-based methods in participatory action research, and how creativity can spark conversations about change.

Field visits to the local entrepreneurs in the communities in Kagadi were equally eye-opening. Listening to women entrepreneurs, epicentre managers, and visionary families was really inspiring. For me, the summer school's objectives—to understand ARU's community projects, acquire new perspectives, and build strong networks were fully realized. I did not only learn from workshops, discussions, and field experiences, but I also built lasting friendships and professional connections with participants from different backgrounds. This resonates with the aspirations of 'engaged education and power of collaboration'.

The summer school reaffirmed my commitment to advancing women-led community development and participatory approaches to learning and change. As I carry these lessons forward, I am hopeful that future summer schools will build on this foundation—reaching wider audiences, deepening cross-cultural collaborations, and continuing to empower women and communities to lead in shaping their own futures.



Wisdom Beyond the Classroom

Peninah Akampurira



The UNESCO Chair Gulu Summer School at African Rural University left me deeply inspired and profoundly changed. As a student at African Rural University it was an honor. The theme was clear and powerful.

One of the most moving aspects of the week was learning from Traditional Wisdom Specialists, affectionately called Professors without Papers. Their insights into indigenous knowledge systems, conflict resolution, and community resilience reminded me that education is not just about degrees, but about lived experience and cultural stewardship.

We explored topics ranging from climate-smart agriculture and appropriate technologies to gender equity and participatory governance. When we visited different communities to witness the impact of women-led change technologies, we learned how those technologies have changed their lives. Each session was rooted in real-world challenges and solutions, making the learning deeply practical and relevant.



Field visits to nearby villages allowed us to witness firsthand the impact of ARU's community engagement model and the Visionary Approach. We met women entrepreneurs, youth leaders, and farmers who are transforming their communities through innovation and collaboration. These encounters were not just educational—they were emotional. They reminded me that development must be co-created not imposed.

The last day of the summer school was an opportunity to celebrate the spirit of co-creation and co-learning. Dr. Mwalimu Musheshe, the ARU Vice Chancellor, affirmed a shared journey and renewed commitment to grassroots transformation. Dr. Robert Jjuuko, the Co-Chairholder of UNESCO Chair Gulu reminded us that lifelong learning is the key to unlocking

human potential. Overall, the summer school experience taught me that real change begins with listening. It begins with honoring local wisdom, empowering women, and building bridges between academia and community life. I left not just with new knowledge but with a renewed sense of purpose.









Uganda to the Netherlands:

Akiki and the Story of Women-Led Change

Josje van der Linden

The picture below shows a wooden doll from Uganda that found a new home in the Netherlands among photos of a Dutch family. The doll was a present given to me when I had to leave the summer school early to attend to my old mother in the Netherlands. I called it Akiki, one of the names in the local language Bunyoro we learned on the first day of the summer school, meaning 'Head of all



nations'. Akiki came with me on the plane travelling from Uganda to the Netherlands. My mother liked her. Akiki seemed to bend over to her to keep an eye on her. That is how Akiki got a place in my family: the 'Head of all nations' watching over my mother, bridging distances and cultures for 'women led change' as the theme of the summer school read.

Reflecting on this story, one could say that Akiki teaches us a lesson, a lesson that stands out, not only after the summer school in African Rural University, but also after earlier summer schools. The summer schools bring together people who are interested in meeting each other. There is no formal obligation, there is no diploma to be earned, but people feel enriched by meeting each other, exploring together and learning from each other. Akiki reflects this. Her influence stretches beyond the venue of the summer school.

Let us hope and work on reaching out even further to people who have never been at a summer school, but may read this magazine and wonder what it is about.



Synergy Created when Visionary Approach meets PAR

Beatrice Acio

I was acting as a volunteer in the 7th UNESCO Chair Gulu summer school, hosted by African Rural University. Through this, I gained experience in mobilization planning and time management, which is really helping me in my daily life activities.

In my view, when PAR meets visionary thinking, powerful synergy is created that transforms research into a movement for long-term, community-driven change. It becomes transformational when guided by a visionary mind-set. Visionary leaders within PAR don't just engage communities in solving present problems. They mobilize people around a compelling future, imagining what their lives, systems and societies could become. This combination shifts PAR from being 'reactive' to being proactive and future oriented.

First, visionary thinking pushes PAR beyond addressing immediate issues to co-creating a shared vision of the future with the community. When we visited Burora Subcounty, we witnessed how the communities and ARU staff were working together. They focused not only on analysing the present, but also on imagining what is possible in the future, thus building hope and ownership of solutions.

Secondly, while PAR emphasizes collaboration and action, visionary thinking ensures that these efforts are aligned with ambitious and long-term goals. Together,

they enable communities to strategically mobilize resources, skills and partnership towards systemic change like we have seen from the Burora woman saving and credit group in Burora sub county.

Thirdly, visionary leaders welcome unconventional ideas. In PAR, this translates into innovative, context-specific solutions and lived realities. Rather than importing models, communities invent their own paths forward supported by bold vision. For example, the Burora community was constructing underground tanks, which is more durable than buying plastic tanks, that can easily get spoiled and expensive in the long run.

In conclusion, when participatory action research meets visionary thinking, research becomes a vehicle for transformation; not just understanding what is but building what could be, as it is being practiced at ARU. This integration nurtures hope, creativity and collective ownership, helping communities move from surviving to thriving, guided by a vision they shape and share.

What happens when PAR Meets Visionary Thinking?

Esther Chebijira



I came to the UNESCO Chair Summer School at African Rural University (ARU) in Kagadi not as a student, but as a lifelong learner, a professional who has worked at the intersection of gender, disability, and education for years. I arrived carrying frameworks and experience. What I left with was something far more profound: a rekindled sense of purpose, connection, and possibility.

The theme, Women-Led Change: Community Engagement and Rural Development in Uganda was not just academic. It was lived. Felt. Witnessed. Every conversation, every community visit, every shared meal under the sun-dappled campus of ARU was a call to return to the heart of development work: people.

