

Season's greetings!

2020 was an eventful year for the Land Restoration Training Programme. On the first day of January, we transitioned from the UNU to join the *GRÓ International Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainable use of Natural Resources and Societal Change*, a new UNESCO category 2 centre located in Iceland. In the beginning of May, we welcomed a new Director to the Programme. The year 2020 turned out to be an extraordinary time for LRT, like for everyone else with the emergence of COVID-19, and the pandemic continued to impact all our activities from mid-March and throughout the year.



UNU-LRT has become GRÓ LRT

After many years of fruitful collaboration, the United Nations University and the Land Restoration Training Programme have parted ways, along with the other three training Programmes in Iceland on fisheries, gender equality and geothermal energy. As of 1 January 2020, the four Programmes are a part of the new UNESCO category 2 centre *GRÓ International Centre for Capacity Development, Sustainable use of Natural Resources and Societal Change*. The Centre operates under its own legal identity and is a unit within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Iceland. It is guided and overseen by a Governing Board, appointed by the Iceland Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Iceland Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, the Director-General of UNESCO, the Icelandic National Commission for UNESCO, and the Icelandic Development Cooperation Committee.

GRÓ's mission is to strengthen individual, organisational and institutional, capacities in developing and conflict/post-conflict countries to deliver development results in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This work is carried out through capacity development training programmes with a focus on four thematic areas: fisheries, gender equality, geothermal energy, and land restoration.

As part of GRÓ under the auspices of UNESCO, GRÓ LRT continues with the strategic objectives of strengthening capacities in developing countries with a focus on restoration of degraded land and sustainable land management. Like before, the main funding of the four Programmes will come from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Iceland as part of the international development cooperation efforts of Iceland.

GRÓ LRT will continue to be implemented jointly by the Agricultural University of Iceland and the Soil Conservation Service of Iceland and hosted by the Agricultural University of Iceland at its research campus in Reykjavik (*Keldnaholt*).

We look forward to continuing our strong collaboration with our partners with a new identity under the auspices of UNESCO.



New website

We have launched a new website with GRÓ and the other three Programmes on fisheries, gender equality and geothermal energy. The website, which is still in the making, will include the content from each Programme's previous websites as well as new information and features. On our new website, www.grolrt.is, you can find information on our mission, capacity development activities, online courses, latest news and more. Information about the GRÓ Centre and its work can be found at www.grocentre.is.



COVID-19 and GRÓ LRT training activities

The GRÓ LRT six-month training programme, scheduled to start in mid-March this year, was rescheduled for March 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The postponement of the training was done at the last minute following an announcement from the Icelandic authorities on firm restrictions of people gathering and the temporary closing of universities, including the Agricultural University of Iceland where the GRÓ Land Restoration Training Programme is hosted.

It was with great regret that we had to postpone the training. But at the same time, we feel it was the right decision as the training experience would in no way have been the same and many difficulties would have met the fellows, lecturers, and staff if the training would have been carried out this year. Consequently, the candidates invited for the 2020 training have been invited to attend the six-month training in 2021 instead. We already look forward to welcoming them next year.

All planned short courses this year were postponed because of the pandemic and rescheduling them will depend on how things evolve around the world regarding COVID-19. We remain committed to delivering quality capacity building short courses and workshops for our partners as soon as global conditions allow.



New GRÓ LRT Director

In May, GRÓ LRT welcomed a new Director as Dr Hafdis Hanna Aegisdóttir left her position as Director after 12 successful years with LRT. The new Director, Dr Sjöfn Vilhelmsdóttir, is not entirely new to LRT. She has been involved with teaching and supervising fellows' research projects since 2008, as well as being a member of the Programme's Academic Committee since 2016. Dr Sjöfn has over 20 years of professional experience in the field of international development, working both in Africa and in Iceland for governmental and non-governmental organizations. She served as the Director of the Institute of Public Administration and Politics at the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Iceland from 2015 to 2020. Her research background includes issues of political trust, social capital, and democracy, as well as gender and development. Sjöfn holds a doctorate degree in Political Science from the University of Iceland. The GRÓ LRT warmly welcomes Sjöfn to the team.

We thank Hafdis Hanna for her outstanding leadership at the Land Restoration Training Programme and wish her all the best in her future endeavours.



Highlighting GRÓ LRT most recent online activities

Dr Hafdis Hanna Aegisdóttir, LRT former Director gave a TEDx talk last winter on the work and philosophy of the Land Restoration Training Programme. The talk is entitled "Training leaders to restore a planet in crisis". You can watch the video and hear about LRT and some of our former fellows [here](#).

The short open online course *Sheep in the Land of Fire and Ice*, co-developed by the Land Restoration Training Programme, has been listed as one of the Best Online Courses of All times at [Class Central](#)! The course covers topics related to the sustainability of sheep grazing in Iceland and explores how history, socioeconomic factors and environmental conditions have influenced the management of grazing resources. A group of experts, including several lecturers at GRÓ LRT, teach in the course. You can access the course for free on the [edX platform](#).

We celebrated the International Day for Biological Diversity, 22 May, by participating in [UNESCO's expert panel](#) on the theme of the day, "Our solutions are in nature". GRÓ LRT Deputy Director was one of the speakers in the panel, addressing the topic "What are the possible ways/tools to regenerate ecosystems and restore our links to the living?" This UNESCO initiative gives us opportunity to come together in this period of great uncertainty around common values, to share the resources on which we can rely upon to be collectively resilient and to accelerate a transformation towards a more sustainable and fair world.



News from former fellows

Dr Bulgamaa Densambuu, former fellow from 2007, gave a [TEDx talk](#) this autumn on the importance of sustainable management of grazing lands in Mongolia. The presentation is in Mongolian.

Dr Toshpulot Rajabov from Uzbekistan, fellow in 2009, was appointed the Dean of the Faculty of Agrobiotechnology and Food Security at Samarkand State University in July 2020.

Dr Enock Ssekuubwa, fellow in 2013, has been promoted to a lecturer at Makerere University, Kampala. He has also won a postdoctoral scholarship to undertake a research on "Enhancing the use of Farmer-Managed Natural Regeneration for mitigating climate change, conserving biodiversity and improving livelihoods in Uganda's Cattle Corridor (FMNR)".

Dr Mariama Yaye (formerly Mariama Diallo) from Niger, fellow in 2016, defended her PhD thesis at the Graduate School of Agricultural Sciences and Water, at the University of Abomey-Calavi, in Benin in December 2019. The title of her thesis is "Differential effects of tree species on soil quality, livestock fodder, millet yield and spatial variability in agroforestry parkland systems of the Sahel". Two journal articles have been published from the thesis, in *Arid Land Research and Management*, and in *Forest, Trees and Livelihoods*.

Dr Akbar Akhmedov from Uzbekistan, fellow in 2017, published an article this December in *Perspectives in Plant Ecology, Evolution and Systematics* on Higher risk for six endemic and endangered *Lagochilus* species in Central Asia under drying climate.

Kubanych Tagaev from Kyrgyzstan, fellow in 2018, has been working on the project "Analysing opportunities for ecological restoration of the urban river Ala-Archa". Kubanych came up with this project idea following his LRT supported attendance in the SER World Conference in Cape Town, South Africa in 2019. Subsequently, he searched for and landed a grant to undertake the study.

The GRÓ LRT team congratulates the fellows on their achievements.

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Land Restoration Training Programme

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