

Season's greetings!

Another busy year at GRÓ LRT is coming to an end! This year, we received 23 fellows for the six-month training, two former fellows started their master's studies at the Agricultural University of Iceland on a scholarship from GRÓ LRT, and we established collaboration with a new partner country, Kenya. A short course was held in Kyrgyzstan, and partner countries were visited.

Read on to see our highlights from the year 2023!



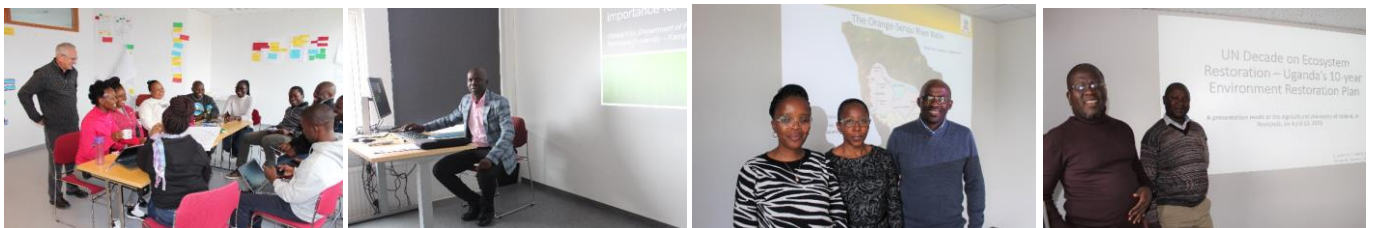
### GRÓ LRT six-month training programme

The GRÓ LRT six-month training ran its course from 3 March until end of August, with graduation day on 29 August. A total of 23 fellows graduated successfully, 12 women and 11 men. They came from partner institutions in Ghana, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Malawi, Mongolia, Uganda and Uzbekistan, as well as two Nigerian fellows who participated through the UNESCO's Man and Biosphere (MAB) network, both working for the Forestry Research Institute of Nigeria.

This was the second year that the six-month training was run as a postgraduate diploma course, eligible for 30 ECTS credits, meaning that fellows could receive a Postgraduate Diploma in Ecosystem Restoration and Sustainable Land Management (30 ECTS) from the Agricultural University of Iceland (AUI), in addition to the GRÓ LRT Certificate of Completion.

The fellows presented their individual project findings in an open seminar at the Keldnaholt Campus on 22 and 23 August. As usual, the projects covered a wide range of topics under the umbrella of land restoration and sustainable land management.

Since the programme started in 2007, 198 fellows have graduated from the GRÓ LRT six-month training, 47% of them women and 53% men.



### Guest lecturers and other international visitors at GRÓ LRT

This year, two international lecturers visited the six-month training and gave lectures on two different topics: Economics of land degradation (ELD), and biodiversity. Dr Gerald Eilu, Associate Professor from Makerere University in Uganda, gave a full-day lecture in April on biodiversity and its importance for human societies,

addressing the issue in the context of ecosystem services, international frameworks, and strategies for biodiversity conservation. In May, we welcomed Dr Richard Thomas, the Scientific Coordinator of the Economics of Land Degradation (ELD) Initiative, who gave a two-day course on the economics of land dynamics as well as introducing the ELD approach and methodology leading to a cost-benefit analysis of sustainable land management options.

Additionally, GRÓ LRT received visitors from partners in Africa. From Uganda, Dr Jerome Lugumira, a Soil Scientist and a Natural Resources Management Specialist at the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) in Uganda, and Dr Daniel Waiswa, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography, Geo-Informatics and Climatic Sciences in Makerere University in Uganda, gave a joint lecture on Uganda's ecosystem challenges and the country's plans for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. In June, GRÓ LRT welcomed three representatives from a new partner organisation in Lesotho, the National University of Lesotho (NUL): Professor Mosotho Joseph George from the Department of Chemistry & Chemical Technology and Dean of Faculty of Science and Technology, Dr Mamohau Elizabeth Thamae, Senior Lecturer and Acting Director of the Water Institute at NUL, and Mrs Rethabile Joalane Marunye, Lecturer & Head of Department of Geography and Environmental Science. The three visitors from NUL gave a joint lecture on integrated catchment management in Lesotho and the educational programmes at NUL that address land and water management. During their 5-day stay, they also had the opportunity to join the fellows on a one-day excursion to Snaefellsnes peninsula, which gave them an opportunity to see some of the challenges and successes of land restoration efforts in Iceland.