The summer school was a gathering of rich diversity. Professionals, students and lecturers from African Rural University, Makerere University, Gulu University, and the University of Groningen in the Netherlands, each brought perspectives shaped by different geographies, disciplines, and lived realities. We debated, shared, listened, and laughed. Despite our differing titles of student, facilitator, professional, the space levelled us. It invited us to reflect deeply, not just on what we do, but why and how.

For me, the real lessons emerged during our visits to the surrounding villages, where ARU has long-established community engagements (the Epicentres). These weren't

just field visits. They were moments of revelation. I watched women, most of them with no or very little formal education, demonstrate visionary leadership. They organised village savings groups (VSLAs), ran family farms, advocated for girls' education, supported children with disabilities, and kept their communities alive with innovation, resilience, and fierce joy. It was not charity. It was not "empowerment" as a buzzword. It was agency in action.

In these women, I saw a kind of knowledge that no textbook could capture: intuitive, strategic, collective, contextually rooted and intergenerational. It reminded me that rural women are not waiting to be developed. They are already developing their communities. What they need is recognition, support, and solidarity.

One instance during one of our community visits made a great impact on me. I found myself seated under the shade of a mango tree, where a group of women had gathered for their regular meeting. As the discussion unfolded, one woman, a mother of six, stood up and spoke with remarkable clarity about her dream of establishing a skilling centre for teenage mothers in her village. She had no formal training, but her voice carried conviction, vision, and a clear plan. She shared how too many girls in her community were dropping out of school due to early pregnancies, often left without support or a path forward. Her goal was to create a safe space where these young mothers could learn practical skills like tailoring, hairdressing, and baking, in order to rebuild their confidence and secure their futures. She had already identified a potential location and was rallying other women to support the initiative. In her, I saw the purest form of visionary leadership, one that does not wait for permission, recognition, or funding, but emerges from lived experience, compassion, and a deep sense of community responsibility. It was a powerful reminder that some of the most transformative development work begins quietly, under trees, in circles of trust, led by women whose leadership is defined not by position but by purpose.

The concept of Participatory Action Research (PAR) came alive in those dusty village paths. I have engaged with PAR before, in policy spaces and programme design. But this time, it felt more personal. I saw how research can be both radical and respectful. Not extractive but embedded. Not academic, but ancestral rooted in story, dialogue, and reflection.



If you ask me what happens when participatory action research meets visionary thinking, I will say this: we are reminded that development is not something we do for people, but with them in dialogue, in solidarity, and in shared vision. It challenges us to reimagine a world where those at the margins are not merely recipients of help, but architects of their own futures. In Kagadi, I saw rural women not as passive beneficiaries, but as

bold leaders shaping their communities with courage, clarity, and collective action. That experience has stayed with me, not just as a memory of a powerful learning exchange, but as a personal mandate to approach my work in development and research with deeper humility, curiosity, and connection. It reaffirmed for me that lifelong learning is not a lofty ideal, but a daily discipline, a choice to listen more, centre lived experience and remain anchored in the realities and hopes of the communities we serve.

There were contradictions too. We spoke about visionary thinking and yet wrestled with questions of power: whose vision, whose voice? Are we truly listening, or simply fitting communities into pre-determined development or research templates? These are the questions that followed me back from Kagadi, and I hope they continue to haunt and shape my work.

What stays with me most from this experience is not just what I learned, but how I was changed. Kagadi challenged me to slow down, to listen more deeply, and to question the assumptions I carry into my work. It reawakened the value of being present in spaces not just as a professional, but as a witness, a learner, and a participant in something bigger than myself. As I return to my roles in policy, programming, and advocacy, I carry not just notes and insights, but stories, questions, and a deepened sense of responsibility. The kind of transformation I witnessed cannot be measured in project outcomes, it is felt in relationships, in trust, and in the quiet conviction that development is not a destination, but a journey we walk together.



My Perspectives as the Oldest Participant

Stephen Odama

I am 72 years old amidst youths in their twenties, except for the facilitators and senior staff of ARU, who were our hosts. Although African, especially Ugandan, youths dominated the participation, I was able to interact with youths from Germany, Turkey, India, South-Sudan, and the Netherlands. Therefore, the Summer School provided the opportunity to share experiences from different cultures. Informed by the insights from the summer school, I would like to share my perspectives on women in development, higher education and the strategic position of summer school.

With regard to women in development, I was able to learn that women's problems were the same across the globe. Ugandan women participants shared that they are often left out of leadership at home, in schools, and in agriculture. For example, women do most of

the farming, but men take charge of selling the produce. In schools, leadership roles are mainly held by men, while women mostly remain teachers. One participant noted that on ARU's Governing Council, only one out of eight members is a woman. A participant from Turkey confirmed that this challenge is global, as was supported by another participant from India.

These stories show that efforts like Women in Development in the 1970s that sought to integrate women into the development process have not worked well. The Women and Development approach that suggested involvement of women as an integral part of development has not been achieved. As widely argued, while African women traditionally dominated agriculture, controlling land use and food production programmes targeted men through extension services, credit, and training. These programmes excluded women from modern technologies and reduced their economic power and social status. This is still continuing. Therefore the theme Women-Led Development where women take leadership roles in government, business, and communities to bring about real, inclusive change is a welcome idea.

We should acknowledge that human capital development enhances productivity and quality of life. As part of the summer school field work programme, our group explored Women, Education and Community Development in and around Kagadi. We were informed of the high girls' school dropout, low retention, limited female participation in education decisions, and lack of reproductive health teaching resulting in rampant teenage pregnancies. It was remarkable to know that initiatives such as Mutumba Nsambya Twekambe Organic Farmers' Savings



and Credit Cooperative Society Limited was advocating for girls' education. The participatory action research driven field visits provided me with new insights to the fact that, although Uganda needs skilled people for development, the country faces challenges in offering quality education and decent jobs especially for women. Many graduates have limited opportunities, turning instead to entrepreneurship, which demands practical skills. ARU -, the all-women university blends theory with field practice to prepare graduates to work with rural communities—improving livelihoods, transforming societies and fostering self-sustaining change. Its students and graduates shared compelling testimonies.

