

GRÓ LRT Newsletter, December 2025

Season greetings!

As previous years, 2025 was a busy year at GRÓ LRT! We had the pleasure of receiving twenty fellows for the six-month training program, two former fellows finished master in Restoration Ecology and two started the same master's program at the Agricultural University of Iceland on a scholarship from GRÓ LRT. We were also fortunate to welcome many guests from different parts of the world and director Dr. Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir visited our partners in Mongolia in the beginning of the year.



GRÓ LRT six-month training programme

The GRÓ LRT six-month training started 28 February and ended with graduation, on 26 August. A total of nineteen fellows graduated successfully, nine women and ten men, one woman went home to give birth to a child. Since the programme started in 2007, 240 fellows have graduated from the GRÓ LRT six-month training, 48% of them women and 52% men.

The fellows this year came from partner institutions in Ghana, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lesotho, Malawi, Mongolia, and Uganda. Our cooperation with the UNESCO's Man and Biosphere (MAB) network is getting stronger every year and this year four fellows took part through MAB, from Malawi and Kenya, and for the first time, from Benin and South Africa. We are really excited to meet more MAB members in the future. The fellows took part in various activities during their stay in Iceland, including a wide range of events, engaging courses, and excursions.





The fellows visited the main campus of the Agricultural University of Iceland in Hvanneyri, went on a three-day field trip along the south coast of Iceland, to Höfn. They also visited the Snæfellsnes peninsula where they met with the mayor of Grundarfjörður and the national park manager of Snæfellsnes National Park to discuss restoration and sustainable tourism.

They had an interesting dialogue about the Snæfellsnes Regional

Park's application to the MAB Programme, enjoyed the natural environment, and even tasted a mineral spring water at Ölkelda in Staðarsveit.



Various site visits were included in the program, a visit to the birch woodland restoration project Hekluskógar, a wetland field trip, and two trips to Kjós where they met with locals and observed land degradation. They also spent two days in Gunnarsholt to learn about restoration projects and invasive species. Shortly before heading back home, they had the honour to visit the President of Iceland, Halla Tómasdóttir, in Bessastaðir.



Project presentation and graduation

On the 19 and 20 August, the fellows presented their individual projects in an open seminar at the Keldnaholt Campus.

The presentations spanned a wide range of interesting topics, both related to challenges in their home countries and to issues or methods in Iceland. All projects were in some way, connected to land restoration and sustainable land management.

On graduation day, the fellows ended an intense period of learning and exchange and returned home with new skills and ideas to support ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management. Congratulations to all fellows, we look forward to following your future endeavours.



Guest lecturers and international visits

Director Dr Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir visits Mongolia

The year took off with a strong start with an intensive visit to Mongolia. From 18-25 January, GRÓ LRT Director Dr Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir travelled to the vast country to meet up with partner institutions, reconnect with alumni, and interview

candidates for upcoming six-month trainings. She visited long-standing partners including the National Federation of Pasture User Groups of Herders, the Agency for Land Administration and Management, Geodesy and Cartography (ALAMGC), and the Research Institute for Animal Husbandry. She also visited the Institute of Geography and Genecology, the National University of Mongolia, both campuses of the Mongolian University of Life Sciences (Darkhan and Ulaanbaatar), as well as The Nature

Conservancy Mongolia, a new partner whose first fellows joined the programme in 2025.

Dr Sumjidmaa Sainnemekh, GRÓ LRT fellow from 2014 and former GRÓ LRT PhD scholarship recipient, shared her experience through lectures. The visit highlighted nearly two decades of cooperation, including the training of dozens of Mongolian professionals and the joint development and delivery of several in-country short courses. The training and the short courses have strengthened local capacity in land restoration and sustainable land m

anagement.



Dr Richard Thomas' eighth visit to GRÓ LRT

Richard Thomas, the Scientific Coordinator of the Economics of Land Degradation (ELD) Initiative, has visited us for years, and this year was no exception.

He came to Iceland by the end of April and held two-day course on the economics of land dynamics as well as introducing the ELD approach and methodology that focus on cost-benefit analysis of sustainable land management options.



Mongolian Minister of Foreign Affairs

During an official visit to Iceland in May, the Mongolian Minister of Foreign Affairs, made a stop at GRÓ LRT to learn more about the program's long-standing cooperation with Mongolian partners in sustainable land management. Accompanied by Mongolia's Ambassador to Iceland, she met with fellows and staff, including the three Mongolian fellows in the 2025 cohort, and was introduced to the GRÓ Centre and the three sister programs of GRÓ LRT. Mongolia has been a key partner of GRÓ LRT since 2007, making it one of the program's strongest and longest-standing partnerships.



