

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS – SUMMER SCHOOL ON TRANSDISCIPLINARY METHODS FOR STUDYING SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

With funding from the Volkswagen Foundation, the Research Unit on Agro-Pastoral, Humanitarian and Food Systems (UR-SAPHA) at the University of Parakou, Benin, in collaboration with University Joseph KI-ZERBO (UJKZ) in Burkina Faso, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT) in Kenya, Stellenbosch University (SU) in South Africa, the University of Göttingen (UGö) in Germany and the University of Kassel (UKAS) in Germany, invites you to a summer school on:

“Navigating change in agro-pastoral systems”

Dates: September 22nd – 26th, 2025

Location: University of Parakou, Benin

This summer school is the first in a series of three summer schools on “*New perspectives on social-ecological systems research in Africa: change, tradeoffs and coexistence*”, with a focus on ongoing transformations in African agro-pastoral systems and trajectories of adaptation and resilience.

Background

The world is facing interlinked challenges such as biodiversity loss, climate change, insecurity, poverty, inequality, and rural-urban transformations. Addressing these issues requires not only practical interventions but also conceptual frameworks that capture their systemic nature. While research has improved our understanding of these problems, it has often fallen short in providing solutions that acknowledge the complex socio-political and ecological interactions involved.

In response, the social-ecological systems (SES) framework has emerged as a promising scientific lens, enabling the integration of ecological and societal dimensions in a coherent analytical approach. Rooted in resilience theory and systems thinking, SES provides tools to explore feedback loops, adaptation mechanisms, and governance dynamics in coupled human-environment systems. This theoretical grounding strengthens the rationale for adopting transdisciplinary and systems-based approaches—not only to understand complexity but also to co-produce actionable knowledge with societal relevance.

Although such approaches have gained traction globally, they remain underdeveloped in African research landscapes. Yet, given the continent’s acute exposure to systemic risks and its diversity of knowledge systems, Africa has much to contribute to—and benefit from—advancing social-ecological research tailored to local contexts. Strengthening this orientation could enhance the societal impact of science and offer more grounded pathways toward sustainability and resilience.

We are organising a series of three annual summer schools to offer PhD and post-doctoral scientists working on pressing livelihood issues in different SES contexts the opportunity to deepen their theoretical and practical knowledge and skills in transdisciplinary research that can have tangible impacts on society. The present summer school in Parakou, Benin, focuses on the study of transformations and innovations in African agro-pastoral systems in a context of multi-dimensional turbulence.

Pastoralism in Africa is facing growing challenges linked to demographic pressure, climate change and opaque governance. The scarcity of resources and extreme climatic conditions are weakening pastoral communities, while herd mobility is increasingly restricted. Some states impose bans on cross-border transhumance and encourage sedentarisation, favouring a commercial vision of livestock farming to combat youth unemployment. Access to land remains a major problem, with a confusing mix of formal and informal rules. The multiplication of laws complicates land tenure, while the weakening of traditional institutions limits the defence of herders’ rights. The situation is exacerbated by rising insecurity, marked by organised crime and terrorism, which fuel violent inter-community conflicts and reinforce ethnic tensions. Despite these upheavals, pastoral communities, particularly youth and women, are adapting by mobilising their indigenous knowledge and innovating. They are diversifying their livelihoods and exploring new opportunities, strengthening their resilience in the face of ongoing transformations.

Objectives

The summer school aims to help PhD students and post-docs establish and build conceptual and theoretical foundations, develop methodological and analytical skills, and improve the communication of their results and ideas in the transdisciplinary study of social-ecological systems in general, and on agro-pastoral systems in particular. More specifically, it aims to:

- share experiences among junior and senior scientists conducting research on various social-ecological and agro-pastoral systems in Africa;
- inform young scientists of the latest conceptual and theoretical advances in the study of social-ecological systems through transdisciplinary approaches, in order to strengthen the use of theoretical and analytical frameworks in scientific research in Africa;
- train young scientists in relevant methods, techniques, and tools in transdisciplinary research: data collection, data analysis and synthesis, stakeholder communication and writing of policy briefs to achieve societal impact and contribute to change; and
- set up a network of researchers working on agro-pastoral social-ecological systems for post-training follow up, mentorship, up- and out-scaling

Preliminary program

The agenda for the 5-day summer school combines learning and application of the transdisciplinary approach to analyse the complex ongoing changes in agro-pastoral systems and their innovation trajectories towards sustainability:

Days	Activities	Contents
Day 1	Keynote	International and local experts with in-depth knowledge of African agro-pastoral systems will offer summer school participants the opportunity to learn about transdisciplinary research for sustainable impacts.
	Experience sharing	Former Volkswagen Foundation scholarship holders will share with participants their research experiences on agro-pastoral transformation and resilience pathways, in particular for women and young people in West Africa and the Sahel.
	Theory session	Participants will be given a chance to share their own (research) experiences, provide feedback on pre-defined readings on key concepts (<i>agropastoral systems, change/transformation, uncertainty, insecurity, disorder, commodification, juridification, governance, innovation, collective action, resilience and sustainable livelihoods</i>), and explain how they apply these in their own research contexts.
Day 2	Introductory method session	Experts will give introductory lectures on theoretical and methodological frameworks for analysing the sustainability of agro-pastoral systems – change, innovation and resilience, with a focus on gender and social inclusion.
	Method learning session	Participants will take part in a research methods “fair” which will enable them to develop their skills in a number of methods, techniques, and tools relevant to their research: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rapid Collective Conflict and Strategic Group Identification Survey (ECRIS) ▪ Participant observation – Contact making and in-situ/in vivo observation ▪ Digital design of questionnaires and interview guides (Kobotoolbox and CPro) ▪ Qualitative data analysis methods (e.g. coding with NVIVO and MAXQDA software) ▪ Monitoring and (audio)-visual analysis methods (drone mapping, livestock-tracking, eye-tracking, photovoice study, etc.)
Day 3	Fieldwork	Participants, in sub-groups, will visit research sites to apply the tools learned to assess the challenges of local agro-pastoral systems, as well as trajectories of innovation and resilience in the face of change.
Day 4	Reporting and advisory session	Participants will reflect on their field experiences and how these relate to their own work. They will submit their observations, field data, and questions to experts and senior staff for advice and guidance. Each participant can use this opportunity to present details of his or her own

		research in relation to the methods learned at the summer school. This activity will deepen the lessons learned from the research methods fair initiated on the second day.
	Teamwork	Participants will refine their data analysis from Day 3 and prepare presentations for the plenary session. This will be an opportunity to apply quantitative and qualitative analysis tools like MAXQDA and other applications to capitalise on data obtained with mapping, monitoring, and drone visual analysis.
Day 5	Feedback session	Participants present the results of their work in sub-groups to the whole group. Each presentation will be followed by comments from peers, seniors, and experts to enhance the learning exercise.
	Science communication session	Participants will benefit from a short scientific communication session, and will hold a group work session on lessons learned and difficulties encountered during field research. The programme will conclude with a general wrap up.

Target group

The summer school is open to:

- African and German PhD students
- African and German post-docs

Eligibility criteria

The summer school is highly competitive, with a maximum of 20 doctoral and post-doctoral scientists taking part. The main criteria for applying to the summer school are as follows:

- **Scientific field:** All scientific fields with links to social-ecological systems, agro-pastoral systems, and sustainable livelihoods will be considered. Doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers from both the social and natural sciences are encouraged to apply, especially those seeking interdisciplinary experience.
- **Age limitation:** The summer school is aimed primarily at young researchers. As such, applicants should not be older than 40. However, candidates who justify delays in their doctoral or post-doctoral projects for documented health issues or family reasons like childcare will be considered over this age.
- **Academic requirements:** The summer school gives priority to doctoral students, regardless of the year in which their doctoral project is being implemented. They must have at least a Master's degree and be officially registered at an African or German university. Summer school students will be selected on the basis of the quality of their (post)doctoral programme, their research interests and their application documents. Applications will be considered from first to final year PhD students as well as first year post-doctoral scientists, with preference given to those whose research is fully or partly related to the subject of the summer school. Applications from post-doctoral students whose PhD-theses are less than two years old and who are engaged in post-doctoral research related to the subject of the summer school will also be considered.
- **Language proficiency:** English is the primary language of the summer school. In this respect, all applicants must have an acceptable level of reading, comprehension, writing, and speaking skills in English.

Application requirements

Applicants must submit the following documents by May 31st, 2025

- **An application form:** This online form, accessible via this link <https://forms.gle/UGebAaMCXSTE4Rjm9>, collects the applicant's personal data, contact details, as well as other relevant information to facilitate selection.
- **A letter of motivation** (no more than one page) outlining the applicant's current research activities and specific interest in the subject proposed for the summer school.
- **A Curriculum Vitae** (no more than two pages) containing the usual information and listing in particular the applicant's education, doctoral programme/post-doctoral project and academic achievements.

- **A copy of the last degree/diploma obtained**, namely Master's degree for doctoral students and doctorate certificate for post-docs.
- **Proof of thesis registration** (doctoral student) or **postdoctoral employment/scholarship**.
- **A concept note** (no more than one page) summarising the background information, methods and implementation stage of the doctoral or post-doctoral research project.

Applications should be sent as a **single PDF file** to livelihoodsummerschool2025@gmail.com (with copy to ursaphabenin@gmail.com, gdjohy@gmail.com and ouedraogooumar@yahoo.fr), with the subject line **"Application_Benin 2025 Livelihood Summer School_Applicant's Full Name"**.

Fees and support

Application to the summer school is entirely online and free of charge. The event is supported by a grant from the Volkswagen Foundation, Germany. The registration, travel, accommodation and catering fees are fully covered for successful candidates.

Key dates

- Application deadline: May 31st, 2025
- Notification of selected candidates: June 15th, 2025
- Summer school start: September 22nd, 2025

Any questions can be addressed to:

The Lead of the Summer School Series:

- **Dr. Georges Djohy** (gdjohy@gmail.com), UR-SAPHA, ENSPD/UP, Benin

The team members:

- **Prof. Dr. Oumarou Ouédraogo** (ouedraogooumar@yahoo.fr), UJKZ, Burkina Faso
- **Dr. Ruth Kansky** (kanskyruth@gmail.com), SU, South Africa
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The mentors:

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Partners:

Funding institution:



Academic institutions:



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