Let me turn to the higher education landscape in Uganda in view of what the summer school at African Rural University taught me. From my perspective, the VC for ARU is an initiator, reformist, vision creator and recreator. From my background of working in traditional Universities – Makerere University and Gulu University, I have learnt a lot from ARU's experience in locating universities

in Communities. I feel that the UNESCO Chair took the right decision to select ARU to host the summer school. I think the participants returned home different from what they were before attending the summer school. I expect them to be ready to volunteer and serve other people and also be change agents in their society.

The summer school widened my understanding of women-led change and participatory action research (PAR). The presentation by Victor Friedman clarified that PAR is not a single method but a family of approaches and tools. Its goal is to generate knowledge for change that promotes human flourishing. He emphasized that PAR is research with people, not on them, where participants and partners co-identify problems and solutions producing actionable knowledge that answers "why and how questions" Friedman highlighted reflexivity, the action research cycle (discovery, redesign, projection, action) saying that the "DNA" of PAR is 'change for human flourishing, reflexivity, and continuous learning'.

The PAR field visits helped to deepen my appreciation of the approach. The presentation of the findings from the field were very interesting, good for training and mindset change. I was able to confirm that ARU has changed the trend of women emancipation.

ARU's Relaxed Environment was the Perfect Venue

Dan Kobusobozi



The very first time we were welcomed at ARU, the environment had already challenged what I expected. When I imagined the university as the venue, I expected a noisy and busy place. But ARU's environment was peaceful, calm and exciting. Here I felt readier than I was for the summer school.

On the second day, Dr. Victor Friedman gave me a deeper insight of Participatory Action Research (PAR). I was amazed to learn the features of PAR. Dr. Friedman pointed out that PAR is a cycle that involves discovery, redesign, action and reflection. Another great feature that got me excited was that PAR involves generation of actionable plans with the people, not on people. I remember asking a question of how the question of reliability is compensated for in PAR. He responded "you have to make sure people trust you". So, PAR stood out to be a great tool that can be used to obtain actionable knowledge that can cause change.

When Dr. Mwalimu Musheshe presented on the ARU's visionary approach, he highlighted that the epicenter managers help people of the community set their



visions. They support communities to look at the opportunities at hand and at the possible threats, enabling them to take an active role in their own social transformation. This visionary approach stood out to be an idea that might impact my own professional life. Being a teacher, I can use this approach to set my career goals and financial vision, and to set out how they can be achieved.

The closing day was the day for us to share the learnings and insights we gained from the field visits. My team members and I presented on the impact women have as change agents. I was glad to present the findings in the best way I know how: a creative dance. At this point, I was feeling heard. I felt very good communicating my ideas with my team. It was a pleasure receiving a certificate on the closing day. For me, this was more than just a certificate: it was a representation of the great knowledge that I had acquired. There was one question that kept floating through my mind; how do I apply this knowledge? At the point of departure, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand I felt joy for the knowledge I had received, but on the other hand I was aware of the fact that I will not have more time to gain more knowledge, interact and network with people and learn new things.



Integrating PAR and Visionary Approach: Lessons Learnt

Barbra Akol

The dynamic interaction of Participatory Action Research (PAR) and visionary thinking profoundly inspires me as I consider my transformational experience at the 7th UNESCO Chair Summer School, hosted at African Rural University. The programme's focus on women-led development and community participation offered a live example of how real transformation may be triggered by grassroots projects, visionary leadership, and cooperative research—in particular in rural and urban Uganda. I am happy to share our group's findings from the PAR field visits which were part of the summer school design.

Our group observed first-hand how women are changing the story of local industry. Business women in Kagadi

have set off waves of empowerment for their families and communities, ranging from tailoring stores packed with vibrant clothes to busy hairdressing salons and well-run retail shops. Besides being places of business, their companies are social centers and safe havens for mentoring, skill sharing, and solidarity. The urban success stories highlighted the actual advantages of perseverance, teamwork, and visionary planning—qualities developed by the participatory action philosophy and the visionary approach, both central to the Summer School.

We encountered a youthful epicenter manager—a woman whose visionary leadership has set off a strong reaction of change in her village. Through the establishment of a avings and Credit Cooperative Organization (SACCO), she rallied community members to pursue shared visions for development. What sets her approach apart is the insistence on every SACCO member having a clear personal vision. This was not simply about financial inclusion; it was about fostering a culture of future-oriented thinking and goal setting.

SACCO members, many of whom had never imagined themselves as change agents, were now working collectively to achieve measurable advances—both economically and socially. Economically, the SACCO seemed to result in increased savings rates, improved business start-ups, and wider access to credit. Socially, the SACCO allowed women to support each other in agriculture, education, and health, and created new community norms and stronger networks. In addition to social and economical growth, the rural SACCO is also inspiring visionary growth; by linking individual aspirations to collective action, mindsets were already being changed, and foundations for long-term progress woud be laid.

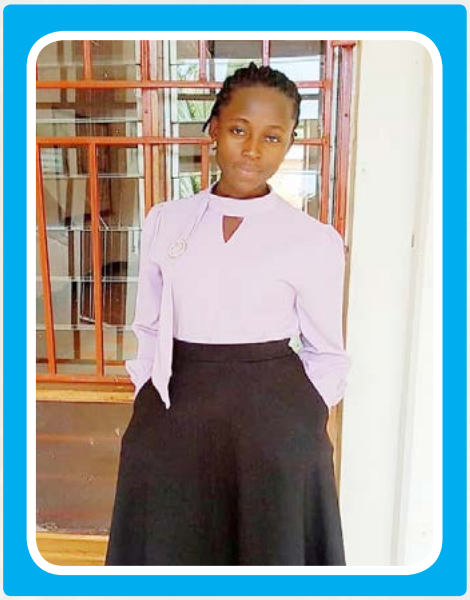


What the Summer School vividly demonstrated is that participatory action research is not just a methodology; it is a catalyst for visionary leadership. By engaging with local women—whether they are business owners in town, or epicenter leaders in the communities. We saw how research, reflection, and action can nurture a deeper sense of purpose and possibility. This approach allows marginalized voices to become architects of their own futures, turning abstract vision statements into actionable blueprints for development. The blend of women-led enterprise and structured, collective planning lays out a practical pathway for gender equity, sustainable growth, and empowered citizenship.