MULS visit

In May, GRÓ LRT welcomed guests from the Mongolian University of Life Sciences (MULS) as part of the ongoing Erasmus+ Mobility Project, strengthening the long-standing collaboration between the



institutions. During their visit, Dr Khishigjargal Mookhor, Dr Bayarmaa Khenchyahav and GRÓ LRT alumna Dr Batbileg Bayaraa participated in a series of activities at Keldnaholt focused on strengthening academic ties and building capacity in ecological restoration. Highlights included meetings with the AUI's Faculty of Environmental and Forest Sciences on curriculum development and best-practice exchange. The visit

marks another step in a partnership dating back to 2007, through which 12 MULS faculty members have completed the six-month training and GRÓ LRT and MULS have jointly delivered multiple short courses in Mongolia. Our alumna from the delegation, Dr. Batbileg, gave a special presentation to the current cohort about her experiences with the program, from living in Iceland to forming lasting friendships with peers from around the world.





Dr Bulgamaa Densambuu returns to Iceland

As part of the visit from Mongolia, another alumna, Dr Bulgamaa Densambuu, Director of the Rangeland Research and Development Programme at the Mongolian National Federation of Pasture User Groups, returned to GRÓ LRT as an international guest lecturer. Dr Bulgamaa was a member of the very first cohort of GRÓ UNU/LRT fellows in 2007, at the time representing the Mongolian University of Life Sciences in Darkhan. Since Dr Bulgamaa finished the GRÓ LRT program, she has dedicated her research and work to rangeland management. During her visit in Iceland, she delivered a full-day lecture on the health of Mongolian

rangelands, covering degradation, monitoring and evaluation, and sustainable management, with a focus on resilience-based approaches and the “Responsible Nomads” code of practice. It is always a privilege to welcome alumni back as guest lecturers, and Dr Bulgamaa holds a special place in GRÓ LRT history as a member of the first cohort and the first Mongolian fellow.

UNESCO and Man and the Biosphere



GRÓ LRT was honoured to welcome Dr Lidia Arthur Brito, Assistant Director-General for Natural Sciences at UNESCO on the campus in Keldnaholt. Joining her team was Mr. Hans Thulstrup, Chief of the Section on MAB Networking: Biosphere Reserves and Capacity Building, along with Nína Björk Jónsdóttir, Director General of GRÓ, and Jón Karl Ólafsson, Chairman of GRÓ. Our MAB fellows had the opportunity to share with the guests from UNESCO how the GRÓ LRT training supports their work back

home, including efforts in biosphere reserve sites in their home countries, Kenya, Malawi, Benin and South Africa. This is the first time GRÓ LRT works with Benin and South Africa, and we warmly welcome those two countries into the GRÓ family.



Delegation from Makerere University in Kampala



From 26 May to 4 June, GRÓ LRT welcomed five guests from Makerere University, Uganda, and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) through the Erasmus+ mobility program. The delegation included four faculty members from Makerere University in Kampala, Dr Lawrence Orikiriza, Head of Department; Dr Gerald Eilu, Associate Professor; Dr Daniel Waiswa, Senior Lecturer; Dr Enock Ssekuubwa, Lecturer; and one specialist from NEMA, Dr Jerome S. Lugumira, Natural Resources Management Specialist. The visit was part of the long-standing collaboration

between Makerere University, NEMA, AUI and GRÓ LRT, with a shared focus on ecological restoration and sustainable land management. During their stay, the group met with the AUI Faculty of Environmental and Forest Sciences to discuss curriculum development and academic cooperation and explored links to the M.Sc. program in Restoration Ecology. The group also visited the Sustainability Institute at the University of Iceland and met with the director Dr Hafdís Hanna Ægisdóttir and Dr Jón Geir Pétursson. Alongside meetings and discussions, the guests visited West Iceland, the main campus of the Agricultural University of Iceland in Hvanneyri as well as the beautiful nature, adding an informal and memorable dimension to the exchange. GRÓ LRT alumnus Dr Enock Ssekuubwa, a 2013 alumni, gave a lecture to the 2025 fellows and emphasized the importance of keeping connections with his cohort, noting how these relationships have enriched his career.



