

Terms of Reference

Call for Applications for Drought Resilience Research Fellowship Grants for students in East Africa

Grant supporting the scientific advancement of ongoing PhD and Master thesis research for students studying at East African universities.



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Overview

The Water Security Research Group at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) and the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC) are conducting research on understanding pathways for increasing resilience to drought events in East Africa within the 'research for development' project *Resilience to extreme drought events in East Africa (INTERVENE)*. Capacity enhancement project activities include support to PhD and Master students. The aim is to promote the students' ongoing research beyond the usual standards and to integrate them into an international research environment. Key characteristics of the support scheme are:

- To support students who are contributing to the advancement of the understanding of drought resilience in countries of the East African Community (EAC), the INTERVENE project consortium is disbursing **grants to 14 promising PhD and Master students** who can demonstrate that receiving the grant will substantially improve the societal and scientific impacts of their **studies related to drought resilience in East Africa**.
- The call is open to **all disciplines** with a preference for the following fields: *agricultural, environmental or development economics, agricultural and rural livelihoods climate adaptation, gender studies, agronomy and hydrology/water resources*.
- Students must be enrolled at an **East African university** in a member country of the EAC (Republic of Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Kenya, Republic of Rwanda, Republic of South Sudan, United Republic of Tanzania UR, and Republic of Uganda).
- The granted amount is a one-off payment of **6,000 € per student**. The payment shall be used to increase the time and scientific rigor students require to contribute to their thesis and to participate in ongoing activities of the INTERVENE project.
- Students will have the opportunity to enhance their research and knowledge through capacity building offers such as **virtual courses and project webinars**.
- Applications require **support from the University assigned thesis supervisor**.
- The scholarship shall last for a **minimum of 12 months** and a maximum of 30 months starting in 2025.
- The **application deadline is 15 June 2025**.
- Scholarship recipients are expected to engage with the project team and local stakeholders in a **series of webinars**. The progress of the thesis will be documented through an **interim report and a final report**. Documentation of grants beneficiaries would be made and shared on LVBC and IIASA virtual communication platforms.

The INTERVENE project

Water is critical to leveraging development opportunities. Because climate change will increase the frequency and intensity of droughts in East Africa, which could hamper economic growth and cause negative social and environmental impacts, measures are urgently needed to address drought vulnerabilities. For effective drought management it is necessary to develop strategies, knowledge, skills, and technologies, which strengthen adaptive capacity. While flood coping strategies have been developed for several regions in East Africa, less attention has been paid to drought preparedness.

Drought is a multi-faceted challenge and can range from effects of longer than usual dry spells to extreme multi-year droughts. It manifests itself through natural and social aspects, and it is foremost the social dimension that can turn a drought into a disaster. Women are important holders of knowledge and skills for drought-related adaptation and risk reduction, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), due to their significant contribution to agricultural production and their responsibility for drinking water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), among other things. Therefore, the resilience of local societies will be enhanced by a gender-sensitive response to drought.

The Austrian Development Cooperation provides funding for the 'research for development' project

Resilience to extreme drought events in East Africa (INTERVENE)

INTERVENE aims to gain a better understanding of the impacts of droughts on water resources and related socioeconomic activities (drinking water supply, agriculture incl irrigation, hydropower, etc.) and to identify adaptation pathways to enhance the resilience of the human-natural water system to droughts. This will contribute to sustainable socioeconomic development in East Africa that is resilient and prepared for future droughts including extreme droughts. To advance local preparedness for droughts INTERVENE will **co-develop drought preparedness and response strategy and action plan(s)**.

Building resilience to drought hazards requires targeted, people-centred approaches that consider the diversity of people's social backgrounds. Diversity analysis, especially the intersectional nature of gender, is a key project objective. Drought response strategies must consider the impacts of intersectional inequalities of social groups, especially women, on food and water resulting from social disparities such as age, education, disability, or income. The project is operationalized by three interconnected output areas (OA):

- OA1: Raising awareness of gender aspects of drought resilience
- OA2: Drought preparedness and response strategy & action plans
- OA3: Improving drought resilience capacity to inform policy and practice (includes scholarships)

INTERVENE is a 3-year project starting in December 2024, and is implemented by the 'Water Security Group (WAT)' of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in partnership with the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC), an intergovernmental organization of the East African Community (EAC).