The fusion of PAR and visionary thinking experienced through the lens of the 7th UNESCO Chair Gulu Summer School offers a powerful template for rural progress. Women in both urban and rural settings are proving that with the right tools, support, and vision, transformational change is not just possible. It is already underway. Their stories challenge us to rethink development—not as something brought from outside, but as a living, evolving partnership between communities, researchers, and leaders, all moving forward together.

The Summer School did not Leave me the same

Patricia Acirocan



My participation in the 7th summer school did not leave me the same, but rather opened my understanding of participatory action research and the visionary approach, and their role in causing rural transformation. I realised that in order to cause rural transformation, the visionary approach (VA) and participatory action research (PAR) must be integrated. Moreso, it is also better for one to know that these approaches can not work alone but rather with others like systems thinking.

The 7th summer school was characterised by more field visits compared to the 2024 6th summer school, which I had been a participant. We had a chance to visit different places, where the elements of the two approaches had been used practically. It is amazing to say that even the way that these visits were conducted, was participatory as well as visionary. This is because different groups had different research topics and different visions that had influenced them to go to these fields.

In Burora Subcounty, where we visited Burora primary school, Burora Savings Group and one household; we saw the

influence of the two approaches. Burora Primary School is a government school which collaborates with the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT). URDT uses the visionary approach backed up by what is called the 2-generation approach. The 2-generation approach brings parents, guardians and pupils together to learn about different projects that they can implement at home to support the family.

These projects are called the 'back home projects', and every family that has a pupil at the school is expected to take up one or more of these projects. Some of these projects, like vegetable and maize growing, have been implemented at the school. This has increased the number of pupils to join the school, as well as the number of girls to remain in school, because both the parents and the school administration have a shared vision.

Burora Women Savings Group is a women-led group with the aim of promoting women leadership in local communities. The group has existed for more than 15 years and is still growing. When the group was created, the members were taught how to work with a shared vision and clearly learnt how to articulate their vision. The group is composed of both men and women who are living an exemplary life, because they are doing well. An example is their chairperson, who has managed to educate her 5 children and build herself a good house, even though her husband has been paralysed for 10 years.

Finally, one other household that we visited in the subcounty gave us an insight on the power of the visionary approach and participatory action research. This family has a shared vision, which is clearly illustrated on a flip chart. Every day; they reflect on their vision,to see what has been achieved and what is not yet achieved in line with the vision. The husband, wife and children are working together to make sure the vision is achieved. For example, they do all the farm work together and they are building their house together. Ever since they learned about their vision, they have managed to leave their children in school. They want all of them to finish their university education. In a participatory fashion, the family has managed to put together different projects, like growing coffee and cocoa, and rearing goats.



In my view, in order to cause rural development and development as a whole, PAR and VA are key approaches. This is because participatory action research allows people to own and be part of development instead of feeling neglected. The visionary process allows people to think and imagine the future they want, as if it has already been achieved. It allows them to identify what they really want, instead of dictating for them what they want.



Bridging Theory & Practice: Feminism from Bishkek, to Berlin to Kagadi

Aidana Bock

Participating in the summer school "Women-Led Change in Rural Uganda", that took place at the all-women African Rural University, offered me a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice. During my studies, I had already learned about Participatory Action Research and written a paper on the topic. However, back then I felt that I was missing a key part to really understanding the concept. Something my classroom could have not taught me like the summer school did: practical knowledge. Experiencing how Participatory Action Research is lived and applied firsthand, particularly by a group of women, provided me with an invaluable perspective on how research can actively engage communities and drive change. It revealed something beyond a methodology, a way of engaging people in shaping the future.

As a student of International Human Rights Law, with a particular interest in women's rights in Central Asia, the summer school's theme, "Women-Led Change in Rural Uganda," resonated deeply with me.

Taking part in this experience allowed me to witness innovative, and visionary approaches to self-sufficient work and community empowerment, broadening my understanding of female leadership in diverse contexts. In an immersive manner, it challenged me to reflect creatively and critically on complex questions of power, equity, and agency, unlike my mainly western-centric educational background.

This experience offered me a new global perspective on intersectional feminism. It became clear that no matter whether we are in Kagadi, Bishkek, or Berlin, the struggles for women's rights and equity are interconnected. While contexts and settings differ, the underlying challenges can often be similar, and there is much we can learn from one another. Listening to the women of Kagadi and being in conversations with the fellow summer school participants, made me realize how much my own gaze had still been limited in some respects.

I believe this experience made me think and look at situations from different angles, while also allowing me to share my perspectives. Seeing the ways women in and around Kagadi used innovation, and practical work to create sustainable change impressed me deeply. It showed women who, in the



face of adversity, used the resources they had, such as turning their skills into a profitable business and teaching those skills to other women. But it also illuminated the stones still in their path. This further opened my understanding of community dynamics at hand. In this case something that could be observed is that change is never isolated, but it is collaborative.

This summer school was more than an academic experience, it was a holistic journey that extended my horizons and connected me to people from around the world. For me, it was a reminder that intersectional feminism requires listening across cultures, building trust, relying on each other, and recognizing the links between our struggles. The issue of women's rights and equity remains an uphill battle, and together we are strong enough to take it on. Experiences like this reaffirm that we are not fighting the fight alone. Standing together, sharing our strategies, resources, and courage, whether in Kagadi, Bishkek, or Berlin, we can turn our visions into change.

Online Women-Led Change in Action

Jackline Katusabe



When I was asked to serve as head of volunteers for the 7th UNESCO Chair Gulu Summer School, I did not fully anticipate how deeply it would shape my understanding of what women-led change truly means not just as a concept but as a living, breathing force within our communities.

As a finalist pursuing my Bachelor's degree in Sustainable Agriculture, I am passionate about community transformation through organic farming and

participatory action research. This summer school reinforced that vision, but more importantly, it showed me the power of women's leadership in driving sustainable solutions and generational impact.