Alumni news

It is safe to say that the GRÓ LRT alumni have been busy since they graduated from the six-month program in Iceland. Here are the highlights of last year's achievements.

Congratulations to Kamola Khalilova!

In June, Kamola Khalilova, a UNU/GRÓ LRT fellow from 2019, successfully defended her PhD thesis at Tashkent State Agrarian University in her home country, Uzbekistan. Her thesis, titled "Technology of Intensive Cultivation of *Pyracantha* Seedlings and Creating Its Plantation," is the result of a three-year research project. Kamola currently serves as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Forestry, Faculty of Forestry and Landscape Design at the Tashkent State Agrarian University.

GRÓ LRT congratulates Kamola and wishes her all the best on her continued journey!

Master's students' graduation

GRÓ LRT's scholarships recipients Ms Binna Kipandula and Mr Leonard Gondwe, both former GRÓ LRT fellows from Malawi, finished their master's studies in Restoration Ecology at the Agricultural University of Iceland this summer.

Binna's thesis titled "*Challenges and Opportunities of the Catchment Management Approach in Mitigating Land Degradation: The Case of Mkuwazi Catchment, Malawi,*" and was supervised by Dr Jóhanna Gísladóttir and Dr Utra Mankasingh, both of AUI.

Leonard's, who is a AfriMAB fellow, thesis titled "*Assessing the Effectiveness of Forest Restoration Efforts in Malawi: A Systematic Review of Successes, Challenges, and Lessons Learned*", was supervised by Katrín Valsdóttir from Land & Forest Iceland and Professor Ása L. Aradóttir from AUI. We warmly congratulate Binna and Leonard on this well-deserved achievement. We are excited to follow their academic progress and future contributions to sustainable land restoration in Malawi.

Following Binna and Leonard's graduation, two new GRÓ LRT alumni were granted a scholarship to the Restoration Ecology master's program at the Agricultural University of Iceland; Brendah Namara from Uganda, a GRÓ LRT fellow from 2023, and Dominic Awukuvie from Ghana, a fellow from 2024. This scholarship initiative is part of the ongoing collaboration between GRÓ Centre, GRÓ LRT and AUI, aimed at strengthening capacity in ecosystem restoration and sustainable land management in low- and middle-income countries.



GRÓ Alumni Network Mongolia Officially Established

The GRÓ Alumni Network Mongolia was officially founded at a meeting in Ulaanbaatar on 4 July, bringing together 28 alumni both online and in person. Alumni from all three GRÓ training programmes that have worked with Mongolia, were represented, with LRT fellows forming the largest group, with 40 out of a total of 57 Mongolian GRÓ graduates. The meeting agreed on the creation of a formal alumni association, the establishment of a steering committee, and the development of an annual action plan. This marks the first formally launched GRÓ alumni network with similar initiatives now emerging in other partner countries. See on GRÓ Centre's website [here](#).

Alumni carrier updates:

In no particular order.

Due to reasons beyond our control, there was no Newsletter published in the end of 2024. Therefore, we would like to use the opportunity to highlight achievements from last year, included in this year's highlights.

Aytenew Endeshaw Tatek, an Ethiopian fellow from 2015, was a part of a team that published an article this year. The article can be read [here](#).

Principal Mdolo, a 2016 Malawian fellow, published a paper which can be accessed [here](#). He also presented a paper at the 3rd International Conference on Earth and Environmental Sciences in Durban, South Africa, from August 17 to 24, 2025.

Dr Mwesigye R. Abraham from Uganda, member of the first LRT cohort in 2007, was one of three co-writers of the published paper "*Soil and water contamination from oil exploration activities in the Albertine Graben study sites: Western Uganda*". Dr Abraham is concerned about chemical land degradation being spread all over the world and wants to emphasize the need to increase knowledge of that among young scientists.

Nazgul Esengulova, a 2010 Kyrgyzstan fellow, completed a PhD in Ecological Modeling, and is now lecturing Ecology in the International Ala Too University in Kyrgyzstan.

Dina Maldybaeva another fellow from Kyrgyzstan (2022), became the coordinator of and finished the ILUCA Programme (Integrative and Climate-sensitive Land Use in Central Asia), including the development of a new academic module titled "Integrated Approach to Land Use and Natural Resources Management in Central Asia (ILUMA)".

Mahmud Muminov is from Uzbekistan and was a fellow in 2022. Mahmud is an Associate Professor and Senior Researcher in ecology and land restoration at the University in Tashkent. He developed L-Range ecosystem monitoring module to support long-term rangeland assessment and restoration planning.