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### Two new master students at AUI with scholarship from GRÓ LRT

Ms Binna Kipandula and Mr Leonard Gondwe, both former GRÓ LRT fellows from Malawi, started their master's studies at the Agricultural University of Iceland in late August, on a scholarship from GRÓ LRT. Following their successful completion of the six-month training programme in Iceland in 2022, they applied - and were granted admission - to the newly established MSc programme in Restoration Ecology at the Agricultural University of Iceland.

The new MSc programme in Restoration Ecology is offered within the Faculty of Environmental and Forest Sciences as is the Postgraduate Diploma that successful fellows receive after attending GRÓ LRT six-month training programme. The Restoration Ecology Master's programme is a two-year degree programme (120 ECTS) designed as a full-time study. It includes interdisciplinary science education and practical experiences.

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### Visits to partner countries

#### Lesotho

In the beginning of the year, the GRÓ LRT Director, Dr Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir, visited Lesotho together with GRÓ LRT's key lecturer and studies committee member, Dr Ása L Aradóttir, Professor at AUI. The main purpose of the

visit was to meet with representatives of ministries, government agencies, and organisations working in the field of ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management, to interview candidates for the GRÓ LRT annual six-month training in Iceland, and to visit the National University of Lesotho. The visit to National University of Lesotho (NUL) was part of GRÓ LRT and NUL's Erasmus+ Mobility Project, running from 2022-2024.

Sjöfn and Ása got the opportunity to visit a restoration site in Sebibing Catchment in the highlands of Lesotho. The restoration project was organised by the Ministry of Water through the ReNoka Programme and two former GRÓ LRT fellows worked on the project, Mr Ramatsoku Isaac Rampai and Ms Moselantja Molaoa.

Sjöfn and Ása also met with GRÓ LRT alumni in Maseru, which is always the most rewarding part of a visit to partner countries. Of the 18 fellows from Lesotho that have graduated from the GRÓ LRT six-month training in Iceland so far, there have been 11 women and seven men.

## Uzbekistan

In October, the GRÓ LRT director visited Uzbekistan, accompanied by Dr Bryndís Marteinsdóttir, Department Head of Climate and Sustainability at the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland (SCSI) and a lecturer and supervisor at GRÓ LRT. The purpose of the visit was to visit partner institutions in Samarkand and Tashkent and interview potential candidates for the six-month training in Iceland.

The GRÓ LRT visit to Samarkand was part of GRÓ LRT and Samarkand State University's Erasmus+ Mobility Project (2023-2025), more specifically with the Institute of Agrobiotechnology & Food Security. The Mobility Project focuses on curriculum development related to rangeland ecology, and the director of the Institute is Dr Toshpulot Rajabov, a GRÓ LRT fellow in 2009. Furthermore, Sjöfn and Bryndis participated in a conference on food security at Samarkand State University where they with the Uzbek GRÓ fellows hosted a special session on the GRÓ LRT programme and ecosystem restoration work in Iceland.

## Kyrgyzstan

The final visit of the year took place in Kyrgyzstan by the GRÓ LRT Director in October. Similar to previous partner country visits, Sjöfn engaged with representatives from institutions and organizations involved in sustainable land management in Kyrgyzstan. The discussions focused on cooperation and the identification of potential candidates for the GRÓ LRT's six-month training programme. During the visit, Sjöfn visited the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) and delivered a lecture to students and faculty on land restoration efforts in Iceland and the GRÓ LRT programme. The visit was part of the GRÓ LRT and AUCA's Erasmus+ Mobility Project (2023-2024), aiming to foster a partnership between the two institutions.

In both central Asian countries, former fellows welcomed the GRÓ LRT visitors and took great care of them during their visits. Until now, 11 fellows from Kyrgyzstan have graduated from the six-month training while 10 have come from Uzbekistan.



## Kenya becomes the newest partner country of GRÓ LRT

GRÓ LRT's Deputy Director, Berglind Orradóttir, and Dr Jóhann Thorsson, a Senior Scientist at the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland, and a member of the GRÓ LRT's academic committee, embarked on a fact-finding mission to Kenya in September. The primary objective of the visit was to establish connections with government agencies and research institutes actively involved in land restoration and sustainable land management.