In the weeks leading up to the summer school, my role as Head of Volunteers was to mobilize and organize a team of equally passionate students ready to serve. Coordinating meetings, ensuring logistics were clear, and motivating the volunteers were key parts of my responsibility. A core part of this planning focused on creating an environment where young women volunteers felt confident to lead. From assigning roles to encouraging their input in decision-making, this was an early lesson for me. Meaningful women-led change begins when women feel trusted and supported to lead even in small ways.

One of the most transformative aspects of the summer school was our field visit to women-led businesses and community cooperative groups in the surrounding communities. Visiting these local initiatives gave life to the theories we discussed in workshops. We met inspiring women who have formed village savings and loan associations to pool resources, invest in sustainable agriculture, and support each other's entrepreneurial ventures. We sat with women who run successful sex saloons, bakeries and tailoring. The add value to their lives and creating employment for fellow community members.

These women shared not just their stories of success but also their challenges from limited access to markets to balancing business with family responsibilities. Yet, despite these hurdles, their resilience, creativity,



and collective spirit shone through. They reminded us that cooperatives are not just economic structures, they are spaces for women to practice leadership, decision-making, and solidarity. These engagements brought participatory action research to life. We didn't just study about these businesses, we listened, asked questions, and co-reflected on what is working and what can be improved. The mutual trust and open dialogue we experienced are the essence of true community-based learning.

Even after the end of the summer school, the lessons stayed with me. They have influenced how I approach my role as Secretary General of the United Africa Students and Youth Forum (UASYF) and as a volunteer coordinating student projects at ARU. I am more intentional about ensuring that young women in our student community step into leadership, whether they are managing a student garden, organizing training, or representing their peers at national or regional meetings.

I have also begun to integrate some of the models we observed into student projects encouraging cooperative approaches, group savings models, and value addition as ways to empower communities economically and

socially.

The summer school reaffirmed a powerful truth: when participatory action research meets visionary thinking under women's leadership, communities can unlock new pathways for growth, resilience, and lifelong learning. As young women leaders, we must continue to listen, to learn with communities not for them and to create networks that allow ideas to move beyond pilot stages to real, scalable change.

I am deeply grateful to UNESCO Chair Gulu, African Rural University, my fellow volunteers, facilitators, and the remarkable women we met along the way. Together, we demonstrated that when women lead — whether in businesses, cooperatives, or student communities — entire generations benefit. I look forward to continuing this journey, walking alongside other women and communities to build a future where knowledge, courage, and collective vision light the path forward.



When Women-lead, Communities Transform:

Joshua Ayiri

Attending the summer school on Women-Led Change: Community Engagement and Rural Development in Uganda was more than just an academic experience. It was an immersion into the real lives of women and communities shaping their futures in often challenging environments. It was both inspiring and sobering because behind every story of progress, there were unspoken questions about sustainability, fairness, and the hidden struggles of development.

One of the most important lessons came during our field visit to a farmers' group that had adopted the Visionary Approach. They worked together to create a shared vision for their community, which each household turned into personal goals aligned with the larger dream. Hearing families share how this practice helped them send children to school, start small businesses, and improve their livelihoods was moving. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder: if visionary planning is so powerful, why isn't it more common in other rural areas? What unseen obstacles, whether structural, cultural, or political, prevent more widespread adoption of such successes?

Another experience that deeply impacted me was meeting a differently-abled woman - who I call 'Ayanfe'. She was both deaf and unable to speak.

Ayanfe had been trained in tailoring. Against all odds, she now owns her own shop, making clothes and school sweaters for children. Her story conveyed strength, dignity, and inclusiveness. It reminded me that empowerment isn't about charity but about creating spaces where everyone, no matter their circumstances, can thrive. Still, I couldn't ignore another issue: how many differently-abled women in rural Uganda remain unseen, unheard, and without support? Ayanfe's achievement illuminated possibilities but also highlighted the ongoing inequalities that need to be addressed.

Throughout the summer school, discussions around gender, youth, entrepreneurship, and education kept circling back to a key truth: women are not just beneficiaries of development but its leaders. However, this belief isn't uncontested. Women bear the burden of leadership while also managing household chores, navigating cultural norms, and often lacking equal access to resources compared to men. The inspiring stories we heard also illustrated resilience in the face of deeply rooted systems of inequality.

As a master's student in Adult and Community Education, the several summer school experiences changed how I view learning and change. They demonstrate that education doesn't always happen in classrooms alone but through dialogue, community visioning, and collective effort. Informal and non-formal learning were central to the transformations we observed. Still, I wondered: how can these types of learning be better recognized, supported, and expanded to help achieve wider goals like food security, climate resilience, and economic empowerment?

I left this summer school both inspired and uneasy. Inspired by the courage, creativity, and leadership of women driving rural change. Uneasy because their stories remind me of the gaps that still exist, the women who haven't been reached, the visions that remain unfulfilled, and the structural barriers that are yet to be challenged. The summer school showed me that women-led change isn't just an option for Uganda; it's an essential need. Yet, it also convinced me that such change requires more than just inspiration; it demands ongoing engagement, honest reflection, and a willingness to face and challenge the challenges.



Challenges and prospects of women-led change and community engagement



Zula Namubiru

Drawing from the panel discussion on women-led change which was one of my key highlights from the summer school, let me share with you my short reflections on the associated challenges and prospects of women-led change and community engagement. I start with a brief on the four panelists with lived experiences from Uganda, Turkey, Netherlands and the United Kingdom. One of the panelists was still a student at African Rural University but had acquired a youth leadership position at a continental level. This implies that she acquired the position while still a student. She indicated distinct behavior; her kind gesture and the spirit of Ubuntu was visible.

The second panelist, who was born from Turkey, shared from experience of being the first girl from her rural community to acquire a degree and to do a master's degree. This meant that she has been leading in the community by being exemplary to the girls and the community, besides the challenges and obstacles she met. Having been born from a European country that is considered as first world, this was not expected by the audience from their feedback.