Last year, he completed a Fulbright Visiting Scholar program at Colorado State University (USA), focusing on rangeland monitoring, land degradation assessment, and remote sensing-based ecosystem analysis.

Igor Taranov, a 2019 fellow from Kyrgyzstan, was in March awarded a Doctoral degree in Environmental Conservation from the Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology in Japan. His doctoral research focused on organic agriculture in Kyrgyzstan. He also published a paper, which you can see [here](#). He recently held a presentation at an OSCE International conference in Bishkek on Kyrgyzstan's agriculture in the context of sustainability and the circular economy. Igor has joined the Department of Organic Farming under Ministry of Agriculture, as a chief specialist.

Byambaa Ganbat, a Mongolian fellow from 2023, published a research [paper](#) in Geoderma Regional entitled. The research paper was co-authored with **Ganzorig Ulgiichimeg**, a 2021 GRÓ LRT fellow, as well as Jón Guðmundsson, a researcher at the AUI. In addition, in 2025, **Byambaa** together with **Ganzorig Ulgiichimeg** and their colleagues, published a book in Mongolian, titled "Forest Soil Cover and Properties of Mongolia."

In 2025, **Vasila Sharipova**, Uzbekistan fellow from 2023, received a promotion and was appointed as Head of a laboratory (Laboratory of Extremophile Plants & Phytoremediation) at the Institute of Botany, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan. In addition, she published two scientific articles during the year. See [here](#) and [here](#).

Mulugeta Sebhattleab Tesfay from Ethiopia and a 2014 fellow, completed his PhD in Soil Science. He also published a paper this year.

Abdubakir Qo'shboqov, an Uzbekistani and a fellow from 2022, took part in the conference SCCS 2025 in Hungary, with a poster presentation. In addition, he published a review [paper](#) in the Journal of Arid Land Research and Management with co-authors.

Malipholo Hae, 2016 fellow from Lesotho, got a promotion to a Director for the Department of Range Resources Management, at the Department of Range Resources Management in Lesotho.

Alimbekova Nagima from Kyrgyzstan and a fellow from 2022, took part in the GIS Conference - Nagima Alimbekova, U.Chortonbaevy (Razzakov KSTU): *Integrating GIS and MCDA for Grassland Suitability Evaluation*.

Bakari, M. Mwachakure, a 2024 fellow from Kenya, won a scholarship award and attended Erasmus+ Mobility Project for Higher Education Students and Staff with Partner Countries in Targu Mures City, Romania at the Dimitrie Cantemir University in partnership with University of Nairobi.

In 2024, he graduated with a Master of Arts degree in water resources management conferred on the 20th of September 2024 from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. He was promoted to the position of Deputy director - drought management coordinator and posted to one of the ASAL counties (Kilifi County), in Kenya as the County Drought Coordinator.

Purevsuren Munkhtur, a Mongolian fellow from 2023, published an article this year. The study is based on the results of her individual project conducted in Iceland during the fellowship, and the co-authors are her supervisors from Iceland; Maartje

In June, Lesothoian fellow from 2019, **Retselisitsoe Stephen** was promoted to Principal Lecturer - Forestry, at Lesotho Agricultural College.

Alex Busagwa, Ugandan fellow from 2018, was promoted to the District Natural Resources officer as head of department.

Esther Ekua Amoako was a part of big author team that published an article that can be reached [here](#). Esther also displayed a poster on the 11th International Fire Ecology and Management Congress held 2-6 December 2025, in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA. The posters title was „*Fire effects on population structure of Anogeissus leiocarpa and Vitellaria paradoxa in a savanna parkland*“. Finally, her position as the foundation Director for the newly created Centre for Gender and Career Mentorship was renewed for a second term.

In 2024, Esther published two papers with her collages. You can reach them [here](#) and [here](#).

In 2025, **Sherzod Nizamov**, a 2024 fellow from Uzbekistan, started working as a Team Leader of the FOLUR (Food Systems, Land Use and Restoration Impact Program) project in Uzbekistan. He also took part in the JALS conference in Tokyo, Japan, where he presented and discussed land restoration and water harvesting practices relevant to dryland agriculture.

Peter Mathenge from Kenya, a AFROMAB fellow from this year, presented a poster at the 2nd International Wildlife and Scientific Conference in September, organized by the Wildlife Research and Training Institute (WRTI). Titel of the poster was *Utilization of Opuntia stricta as An Alternative Source of Forage for Livestock During Drought*.

