

SDG Graduate Schools: The Art of Sustainability



Dance as part and parcel of science: members of the Graduate School “Performing Sustainability – Cultures and Development in West-Africa” in Ghana

The Graduate School “Performing Sustainability – Cultures and Development in West-Africa”, financed by the DAAD using funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), performs something out of the ordinary: it strengthens the scientific cooperation between Germany, Ghana, and Nigeria, is focused on the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) – and conducts research into new answers to violence and terror.

When violence threatens a country’s development prospects – as has been the case for many years in the north-east of Nigeria and its neighbouring states, where the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram spreads its terror and has already displaced over 2 million people – then sustainable solution proposals are called for. This is where the work of the Graduate School “Performing Sustainability – Cultures and Development in West-Africa” [<https://www.unihildesheim.de/sustainability/>] comes in: its key objective is to develop local strategies for overcoming conflicts and traumatic experiences. The Graduate School was jointly established at the end of 2016 by the University of Hildesheim, the University of Maiduguri in Nigeria, and the University of Cape Coast in Ghana and will be funded by the DAAD until 2020.



German/Ghanaian/Nigerian network: group photo of the latest workshop of the Graduate School at the University of Cape Coast

The key focus of research is on the subjects Art and Culture in the context of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The exceptional focus is not only on sustainable development but especially on conflict solutions and the propagation of peace. "The long-term task will be to bring about the revival of communities", says Professor Raimund Vogels, one of the Graduate School's three directors and ethnomusicologist at the University of Hildesheim. According to Vogels, music could be one of the pathways for people to find a common identity.

Raimund Vogels himself lived for a long time in Nigeria and Ghana and has conducted research there; since 2011, he has been the Director of the [Center for World Music \[https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/center-for-world-music/studium-und-lehre/musikwelt/\]](https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/center-for-world-music/studium-und-lehre/musikwelt/) – an impressive institution at which scientists have collected over 45,000 gramophone records and 4,500 musical instruments from all around the world. According to Vogels, music in Germany is more a feature of people's entertainment and leisure time activities but for societies such as those existing in Nigeria or Ghana music is incredibly important. In addition to language, music is the most important way of channelling emotional and conflicts, creating a sense of community, and promoting social interaction, says Vogels. "Social, ecological, or economic processes are always reflected in music."

Preservation of Cultural Heritage

The three universities jointly involved in the Graduate School have awarded a total of 21 scholarships. One of the scholarship holders is Umar Lawal Yusuf. He is a lecturer at the University of Maiduguri, one of the biggest higher education institutions in Nigeria boasting over 51,000 students. The 37-year-old is studying for a doctorate on the subject of the Role and Influence of the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), a state-funded militia combating the influence of Boko Haram in the federal state of Borno. "The activities of Boko Haram are having an erosive effect on the region's cultural heritage", says Umar Lawal Yusuf. He now wants to find out what is motivating the CJTF in its fight against the terrorist group and how it goes about its work. "Many of the communities in the villages of northeast Nigeria have been destroyed over the last six years of the conflict", confirms Dr. Christopher Mtaku, coordinator of the SDG Graduate School in Nigeria.



Scholarship holders immersed in discussion: jointly exploring new paths of research

The Graduate School's partner in Ghana is the University of Cape Coast. Prisca Ama Anima is studying for a doctorate there, focusing her doctor's thesis on how minor-aged mothers can escape poverty. "Poverty is a key causative factor in teenage pregnancies", she says. To find out how young mothers master their everyday lives, she focuses on an exchange of information that makes use of photographs to help women better communicate their experiences. "Pictures often say more than a thousand words", the postgraduate emphasises.

DAAD Support

"A university which sees itself as a global actor should foster contacts with other national and international institutions so as to educate its students and also offer workshops and seminars", says Dr. Abba Tijani, director of the Graduate School in Nigeria. The support of the DAAD enables students and postgraduates to be schooled in cultural sustainability with an international perspective, he explains. The African scholarship holders spend three months at the University of Hildesheim. Twice a year they come together for workshops in Nigeria and Ghana for discussions on the results, methods, experiences from the field studies, or everyday issues concerning project management. In 2020, the last year of DAAD support, the focus will be on the subject of scientific career opportunities.



Sustainable exchange: work session during the workshop at the University of Cape Coast

"I'm sure to benefit a lot from access to scientific publications, contact to other experts in my field of research, and experience exchanges with other scholarship holders", hopes Umar Lawal Yusuf. Prisca Ama Anima has similar thoughts: "Germany's different cultural environment will also help me progress as a scientist."

Director Raimund Vogels is especially hopeful about the sustainability of the Graduate School. The foundation for this has already been laid at the University of Maiduguri: it founded the Centre for the Study and Promotion of Cultural Sustainability, whose director is Abba Tijani. "This is a valuable structural measure which can guarantee the longevity of the Graduate School", says Vogels. He underlines the importance of the centre as, in addition to providing scientific expertise on project initiatives, it has an influence on local society. As Vogels emphasises: "Cultural sustainability is a decisive tool for generating social cohesion."

Benjamin Haerdle (24 May 2018)