The third panelist had been a leader before in Rotaract, an organisation for both men and women which emphasizes on humanity. That experience helped her a lot in community service provision but also helped her to obtain a PhD scholarship that was very competitive in the UK. In her studies, she chose to conduct research with rural women. This highlights the need for more knowledge and skills for women led change and community engagement for rural development. Besides this experience, she is also a mother of two boys whom she left when the youngest was just five months with their father in Uganda. Considering division of labour in the Ugandan context and world over, domestic work/ child care is considered a female role, which has been taken up by the male father!

Lastly, the fourth panelist is a coordinator on UNESCO Chair Lifelong Learning Youth and Work at Makerere University, a lecturer, researcher, Council member, Chair Board of a women's rights' organisation and a member of Women's major group. Her active leadership started with UNESCO Chair coordination that she was identified by African Rural University Council, an all women university. Later, during the UNESCO Chair conference, she was identified by FEMNET to work on the project (African women organisation



communication Network) to work on the ACHIDNA project that was about skilling girls and young women on vocational Education in East Africa. Since then, she is affiliated to a women's major group, a global network of women advocating for Gender Inclusive Sustainable development goals at all levels.

The experiences of the four panelists highlights several challenges that include family responsibilities that were socially designed for women like care responsibilities. In addition to family and care responsibilities, three of the panelists involved in community responsibilities. Further, income generation is also another responsibility to support the family and the community. My experience is that besides the sex roles like carrying the pregnancy, breast feeding, all the responsibilities have to be fulfilled to be socially acceptable in society. To overcome these challenges of multiple roles for women, a support system is needed right from home. Good social practices with the relatives and neighborhood helps to monitor family while away, among others. Advancement in Technology is crucial in enabling virtual/ online engagements to fulfill family and community engagement roles.

The key lesson is that women led change and community engagement is not automatic but possible even at individual level, in all forms. Someone has to have a passion for humanity. This passion is exhibited in our personalities. It can also be nurtured if someone is interested in humanity through participatory action research.

The UNESCO Chair on Lifelong Learning



Established in 2017, the UNESCO Chair on Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work is a team of scholars, educationists, researchers, and practitioners affiliated to Gulu University in Uganda and the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. It was pioneered by Prof. George Openjuru of Gulu University and Prof. Emeritus Jacques Zeelen at Groningen University, both of whom are eminent scholars with a deep theoretical and philosophical understanding of adult education and lifelong learning. Dr. Josje van der Linden from the University of Groningen and Dr. Robert Jjuuko at Gulu University are the current Chairholders driving the consolidation phase of the Chair.

Since July 2025, the Chair is situated in the Open Distance, Electronic and Lifelong Learning (ODELL) at the Faculty of Education and Humanities at Gulu University, Northern Uganda. The Chairholders are supported by a team of faculty members, lecturers, researchers, graduates and students from the host universities and partners as well as motivated individuals from other willing vocational institutions and NGOs. The objectives of the UNESCO Chair Gulu are:

- strengthen the capacity of academic staff at the university and its partners to conduct quality teaching, research and community-university engagement;
- support capacity-building of professionals in formal and informal BTVET and NGO sector;
- foster the establishment of networks and sustainable partnerships between higher education, the BTVET sector, government etc;
- strengthen academic lifelong learning and adult education networks;
- develop new ways of working with students in community-oriented programmes and analyse how these ways can be integrated in the regular university programme;
- cooperate closely with UNESCO on relevant programmes and activities, as well as with relevant UNESCO Chairs

The Chair's work is organised under three themes namely Research & Capacity Building; PAR & Lifelong Learning Series; and Summer Schools.

Researching higher education, adult education and vocational education

The Chairs' research work is framed within a lifelong learning perspective. It primarily operates within a participatory action research tradition. Its DNA is cocreated research design as a framework for social practice by actors to interrogate their own actions, theories, prejudices, biases and assumptions they enact improvements while building and consolidating knowledge.

The Chair engaged effectively in the VET4.0 joint research project of Gulu University, Nottingham University, Witwatersrand University, and Rhodes University, which sought to understand the adaptation and transformation of vocational education and training systems in context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Its flagship Education-Work Transition Research, in partnership with researchers from Makerere University and University of Nottingham, is steadily gaining momentum since its inception in January 2025. Also, the Chair is professionally accompanying and supporting the ODELL department to develop the required human capacity for ODeL Material Development and Delivery.

PAR & Lifelong Learning Series

The Chair conducts a range of learning, communication, advocacy, and skills development events in the framework of its mandate, in order to contribute to UNESCO's mission of promoting lifelong learning in all its forms.

1.Professional & Career Development Events for Young Professionals

In collaboration with self-driven and motivated individuals and organisations, the Chair conducts seminars, workshops and other capacity enhancement events to support students, recent graduates and other early career professionals on their education-work transition pathways. In recognition of the increasing transition uncertainties of not only young people but also adults and older persons, the Chair is determined to explore innovative ways of responding to the specific challenges of these population groups.

2. Uni Alternative Access Seminars

The Chair, within the mandate of ODELL, conducts regular online and hybrid seminars for individuals without the requisite entry requirements to vocational training and higher education opportunities. This is the Chair's contribution to facilitating the socially and educationally disadvantaged youths and adults to harness and consolidate their prior learning within the dominant education systems and labour market.

3. Education Policy & Research Dialogues

The Chair is dedicated to fostering research, capacity building, and policy dialogues in the critical areas of lifelong learning, youth transition and work. These dialogues aim to create a vital platform for researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders to engage in robust discussions, share cutting edge research findings, and collaboratively explore and influence theory, policy and practice.

Summer Schools

The Chair conducts summer schools focusing on strategic themes such as 'youth, education and work in conflict

areas', 'education-work transition', 'Entrepreneurship and youth development in an international context', 'Mental resilience and social entrepreneurship' and 'Women-led change, community engagement & rural transformation'.



The summer schools are spaces for diversity and intercultural learning by national and international participants. The schools' action research-driven transformative pedagogies promote the engagement of experts and individuals with relevant lived experiences into higher education spaces. A book 'Youth, education and work in (post) conflict areas', based on the learnings from the summer schools, was published in 2020.