Throughout their visit, Berglind and Jóhann had the privilege of visiting various institutions, including the Ministry of Water, Sanitation, and Irrigation. Here, they engaged with representatives from multiple departments within the ministry. As a result of these productive encounters, six institutions in Kenya were invited to nominate prospective

candidates for GRÓ LRT's six-month training in Iceland. These entities were chosen due to their close alignment with the mission of GRÓ LRT and included:

- The Department of Land Reclamation at the Ministry of Water, Sanitation, and Irrigation
- Centre for Training and Integrated Research in ASAL Development
- Directorate of Resource Surveys and Remote Sensing (Executive Office of the President, Chief of Staff, and Head of the Public Service)
- Kenya Forestry Research Institute (Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, and Forestry)
- National Drought Management Authority (Ministry of East African Community, ASALs, and Regional Development)
- State Department for Livestock at the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries Development

Additionally, Berglind and Jóhann paid a visit to the offices of UNESCO Nairobi, the Multisectoral Regional Office for Eastern Africa. Alexandros Makarigakis, Director and Representative (a.i.), along with his colleagues at UNESCO Nairobi, played an essential role in initiating contact between GRÓ LRT and the Department of Land Reclamation at the Ministry of Water, Sanitation, and Irrigation last year.

GRÓ LRT eagerly anticipates its collaboration with these new partner institutions in Kenya, marking an exciting milestone in its mission to champion land restoration and sustainable land management.

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### Short course on gender and the environment in Kyrgyzstan

GRÓ LRT, in collaboration with GRÓ GEST, conducted a three-day training course titled "Gender, the Environment, and Sustainable Land Management" in Kyrgyzstan at the end of November. The course was tailored for the staff of Camp Alatoo Foundation, comprising 16 natural resources management experts. CAMP Alatoo is a leading regional Central Asian non-governmental organization known for its innovative approaches and tools on sustainable natural resource management and has been GRÓ LRT's key partner in Kyrgyzstan.

The training delved into effective integration of gender equality and climate considerations into the design and implementation of sustainable land management projects. It aimed to address both practical and strategic gender needs. The course facilitators were Dr Audrey Ingólfssdóttir, founder and manager of Transformia (a consulting firm), and Védís Sigrúnardóttir Ólafsdóttir, project manager at GRÓ GEST. Dr Audrey has previously served as a lecturer and project supervisor in the GRÓ LRT and GEST six-month training programmes.

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### News from former fellows

**Evelyn Mugume**, a fellow from Uganda in 2014, finished her master's degree in Natural Resources Management from Makerere University in 2019. Since then, she moved from Kasese District Local Government to Kasese Municipal Council/City, where she has been utilizing her knowledge acquired in Iceland to embark on various projects. She has also been promoted to Senior Environment Officer for the Kasese Municipal Council.

**Latif Iddrisu Nasare**, a fellow in 2018 from Ghana, defended his doctoral dissertation in June this year at the Department of Conservation Biology and Entomology, School of Biological Sciences, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The title of his thesis is: *Pollination Ecology of Shea (Vitellaria paradoxa) in the Guinea Savanna zone of Ghana*. Dr Latif Iddrisu Nasare is a lecturer at the University for Development Studies, Tamale, Ghana.

**Wilhelmina Asare**, a fellow in 2019 from Ghana, defended her doctoral dissertation in March last year, at the Department of Civil Engineering of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana. The title of her thesis is: *Households Solid Waste Source Separation and Incentive Options for Improving Municipal Solid Waste Resource Recovery*. Dr Asare is a Lecturer in the Department of Environment and Sustainability Sciences at the University for Development Studies in northern Ghana.

As part of his PhD work at the Mongolian University of Life Sciences in Ulaanbaatar, **Sainchuluu Amarsanaa**, a fellow from Mongolia in 2016, published two articles last year. The articles can be read in the following links: <https://doi.org/10.3390/land11060820> and <https://doi.org/10.5564/pmas.v62i01.2086>

After finishing his MSc in Environmental Ecology, following his stay in Iceland in 2015, **Harrington Nyirenda**, a fellow from Malawi, got promoted from Senior Land Resources Conservation Officer to Principal Land Resources Conservation Officer, within the Department of Land Resources Conservation, at the Ministry of Agriculture in Malawi. Inspired by the research he did in his master's programme, he has already published eight research articles in peer reviewed journals focusing on soil science, agroforestry, forest ecology, food security, conservation agriculture. Last year, he changed jobs and joined the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), where he

coordinates a project called *Alliance for the Restoration of Forest Landscapes and Ecosystems in Africa* (AREECA). The project is implemented in Malawi, Kenya, Cameroon and Rwanda where Harrington is responsible for the coordination in Malawi. The project intends to restore 25,000 ha of land

**Ackim Dickson**, a fellow from Malawi in 2022, was promoted to Senior Land Resources Conservation Officer at the Department of Land Conservation Service within the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, soon after he returned from the 6-month training last year.

