



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

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

Livelihood and Biophysical Gains from Forest and Agroforestry Systems— Synergies and Trade-offs

Dates: September 28th – 2nd October, 2026

Location: Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), Kenya

This summer school is the second in a series of three summer schools on "*New perspectives on social-ecological systems research in Africa: change, trade-offs and coexistence*", with a focus on ongoing transformations in African forest and agroforestry systems and trajectories of adaptation and resilience.

Background: Livelihood and Biophysical Gains from Forest and Agroforestry Systems—Synergies and Trade-offs (Kenya)

Forests and agroforestry systems are under growing pressure from climate change, biodiversity loss, land-use change, and socio-economic transformations, with profound implications for ecological integrity and forest-dependent livelihoods. Over the past two decades, many governments—including Kenya's—have promoted participatory forest management and incentive-based conservation approaches such as *Payments for Ecosystem Services* to address forest degradation while improving local welfare. Evidence shows that these approaches can generate both synergies and trade-offs between conservation and livelihood outcomes, yet research often examines social and ecological dimensions in isolation, limiting the understanding of sustainability. There is a critical need for systems thinking and transdisciplinary research that jointly analyses biophysical and socio-economic outcomes and responds to growing demands for tangible, policy-relevant impacts, particularly in African contexts where such approaches remain nascent.

This summer school aims to strengthen participants' capacity to analyse and promote sustainable forest and agroforestry governance that balances biodiversity conservation,



livelihoods, and environmental justice. Through interdisciplinary learning and cross-case exchange, participants will explore how governance and management strategies shape social, economic, and ecological outcomes, and how progress toward sustainability can be assessed using science-based frameworks, criteria, and indicators. Hosted in Kenya—a country with diverse experiences in community-based and incentive-driven forest management but forest cover below the UN-recommended threshold—the summer school will draw on rich empirical cases.

Aims:

To strengthen the capacity of PhD and postdoctoral researchers to design and apply transdisciplinary, systems-based approaches that enhance both livelihood and biophysical outcomes in forest and agroforestry systems.

Objectives:

- To deepen understanding of how governance and management strategies shape synergies and trade-offs between biodiversity conservation, livelihoods, and environmental justice.
- To build skills in applying social–ecological systems frameworks for integrated analysis of forest and agroforestry sustainability.
- To facilitate cross-case learning from Kenyan and regional experiences with participatory and incentive-based forest management.
- To support participants in identifying, developing, or refining indicators and frameworks for measuring progress toward sustainable forest and agroforestry use.

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 the forest and agroforestry systems and their innovation trajectories towards sustainability:

Days	Activities	Contents
Day 1	Framing the Challenge: Concepts and Evidence	The summer school opens with keynote lectures by leading international scholars on forest and agroforestry systems sustainability, livelihoods, and environmental economics in sub-Saharan Africa. These keynotes set the conceptual foundation on synergies and trade-offs in forest and agroforestry systems. This is followed by an experience-sharing session highlighting empirical evidence from SSA on social and ecological outcomes of ecosystem-based conservation. The day concludes with a theory session and facilitated roundtable discussions based on pre-assigned readings on forest governance, incentive-based conservation, and science-based sustainability indicators.
Day 2	Methods for Assessing Synergies and Trade-offs	Day two introduces comparative methodological frameworks for assessing sustainability in forest and agroforestry systems. Expert-led sessions cover social–ecological systems analysis, socio-economic and biophysical assessment, and livestock–forest interactions. Participants then engage in hands-on group work to design comparative analytical frameworks and data collection tools, including surveys, focus group guides, interview protocols, and geospatial datasets, using digital data collection platforms.



Day 3	Field Application and Experiential Learning	Participants undertake a full-day field excursion to a selected forest management site in Kenya. Working in groups, they apply the social–ecological systems framework to assess governance arrangements, livelihood dependence, forest condition, drivers of degradation, and climate mitigation potential. The day ends with preliminary data synthesis and preparation of key findings.
Day 4	Reflection, Validation, and Analysis	The morning focuses on advisory and action-learning sessions, where participants present field observations to experts and community representatives and receive feedback. In the afternoon, participants conduct team-based data analysis, applying qualitative synthesis methods, basic econometric or statistical analyses, and geospatial mapping (e.g., Q-GIS) to assess sustainability outcomes in forest governance.
Day 5	Synthesis, Communication and Reflections	The final day is dedicated to presentation of findings and collective feedback from peers, experts, and community stakeholders. A concluding skills-building session supports participants in outlining scientific manuscripts or policy-relevant outputs based on their research questions and field experience, followed by synthesis of key lessons and closing reflections.

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:** Applications are open to candidates from all scientific disciplines related to socio-ecological systems, forestry and agroforestry systems, and sustainable livelihoods. Doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers from both the social and natural sciences are encouraged to apply, particularly those seeking interdisciplinary exposure.
- **Age limitation:** The summer school primarily targets early-career researchers. Applicants should generally be no older than 40 years. However, candidates above this age may be considered if they can document delays in their doctoral or postdoctoral trajectories due to family-related reasons, such as childcare responsibilities.
- **Academic requirements:** Priority will be given to doctoral students, regardless of the stage of their PhD. Applicants must hold at least a Master's degree and be formally registered at an African or German university. First-year postdoctoral researchers, will be considered with preference given to those whose research is fully or partly aligned with the theme of the summer school. Selection will be based on the relevance of the applicant's research interests and the overall strength of the application file.
- **Language proficiency:** English is the working language of the summer school. Applicants must therefore demonstrate a good command of English, including adequate reading, comprehension, writing, and speaking skills.
- **Previous participation:** Applicants who participated in the first edition of the New Perspectives on Social-Ecological Systems Research in Africa: Change, Trade-offs and



Coexistence summer school and demonstrated outstanding performance will be given favorable consideration during the selection process, provided they continue to meet all eligibility criteria

Application requirements

Applicants must submit the following documents by May 17th, 2026

- **An application form:** This online form, accessible via this link <https://forms.gle/Rzb2qPyWYMfixzMc9> , collects applicant's personal data, contact details, as well as other relevant information to facilitate selection.
- **A letter of motivation** (no more than one page).
- **A Curriculum Vitae** (no more than two pages).
- **A copy of the last degree obtained** (Master's degree for doctoral students and doctorate certificate for post-docs).
- **Proof of thesis registration** (doctoral student) or postdoctoral employment/ scholarship.
- **A summary of current research project** (no more than one page) summarising the background information, methods and implementation stage of the doctoral or postdoctoral research project.
- **Letter of referral from the department.**
- **Proof of English proficiency (TOEFL/ IELTS or academic records from an English language university).**

Application Procedure

All applications should be done through the form available on the link provided below;

<https://forms.gle/Rzb2qPyWYMfixzMc9>

A **single PDF file** to be submitted via email to mercyline.maina@jkuat.ac.ke and copied to summerschool2026@jkuat.ac.ke with the subject line "**Application Kenya 2026 _Livelihood Summer School_ Applicant's Full Name**".

Fees and support

Application to the summer school is entirely online. 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 17th 2026
- Notification of selected candidates: May 31st, 2026
- Travel to Kenya: September 26-27th, 2026
- Summer school start: September 28th, 2026

Any questions can be addressed to **Dr. Josiah Ateka** (jateka@jkuat.ac.ke)



Partners:

Funding institution:



Academic institutions:



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