For more information,
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About African Rural University





Dr. Mwalimu Musheshe,
Vice Chancellor African Rural University

Documentary review and personal accounts indicate that the African Rural University (ARU) is a pioneering value based higher education institution located in Kagadi, Western Uganda. Established in 2006 by the Uganda Rural Development and Training Programme (URDT), ARU holds the distinction of being the first all-women university in Uganda dedicated to educating women in the field of sustainable agriculture. Rooted in the vision of empowering rural communities from within, the university

was founded on the belief that women, when given access to transformative education, are uniquely positioned to become agents of meaningful and lasting change in their communities.

According to its official website, ARU admitted its first cohort of students in 2011, offering an educational model that goes beyond traditional academic training. The university's approach integrates leadership development, sustainable agriculture, and community transformation with a strong emphasis on both the oretical knowledge and hands-on experience. ARU prepares women to become visionary rural leaders who are capable of addressing the complex social, economic, and environmental challenges faced by Uganda's rural communities. This vision aligns closely with URDT's broader mission of enabling people in rural areas to create conditions for their own development through education, training, and participatory action.

A defining characteristic of ARU's curriculum is its grounding in systems thinking, the creative process, and indigenous knowledge. By valuing local wisdom alongside scientific and academic learning, ARU bridges traditional practices with modern sustainable methodologies. The curriculum is structured to maintain a balance of 60% classroom learning and 40% fieldwork. This ensures that students not only acquire conceptual understanding, but also gain the confidence and experience necessary to implement solutions in real community settings.

One of ARU's signature educational philosophy is its community-based learning model in which students conduct participatory action research in selected villages. Under the guidance of faculty and traditional wisdom specialists, students work directly with rural households and community groups to identify local development challenges and co-create solutions. Through practicums and year-long internships, students gain firsthand experience in facilitation, project planning, and rural innovation. This immersive engagement prepares graduates to move into leadership roles as community development practitioners, agricultural professionals, and rural transformation facilitators.

ARU currently offers two bachelor's degree programmes. First, the Bachelor of Rural Development is a four-year program that equips students with the skills and knowledge required to address development challenges in rural communities effectively. Students complete three years of academic coursework followed by a full year of field practice, allowing them to integrate learning with real-world application. The second programme is the Bachelor of Science in Sustainable Agriculture which focuses on agriculture, sustainability, and food systems. The programme provides students with analytical tools needed for modern, evidence-based agricultural work and prepares them to understand and implement practices that support long-term agricultural productivity while preserving environmental health.



Through its innovative educational philosophy and strong commitment to empowerment, ARU stands as a model for women-centred rural transformation in Africa. Its graduates are emerging as community leaders, agricultural entrepreneurs, development practitioners, and catalysts of positive change. In doing so, ARU continues to redefine higher education as a powerful engine for sustainable rural development and social transformation.

Gulu University - History and Now!

Documents and online sources indicate that in 2001, a Technical Task Force was appointed to set up Gulu University. Because of insecurity in Gulu at the time, the team had to set up a temporary office at Lincoln Flat 4 at Makerere University in Kampala.

In the first meeting of the Task Force, members agreed to the process leading to the preparation of the Master Plan for the University of Agriculture and Environment Science (UAES).. Temporary premises for the UAES were identified at Gulu District Farm Institute.

Today, Gulu University is one of the ten Public Universities in Uganda established by Statutory Instrument Number 31 of 2003. It has six Faculties namelyFaculty of Medicine, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Agriculture and Environment, Faculty of Education and Humanities, Faculty of Business and Development Studies, and Faculty of Law. There are two institutes namely, the Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies, and Institute of Research and Graduate Studies. Its satellite campuses are located in Kotido District, Hoima City, Kitgum Municipality, and Moroto District.



Prof George L Openjuru,
Vice Chancellor Gulu University

The University offers six PhDs, 27 masters, nine postgraduate, 33 undergraduate, and five certificate programmes, in a range of specializations. Gulu University has a student population of about 4,500. It also boasts an Alumni population of 19,529.

Over 20 years of Advanced Education A Brief History of Gulu University 2002-2022



2022

Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda becomes the third Chancellor of Gulu University succeeding Prof. Fredrick Kayanja



2020

Assoc. Pref. David Davy Owiny Okello becomes the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs. He still serves in that capacity to date.



2019

Mrs. Mary Theresa Obbo was appointed Chairperson Gulu University Council in 2019.



2019

Rwot Santos Apire was appointed Vice Chairperson Gulu University Council in 2019.



2018

Prof. George Ladaah Openjuru becomes the second Vice Chancellor of Gulu University and he is still serving the University in that position.



2018

A constituent college of Agriculture under Gulu University established in Moroto.



2014

Dr. Prof. Fredrick Kayanja installed as the second Chancellor of Gulu University succeeding Dr. Martin Jerome Aliker.



2014

Gulu University entered in an MOU with Bunyoro Kingdom to establish Hoima Campus in Hoima District, Bunyoro Sub-region. This campus enrolls over 100 students.



2011

Kitgum Campus opened. This campus is approcimately 105km north-east of Gulu City and close to South Sudan.



2007

Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies established. This Institute is a centre for the study, teaching and practice of peace building and conflict resolution. It was formerly known as "the Centre for Conflict Management and Peace Studies (CCMPS).



2006

The first University graduation ceremony held with only 257 graduates of which 72 were female and 175 were male.



2004

Dr. Martin Jerome Aliker *becomes the first Chancellor of Gulu University.*



2003

Prof. Nyeko Pen Mong *installed as the first University Vice Chancellor of Gulu University. He served in this position until 2018 when he was succeded by* **Prof. George Ladaah.O**



2002

Gulu University established and was named "Gulu University of Agriculture and Environmental Science



Gulu University Launches eLearning Department

On 23 July 2025, Gulu University launched the department of Open, Distance, Electronic, and Lifelong Learning (ODELL) under the Faculty of Education and Humanities. The launch of ODELL was remarkable and it cemented the position and contribution of the UNESCO Chair on Lifelong Learning, Youth and Work. The Chair has been part and parcel of the founding process of the Department for more than 2 years.