Since graduating from the GRÓ LRT training in 2016, **Charles Otim** from Uganda has been advancing in his career. In 2017, Charles left the position as a District Natural Resources Officer to become an environment specialist for the Water Management Development Project, funded by the World Bank, within the Ministry of Water and Environment in Uganda. In 2019 he moved to the Ministry of Lands, Housing & Urban Development, and now serves as an environmental specialist for the Uganda Support to Municipal Infrastructure Development.

In April this year, **Ganzorig Ulgiichimeg**, a fellow from Mongolia in 2021, was promoted to the Head of the Division of Soil Research, Institute of Geography and Geoecology, Mongolian Academy of Sciences.

Dr **Enock Ssekuubwa**, a former fellow (2013) from Uganda, published two articles this year in peer reviewed journals. The articles can be read at the following links: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ece3.9870> and <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/csp2.12781>

**Calvin Rapa**, a fellow from Uganda in 2022, has been promoted within his district to a position of Town Clerk, a management position overseeing 32 technical staff. His primary responsibility is to foster collaborative partnerships with other towns and organizations, as well as to provide leadership in developing and implementing actions aimed at mitigating the effects of climate change in urban areas and achieving sustainable urban development.

**Merkeb Woldu Bezabeh**, a fellow in 2013 from Ethiopia, finished her PhD this year from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU). Her thesis is entitled: *Strategies for increasing sustainability of wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) and faba bean (*Vicia faba* L.) production – Effect of composts, rotation and biofertilizers*. Dr Bezabeh has started working as a Post Doctor at the Soil and Water Science Section at NMBU.

**Huriatu Moro**, a fellow in 2015 from Ghana, finished her MSc in Environmental Science, Policy and Management in August this year from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana.

**Bayartulga Altankhuyag**, a fellow from Mongolia in 2022, has finished a second master's degree from the University of Leeds, UK, majoring in Climate Change and Environmental Policy. He is back in Mongolia and has started working at the Millennium Challenge Account-Mongolia, as a Sustainability Specialist. Bayartulga's role is to aim for the development and execution of a wide range of initiatives that support policy, regulatory, and institutional change in public entities in the water sector to enhance the long-term sustainability.

**Shuhrat Valiyev**, a fellow from Uzbekistan this year, was appointed to the position of Deputy Director for Scientific Affairs and International Cooperation at the Institute of Agrobiotechnology and Food Safety, at Samarkand State University in Uzbekistan, upon his return from the GRÓ LRT training.

**Andrew Evans Opiolo**, a fellow from Uganda in 2021, has moved from a position for the district government to a position as Senior Agricultural Inspector at the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF). He will contribute to supporting the control of crop pests and diseases for improved and sustainable food security and household incomes amongst farmers in Uganda.

**Masekhotali Bernice Lekhotsa**, a fellow this year from Lesotho, graduated from the National University of Lesotho in November with a master's degree in Range Management and Pasture Production.

The GRÓ LRT team congratulates former fellows on their achievements!

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## Changes within the GRÓ LRT Team

After many years serving the Land Restoration Training Programme, Berglind Orradóttir and Halldóra Traustadóttir, are leaving the GRÓ LRT Team to embark on new challenges.

Berglind started working for GRÓ LRT in 2009. Before joining GRÓ LRT as a Deputy Director, she served as an Assistant Professor at the Agricultural University of Iceland (AUI). Berglind will now return to her position as Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Environmental and Forest Sciences, AUI.

Halldóra has served as an Office- and Operations Manager since 2013 and as such, she has been very much involved with coordinating the affairs of the fellows during their stay in Iceland. Halldóra is going to seek new challenges abroad.

We thank Berglind and Halldóra for their work through the years and wish them all the best in their future endeavours.

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