Executive Summary

GRC Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Meeting and the SGCI Academic Symposium

10 – 13 November 2025

Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

Introduction

The Global Research Council (GRC) Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Meeting and the Science Granting Councils Initiative (SGCI) Academic Symposium were held in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, from 10 to 13 November 2025.

The week's programme combined a regional consultation on the two 2026 GRC Annual Meeting topics, a series of GRC-related activities, a session showcasing institutional developments in selected African research councils and a two-day Academic Symposium that explored African perspectives on curiosity-driven research (CDR) and profiled 22 new bilateral research projects across five thematic clusters.

Eighteen countries participated in the GRC Regional Meeting – Ghana, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Eswatini, Burkina Faso, Togo, Botswana, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Angola, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Africa and Senegal.

Several closed governance and planning meetings among African heads of research councils and GRC structures took place during the week. These sessions strengthened Africa's collective voice in GRC governance and helped shape the road to the 2027 Annual Meeting in Cape Town. A dedicated workshop on GRC Working Groups highlighted opportunities for increased African participation in the Working Groups.

Sub-Saharan Africa Regional Meeting: Inputs into 2026 GRC topics

1. Reimagining inclusive open science and AI for equity, justice and sustainability

Participants strongly endorsed a justice-centred, context-sensitive vision of open science (OS) that is grounded in the UNESCO OS pillars and explicitly linked to equity, inclusion and sustainability.

OS must work for African realities. Africa cannot remain primarily a data source for global science. Councils emphasised the importance of African ownership of data and knowledge, as well as addressing persistent inequities in authorship, infrastructure, and visibility.

Infrastructure should be treated as a public good. Participants agreed that without explicit attention to power, infrastructure gaps and language, OS risks reinforcing existing hierarchies. Diamond open-access models, repositories owned by universities and public institutions, and support for multiple languages were identified as key levers for equitable access that should receive due investment.

Plural STI futures are needed. Participants supported the notion of coordination across differences, moving beyond policy cloning and a singular focus on Global North metrics. Shifting away from narrow journal-based indicators towards responsible research assessment was identified as essential to valuing work that is locally relevant and societally impactful.

Indigenous and local knowledge must be recognised and protected. Examples from several countries showed how councils are beginning to embed OS in national strategies, promote engagement with communities and indigenous knowledge systems, and confront questions of data sovereignty.

AI was recognised as an enabler and a risk within an OS ecosystem. Participants emphasised the need for robust regulation, data protection, and ongoing dialogue on the rapidly evolving landscape.

2. Advancing research for sustainable and inclusive communities

While acknowledging the focus on sustainable cities in the 2026 discussion paper, African participants **argued for a broader framing of sustainable communities** that includes rural and peri-urban areas, informal settlements and diverse human settlements across the continent.

Communities must be partners, not only beneficiaries. Research should be done with communities rather than on them. Genuine co-design requires early and continuous engagement, adequate time and flexible funding, and mechanisms for feedback and shared learning. Councils highlighted the importance of engaging traditional leaders, youth and community-based organisations as co-actors in research to ensure that approaches are relevant, culturally grounded and implementable.

Barriers to co-created research must be addressed. Late or absent community involvement, lack of feedback after projects end, language and cultural barriers, and funding models that do not cover deep engagement were identified as obstacles that councils can directly address through funding design.

Indigenous knowledge and data governance are central. Councils have a responsibility to safeguard local data governance and community data sovereignty by adopting shared positions on data protection, establishing frameworks for ethical data sharing, and supporting models that respect community rights.

Participants emphasised that AI has a crucial yet multifaceted role in sustainability research. It can lower costs and improve efficiency, but raises concerns about jobs, environmental impacts, and inequities.

Taken together, the discussions on OS and sustainable communities converged on a shared conclusion: achieving sustainable, resilient and just communities depends on open, accessible and usable knowledge, on respectful partnerships between different ways of knowing, and on research systems that are evaluated by their contributions to meaningful change rather than only by their outputs.

Cross-cutting Themes

Strengthening African leadership in the GRC. African councils reaffirmed their commitment to a strong regional voice in GRC governance and to operationalising GRC Statements of Principles on issues such as OS, responsible research assessment and responsible internationalisation.

Consolidating the strengthening of African research councils. The Council Spotlight session showcased how councils in Zimbabwe, Togo, Ghana and Ethiopia are strengthening their mandates, establishing or operationalising national research funds, digitising grant management, integrating gender and inclusion, and developing impact and evaluation frameworks. Participation in SGCI and GRC platforms is accelerating these systems improvements and enhancing credibility, collaboration and access to funding.

The Academic Symposium introduced researchers to impact and responsible research, explored African perspectives on CDR, and showcased joint projects across five thematic clusters.

CDR as a pillar of African research systems. The joint session on CDR served as a bridge between the GRC Regional Meeting and the Symposium, providing early input to the 2027 GRC Annual Meeting. Discussions emphasised CDR as a distinct and essential pillar of research systems. Participants argued that investment in CDR in Africa is integral to scientific sovereignty, and called for supportive policies, funding instruments and review practices that can recognise and reward this type of work. African perspectives on CDR, including the role of indigenous knowledge and intra-African collaboration, were recognised as important contributions to the global narrative.

Collaborative research portfolios addressing shared African priorities. These 22 projects collectively illustrate how bilateral and regional collaborations are addressing challenges while building capacity among postgraduate students, early-career researchers, and practitioners.

Looking ahead. Across the GRC Regional Meeting and Academic Symposium, a consistent message emerged: African Councils are committed to strengthening their own systems while actively contributing to a more just, connected, and impact-oriented global science ecosystem.