Leading an expert panel on the philosophical underpinnings of the new department, the Vice Chancellor, Prof. George Openjuru underscored ODELL's humanistic mission of widening and deepening lifelong learning opportunities for all. In his contribution to the expert panel, the Vice Chancellor of the African Rural University (ARU), Dr Mwalimu Musheshe argued for a Visionary Engagement over Problem-Centric Approaches as a way of acknowledging the resources and dreams of communities.

According to Dr Stephen Odama, the Head of Department,, 'ODELL as an academic unit is tasked with advancing inclusive, flexible, and lifelong learning opportunities, in line with the university's vision of promoting rural transformation and industrialisation for sustainable development'. ODELL is mandated to design, implement, and manage education and training programs that address the diverse learning needs of both traditional and non-traditional learners. Its key priorities include:

- Expanding equitable access to quality higher education, especially for underserved communities.
- Strengthening digital infrastructure and innovation in education delivery, including the use of mobile and offline-compatible platforms. Enhancing learner support and quality assurance through appropriate digital content and psychosocial support.
- Promoting applied, community-focused research and knowledge dissemination.
- Building institutional capacity through strategic partnerships at the national, regional, and international levels.

The ODELL department is destined to run its first fully ODeL-driven Bachelor of Education Primary (BEP), starting in the academic year of 2026/2027. Flexible short courses with a blended learning lens will be launched in the first quarter of the year 2025.

For any inquiries, contact
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ODELL LAUNCH

The Launch was an Event to Celebrate, Co-create, Share and Promote

Main Events

Main Campus
10:00 am -10:30am
Cutting Ribbon
VC & University Top Management

New Library
11:00 am - 01.00pm
Panel Discussion & Offcial Launch

Multi-Purpose Lab
2:00pm - 4:00pm
Inaugural PAR & Lifelong Learning Series

Acholi Inn
6.00pm - 8:30pm
High Level Dialogue Community Engagement Scholarship

EXPERT PANEL ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF ODELL

A panel to stimulate real thinking and reflection
What we mean when we say
ODELL is and will be driven by the principles, practices, values and traditions of:

(a) Indigenous knowledge systems and Transdisciplinarity
Prof. Catherine Odora Hoppers
&
Dr. Agatha Alidri

(b) Widening & Deepening Lifelong Learning
Prof. Dr. George Openjuru

(c) Digital Transformation and ODeL at Gulu University
Chief, ICT

(d) Community Engagement & Community Transformation
Prof. Mwalimu Musheshe
&
Dr Asaf Adebua

(e) Community Based Research & Participatory Action Research (PAR)
Dr. Josje Van Der Linden
&
Dr. David Monk

PANEL & LAUNCH
New Library,
Gulu University

23 July 2025

10:00 am - 01:00pm

RSVP:
Dr. Stephen Odama s.odama@gu.ac.ug 0772 337 749
Dr. Robert Jjuuko robert.jjuuko@gu.ac.ug 0787 667 043

Researching Ugandan Universities' Role in the Education-work Transition of Students & Graduates (2025-2027)

Main research question:

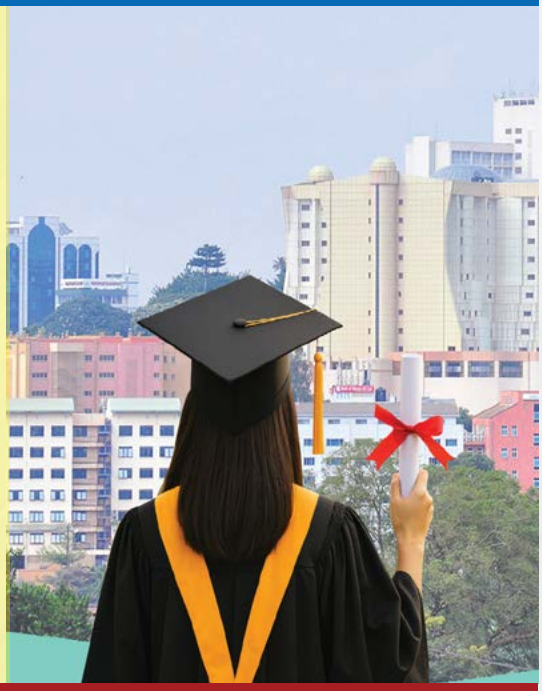
How can the case study Ugandan universities optimise the education to work transitions of their students and graduates in complex contexts where formal work is limited?

Three sub questions:

(i) What are the education- to-work transition needs and aspirations of students in the participating Ugandan universities?

(ii) How can existing university-to-work transition interventions be tailored or adapted to suit the complex work and labour context in Uganda and which interventions most closely align with the needs and aspirations of students?

(iii) How can different stakeholders in the skills ecosystem in and around the participating universities be harnessed to support the education-to-work transition of students and graduates?



Communities of Practice (CoPs): The cornerstone for EWT Research's PAR methodology

CoP Activities Year 1

- Introduction and review of research plans.
- Sharing of CoP member knowledge and experiences.
- Discussion of literature on education-to-work transitions.
- Identification and discussion of existing education-to-work interventions.
- Develop recommendations for Year 2.

CoP Activities Year 2-3

- Extension of CoPs to engage with external members.
- Sharing of CoP member knowledge and experiences.
- Review of existing education-to-work interventions.
- Develop recommendations for education-to-work transition interventions.
- Discuss and report on progress.
- Conduct evaluation meetings to collect and discuss experiences from the pilot interventions.

CoP Activities Year 3

- Collate and share research results.
- Discuss mechanisms for ongoing CoPs beyond the project.
- Contribute to the final report and scientific papers.

unesco Chair Lifelong Learning, Youth & Work

Harnessing Ugandan Universities' Role in the Education-work Transition of Students and Graduates (2025-2027)

Makerere University

The University of Nottingham



Supported by Spencer Foundation



unesco
Chair Lifelong
Learning, Youth & Work

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