Badam Ariya, a Mongolian fellow from 2017, published two papers as a first author in 2025. The papers can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

Lineo Baasi from Lesotho and a 2016 fellow got promoted to the position of District Coordinator in September 2025.

Stephen Johannes, fellow from 2019 and also from Lesotho just published a paper which can be found to read [here](#).

Akbar Akhmedov from Uzbekistan and a 2017 fellow, has published two research papers, see [here](#) and [here](#). He also published a monograph book and received a

Oostdijk and David Cook. You can read the paper [here](#).

Erdenechimeg Avidsuren, a 2021 fellow from Mongolia was promoted to Project Lead at The Nature Conservancy, where she leads projects focused on climate resilience, adaptation and mitigation, rangeland and peatland conservation and planning, and community engagement.

Ghanaian fellow from 2024, **Prince Addai**, was a first author of a chapter in A. K. Mensah, *Soil Pollution* with co-author Kobina Mensah, A. You can access the chapter [here](#). Prince also published an article as a co-author, again with Menasha, A.K, and Sekyi-Annan. Access the article [here](#). He gave a talk with his colleagues at the national conference DAAD Alumni Event - First Conference on Mineral Mining in Ghana and Phytoremediation, where he talked about Impact of Biochar, Compost, and NPK on Metal Uptake, Soil Quality, and Lettuce Biomass in Mine Tailings.

Cosmus Kule from Uganda and a 2024 fellow published a [paper](#) with Johanna Raudsepp, on behalf of the British Ecological Society. This work was a study he undertook while he was at the GRO LRT training in 2024.

research award under the CAS President's International Fellowship Initiative (PIFI) at Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, Chinese Academy of Sciences. He was awarded a Fulbright Visiting Scholar grant in the United States.

In 2024, **Mohamadou Habibou Gabou**, from Niger and a 2013 fellow was promoted to a Deputy Director at the National Directorate of Promotion of Green Economy and Value Chain Development, of the General Directorate of Environment and Sustainable Development.

Principal Mdolo, a 2016 Malawian fellow, completed his PhD in Chemical Engineering from the University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. He published two articles in 2024, see [here](#) and [here](#).

Wilhemina Asare from Ghana and a 2029 fellow, got a postgraduate Diploma in Education. She published seven papers which can be found by searching her name. One of the publications is a chapter in a book for the World Sustainability Series. She got a position as a Quality Assurance Officer for her faculty: Faculty of Natural Resources and Environment, University for Development Studies, Ghana.

Unurnyam Jugnee, a Mongolian 2022 fellow, published two journal articles. The first paper can be found [here](#) and the second paper, [here](#). The first author of the second article, **Undrahtsetseg Tsogtbaatar**, is also a GRÓ LRT alumni, a one from 2019.

New staff members in the GRÓ LRT Team

In the very beginning of the year, a new project manager started working within the team. Her name is **Gunnhildur Guðbrandsdóttir** and she has BSc degree in Geography and a MA degree in Development studies from University of Iceland. She had been employed at the Agricultural University of Iceland for almost three years before she started at GRÓ LRT, so she was quite well familiar with the programme. Before that, she lived in Sweden for 13 years where she worked as a teacher and a project manager within an institution for mother language education in elementary schools. In addition to her

In October, the team got even stronger when another project manager was employed. Her name is **Guðrún Guðjónsdóttir**, a PhD candidate focusing on Ecosystem Restoration at the University of Iceland. Guðrún was also familiar with the programme, since she was already involved in the daily operations during the 2025 fellows stay in Iceland and as a supervisor prior to that. Guðrún shares a background in geography with Gunnhildur, as well as having a bachelor's degree in French, but she lived in France for few years. She has a double M.Sc. degree from the Agricultural University of Iceland and Lund University in Physical Geography and Ecosystem Processes, with specialisation in environmental changes at higher latitudes. But that is not all, she also has a MA degree

environmental interests, Gunnhildur has special interest in equality issues and is happy to work with the programme where this is combined on daily basis.

from the University of Iceland in International Relations with specialisation in environmental policy from Sciences Po in Paris.

GRÓ LRT welcomes Gunnhildur and Guðrún to the team and is looking forward to seeing them develop in their positions.



Remember you can find us on social media! GRÓ LRT is on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#).