

# Continuity, despite COVID-19: NELGA is strengthening its network and boosting its outreach

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Following the announcement of the initial confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Africa in March 2020, many countries integrated health and safety regulations aimed at preventing the further spread of the pandemic. With social distancing measures in place, NELGA institutions across Africa were faced with unprecedented challenges in the academic world: staff members and students suddenly had to do research and study from home.

NELGA institutions decided to turn this challenge into an opportunity and the networks excellence centres from Morocco to Namibia chose proactive approaches to deal with the global crisis. The NELGA partners examined on national, regional and continental levels how this global pandemic was going to affect the implementation the network's activities. In virtual meetings across the continent, they assessed their existing workplans, and with creativity and innovative minds, identified activities which could be implemented without physical contact.

*"In this period of COVID-19 we all live in "lockdown" mode, whether voluntarily or not. But it is clear that our ideas cannot and must not be locked up under any circumstances. With this in mind, like everyone else, we do our best to maintain the same dynamism at work, even if it is from home."* (Oumy Faye- NELGA Francophone Africa)

Based on these brainstorming sessions between and within NELGA regions, many NELGA activities are currently being implemented mainly through virtual means. The research institutions adjusted and instead of meeting in person, used e-mails, online communication platforms, and phone calls for knowledge exchange and joint implementation. Emphasis was also laid on issues that weren't prioritized in the past, such as better communication, monitoring and evaluation.

*"In addition to maintaining permanent coordination activities, our strategy is to focus on activities that do not necessarily require a physical presence, such as strengthening communication, scientific activities via E-learning, and partnership consolidation."* (Oumy Faye- NELGA Francophone Africa).

### **Consolidating and expanding the Network**

When it comes to networking and partners, the NELGA regional networks are being expanded and consolidated during the NELGA crisis. The NELGA regions updated their partner lists, entered into Memoranda of Understanding with new partners, and engaged with broader networks of academic and research institutions.

Outside of the NELGA academic institutions, NELGA also identified potential for wider collaboration and multi-stakeholder dialogue by establishing relations and identifying opportunities for collaboration with non-academic stakeholders, and particularly with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) and the private sector.

To further strengthen the NELGA scholar and alumni network, a virtual scholarship holder meeting, which will put emphasis on science communication as well as the link between pandemics, open data and land governance, is currently being organized for August 2020.

*"Virtual communication and collaboration is no longer just an option but a necessity. This covid-19 crises has presented an opportunity to accelerate the acquisition of necessary virtual skills, competence and equipment."* (NELGA Southern Africa- Theodor Muduva)

Many NELGA members also used the unexpected lockdown to critically examine the strategic development of the network and look into new strategic directives. In Northern and Southern Africa for example, Sustainability Strategies as well as

Strategies on Gender and Outreach are being elaborated in consultation with partners. In Southern Africa, the "Research and Capacity Development Strategy for Land Governance" has been drafted and is currently discussed with the partners in the region.

### **Boosting outreach and communication**

NELGA has also embarked on stronger communication within and beyond the network's regions. A new layout and functions of the NELGA website were introduced and a full revamp of the NELGA digital environment, including the introduction of a NELGA research library and a virtual platform for land-related data and information are under preparation.

NELGA partners in Central, Francophone and Southern Africa updated and redesigned their regional websites. Newsletters were published in Central, Francophone and Western Africa. In addition, different NELGA members have edited and formatted knowledge products, such as policy briefs, research studies, newsletters, good practices and NELGA strategies.

In Northern Africa, two issues of the African Journal of Geospatial Sciences and Land Policy were published, and the Francophone African University Gaston-Berger in Senegal published two issues of the "Cahier du Foncier", focusing on the methodology of land tenure research, as well as good land tenure practices in Francophone West Africa.

NUST university in Namibia, the Southern African node of the NELGA network, continued to publish opinion pieces on Land Governance authored and submitted by partners. The opinion pieces are published in key newspapers in Namibia, which during global crisis become even more relevant means of information than usual.

Several NELGA members also used their (partial) lockdowns to elaborate and share various good practices. NELGA Central and Southern Africa, for example, collaborated on a good practice piece on NELGA advisory missions to effectively mainstream land governance issues into National Agricultural Investment Plan (NAIP) under the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) of the African Union

## **Developing online learning opportunities**

For many NELGA nodes, who had already started to think about online learning in the past years, the emergence of COVID-19 increased the urgency for sound online learning measures in the field of land governance. Many NELGA institutions therefore fast-tracked their online learning ideas and plans.

University of Yaoundé I, the NELGA excellence center for Central Africa, finalized a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) project on land conflicts. NUST university is elaborating a course on land governance and corruption to equip land professionals in various stages of their career with the tools, tactics and networks to help tackle issues of land corruption.

In NELGA Francophone Africa, webinar series in the form of virtual doctoral seminars dedicated to PhD students were held in June 2020, and a directory of young researchers and land professionals with a special focus on PhD students was initiated. Similarly, IAV university in Morocco, the NELGA Northern African node, adapted to the new learning environment and conducted distance education to Master students, and monitored students who are virtually carrying out their internships in different land governance institutions and companies. Northern Africa also tested an e-learning platform which helps ensure and evaluate courses online with African NELGA partners.

## **Doing research**

NELGA also boosted research activities all over the continent. In NELGA Southern Africa and Northern Africa, Scoping Studies on the needs and demands of scientific research in land governance are in the process of finalization and will be presented virtually. Under the NELGA scholarship programme, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) issued a fellowship call for research on the trajectories between COVID-19 and good land governance.

## **What we learned**

Virtual communication and collaboration is no longer just an option but a necessity. The COVID-19 crisis has presented an opportunity to accelerate the acquisition of necessary virtual skills and competences. In an effort to enhance collaboration during this time of the global pandemic, NELGA universities have embarked on an assessment

of the virtual capabilities and competence of their structures and partners and initiated capacity building initiatives, with regards to online learning as well as virtual tools and social media platforms. This will contribute to even more effective cooperation, collaboration and consequently effective implementation in the NELGA network. Ultimately, NELGA is now an even stronger network than before, and better equipped with the virtual tools that are crucial for the future of research and learning.

*"To put it plainly, COVID 19 will not only have negative effects on NELGA in Central Africa but will help also our network to better utilize new communication tools and to innovate in reorienting and adapting its activities."* (NELGA Central Africa- Rosette Mbenda)