

Impact Objectives

- Address the relationship between social, cultural and ecological factors in sustainability in Africa through interdisciplinary research initiatives
- Discover opportunities in the disparities between ontologies of the Global North and the Global South in international collaborations and global endeavours
- Shape and support new opportunities for impact and inquiry that address locally-articulated, socio-ecological challenges

Transforming international development

Leaders of the Sustainable Futures of Africa Network, Dr Mia Perry and Dr Deepa Pullanikkatil discuss their work with a broad range of collaborators to transform how we approach global development projects and counteract their colonial undercurrents



Dr Mia Perry



Dr Deepa Pullanikkatil

Please would you tell us a bit about your project?

The Sustainable Futures of Africa (SFA) Network is about redefining the nature of international, interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaborations. We see and feel the injustice of a global knowledge economy, where research, teaching and innovation is sought out everywhere, where international and development-related research and social justice is highly and substantially supported, but the Global North primarily benefits.

We see and feel the consequences of nationalism, conservatism and extremism in a world that has always been diverse, has always been multiple, but now faces levels of inequality, along with mobility (by choice and forced) and communications that are unprecedented. We are working in relation to a world of increasing ecological vulnerability and social fragmentation.

The SFA Network includes a growing collective of like-minded academics, activists and educators across disciplines, sectors and geographical regions. Specifically, we currently have hubs in

Uganda, Malawi, Botswana, Nigeria and Scotland but the Network is organically growing. We actively acknowledge the interconnectedness of geographies across the world with regards to global challenges that often present the most challenging realities in places already marginalised.'

How is the SFA Network working to confront these issues?

The SFA Network members have considered what might we be missing from our own research and practice and the global drive that exists to make the world a better place. We consider how our actions or lack thereof may contribute to the ever-widening gap between those with resources and those without, as well as between those with opposing views and values, causing extremism and intolerance. We consider our possible contribution to the ever-growing ecological crisis that humans contribute to.

We consider what we could do differently if we found ways to genuinely communicate and collaborate with our scientific, artist, social science and education colleagues or with the communities most affected by the global challenges of resource poverty, land degradation and public health threats.

In certain countries, we have hubs that are working on different projects. Each of these hubs have additional and specific objectives. In Botswana, the SFA is researching the issue of human-wildlife conflict and

interaction. In Nigeria, they are developing research around artisanal mining and its effects on communities. In Uganda, they are working with rural communities on food and water security and community action.

What contribution can overseas partners make towards the work of the SFA Network?

Sustainable futures rely on global participation. It is irrefutable that what happens in one part of the world impacts elsewhere, but models of education and research in sustainable development continue to have a unidirectional focus on perceived under-development. This imposes the implication that the privileged need not change or even reflect on their own roles in global issues. For real, sustainable, ethical change rather than tokenistic, short-sighted or colonial efforts, it is critical that collaboration, research, intervention and development occurs globally.

What are the major challenges facing the Network?

Being a voluntary network, with members having full-time jobs, the SFA strives to keep the momentum of its work going. Placing full-time paid administrators in each hub country has helped in this. It is also challenging to fund work that shines a light on the Global North. This is partly due to a pervasive mindset of 'helping' those considered more vulnerable. ●



Empowered communities: the key to successful projects

Dr Mia Perry and Dr Deepa Pullanikkatil seek to revolutionise approaches to development projects in Africa. With a network of international, interdisciplinary partners, they aim to better attend to the multiple, individual and plural needs, knowledges and perspectives of communities

From our comfortable offices in the West, it is easy to see economic, political or public health struggles in African countries and believe that we have all the answers. Members of the Sustainable Futures in Africa (SFA) Network know we do not.

The SFA Network is an interdisciplinary collective that brings together researchers, educators and communities across four African countries and the UK to assess the true needs of African communities and work together to bring the best, culturally-responsive support possible.

The Network has three overarching goals: to address the relationship between social, cultural and ecological factors in sustainability in Africa through interdisciplinary research initiatives; to discover opportunities in the disparities between ontologies or knowledge systems of the Global North and the Global South inherent in international collaborations and global endeavours and to shape and support new opportunities for impact and inquiry that address locally-articulated, socio-ecological challenges.

LEADING THE WAY

Reflecting the strong multidisciplinary nature of the Network, Dr Mia Perry and Dr Deepa Pullanikkatil, Co-Directors of the SFA Network, come from very different backgrounds that complement the objectives of their ambitious, yet crucial project. Perry was trained entirely in the Global North, while Pullanikkatil was trained entirely in the Global South, but they converge on many aspects, including a shared passion for Africa.

Perry began her education in the arts, using arts-based methodologies in educational research. She has worked in academia as well as with non-governmental organisations (NGOs). During her time working within indigenous and intercultural contexts in Canada, she became acutely aware of her role as a European, white settler and postcolonial awareness and theory soon became an essential component of her practice.

Pullanikkatil, on the other hand, is a civil engineer-turned-environmental scientist, schooled in Tanzania, Lesotho, India and

South Africa. Having spent over 32 years in Africa, she was convinced that development needed to take an integrated rather than sectoral approach. She recognised the need for interdisciplinary work.

THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

The SFA Network has made major progress in Uganda, Botswana, Nigeria and Malawi. In Uganda, the SFA team listened to communities and came up with pathways for action guided by their insights. This resulted in an incredible level of engagement by the community, with sustainable practices that were previously not present. The teams across the Network have established community partnerships, providing all involved with a clear sense of the research and development issues and the resources and knowledges available.

In Botswana, the team researched human-wildlife conflict, asking the community how they wanted to solve their challenges. Again, the project led to a strong community partnership with the SFA team, as well as an academic publication and a plan of action developed by the Madinare community in rural Botswana.

In Nigeria, studies uncovered the socio-ecological impact of mining on the Itaganmodi community of Osun State. This project identified and prioritised challenges faced by the community and analysed indigenous methods of managing pests in farms tied to spiritual belief systems. Studying this indigenous knowledge enlightened academics on the role of religion and spirituality in local land management. ▶



Community meeting in a room made of recycled plastic bottles. Photo Credit: Molly Gilmour



Fieldwork in Uganda. Photo credit: Anthony Kadoma



SFA Network at the 2018 symposium in Lagos. Photo credit: Elson Kambalu

In Malawi, the SFA brought together artists and development practitioners for a discussion on development issues, fostering greater understanding between disciplines and producing ideas for collaboration on sustainable development.

SFA continues to build its network, supporting local and interdisciplinary input in development projects and working to best benefit the societies they work with on their terms.

GROWING NETWORKS

SFA members come from various disciplines and backgrounds, yet come together as a cohesive whole. The key is efficient communication. With regular newsletters and updates, communication of all budgets and projects, regular meetings and collaboration on all decisions, effective interconnectedness is maintained. The team members respect each other and their individual fields. 'SFA members are not just colleagues, we are friends who support each other, and this makes teamwork easy,' states Pullanikkatil.

The SFA has been successful in linking academics and practitioners between UK and Africa for interdisciplinary research. They have established hubs in several African countries that undertake research across disciplines and generate articles and reports that emphasise and demonstrate cross-disciplinary understanding and connection. SFA Network partners include academic institutions, NGOs and individuals. However, they are open to collaborating with the private sector and other areas as well.

One institution the SFA Network has partnered with is EcoAction, a non-profit organisation in Uganda. They work with no outside funding at an unplanned settlement in Kampala, using waste materials to create sculptures and artwork as well as providing

art training to rubbish pickers and those who live in the settlement.

A MINDFUL FUTURE

Each year, the SFA symposium continues to bring together members and new partners to network and share ideas. The next symposium will be held in Lira, Uganda, in February 2019. Events include project updates, workshops, discussions and strategic planning. Additionally, in each of the SFA's partner countries, community forums have been held relating to research projects as well as stakeholder events and capacity building events. Participants are working on writing projects, grant developments, project planning and other activities.

The Network is in full swing and only expanding. 'We have a quickly-expanding network, with partnerships and projects always developing, impacts slowly emerging and a growing foundation of conceptual and practical tools,' explains Perry. The future is looking bright for members of the SFA as well as the communities they serve. The Network has already led to north-south knowledge exchanges and connections. For example, members of the SFA from all hubs have participated in panel discussions at the Glasgow Centre for International Development, as well as universities in Uganda and Botswana on the role of universities in international development and thinking differently about development-related research. This has prompted students and staff to rethink their beliefs on these topics. Many staff and students later engage with the SFA to take the discussion further and connect with the Network's activities.

The more the SFA Network extends its reach, the more individuals and organisations will get on board with their mission. They have demonstrated that there is strength in collaboration and an ethical obligation to listen to the voices of communities they set out to assist. ●

Project Insights

FUNDING

The Sustainable Futures in Africa (SFA) Network is supported by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (EPSRC), the Scottish Funding Council and the University of Glasgow.

CONTACT

Dr Mia Perry and Dr Deepa Pullanikkatil
Co-Directors of the Sustainable Futures in Africa Network

T: +44 141 3301801

E: mia.perry@glasgow.ac.uk

W: <https://sustainablefuturesinafrica.com/>

BIOS

Dr Mia Perry is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow. She works in the intersections of contemporary cultural and arts practices and formal and informal pedagogies, teaching and researching in Social Arts, Community, Youth and Adult Education. Perry's research interests include the educational potentials of making and witnessing arts and culture, the relationships (human and non-human) inherent in every learning engagement and a perspective on those engagements that accounts for more than the end products. She currently works with scholars, artists, and communities addressing sustainability issues that span Africa, Europe and North America.

Dr Deepa Pullanikkatil is an environmental scientist with an engineering background and has 18 years' experience working in developing countries such as Malawi, Lesotho, India, South Africa and Swaziland and also briefly at the University of Glasgow, UK. She has travelled to over 20 countries to present papers or on work-related visits. She is currently Co-Director of Sustainable Futures in Africa (SFA) Network. Besides environmental science, Pullanikkatil's passion is helping bring abundance to communities in need. She is undertaking poverty reduction and environmental protection in Malawi through the non-profit organisation, ABUNDANCE (www.abundanceworldwide.org).