IIASA is an international research institute based in Austria. Its Water Security Research Group will coordinate the scientific research activities in the project. The team will provide scientific support to students and regularly organize webinars on topics revolving around resilience to droughts in East Africa.

Scholarship program

The INTERVENE Scholarship Program seeks to nurture the next generation of researchers addressing drought resilience challenges in East Africa. Established as a collaborative initiative between the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) and the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC), this program provides financial support to 14 promising Master's and PhD students across the East African region undertaking research within the Lake Victoria Basin region and/or with a bearing or benefit for the basin with relevance to the objectives of the INTERVENE Project. The scholarship aims to enhance the quality and impact of student research by providing resources that allow for more rigorous methodologies, expanded fieldwork, and deeper analysis — ultimately contributing to the broader INTERVENE project goal of sustainable drought resilient socio-economic development in East Africa.

Through this program, students will become active participants in a transboundary research network that bridges South-North collaboration. Recipients will benefit from INTERVENE's Community of Practice (CoP), gain access to specialized capacity-building opportunities, and engage with regional and international experts working at the intersection of water and food security, climate resilience, and gender-sensitive approaches to drought management. With particular emphasis on agricultural/rural livelihoods or development economics, gender studies, agronomy, and hydrology/water resources, the program encourages interdisciplinary perspectives that can inform policy and practice across the East African Community. By supporting local academic talent, the scholarship program strengthens the region's institutional capacity for evidence-based drought resilience planning while ensuring that research reflects local contexts and priorities.

Topics supported

Students can seek funding for their own thesis projects, which should be in a wider sense related to the INTERVENE project's research objectives. In this way, students should gain additional time and capacity to increase the relevance and impact of their research through more rigorous methodologies and expanded research activities. Ideally, the INTERVENE related research covers one thematic aspect of the student PhD or Master research, and results in a chapter of the theses and/or journal paper.

Examples for potential research topics may include but are not restricted to:

- *The differential impact of droughts by gender on income, water access, or food consumption in smallholder households*
- *Strategies for building resilience of East African ecosystems and communities to extreme drought events*
- *Analysis of local and regional policies, laws and strategies supporting drought preparedness and response strategies*

- *Hydrological research on localized solutions for improving drought resilience in the Lake Victoria Basin*
- *Assessment of the intersectional dimension of gender-sensitive drought management in specific EAC countries*
- *Socio-economic impacts of cascading climate disasters on vulnerable populations, particularly women*
- *Integration of indigenous/local knowledge into drought early warning systems and adaptation strategies*
- *Climate attribution studies for East Africa*
- *Climate change impacts on East Africa*
- *Downscaled climate projections for East Africa (e.g., working with CORDEX East Africa)*
- *Climate smart agriculture for building resilience to drought*
- *Application of coupled hydro-economic modeling frameworks to inform drought resilience planning*
- *The role of women in agricultural production, rural livelihoods and WASH during drought conditions*
- *Gender mainstreaming in water and land management and their relevance for building drought resilience*
- *Analysis of drought vulnerability mapping and solution options for urban or rural communities*
- *Integrated Water Resource Management for building drought resilience*
- *Roles of National Drought Management Authorities*
- *Assessment of recent drought in East Africa/ in a LVBC/EAC country including identifying and mapping local and national interventions undertaken*
- *Assessment of prevailing Institutional capacity, gaps and needs for effective drought preparedness and response*
- *Leveraging on innovative technology (Earth observation, space technologies, IoTs and AI) to strengthen the regions resilience to droughts.*

The program seeks at least a few scholarships that incorporate the **gender dimension of drought resilience**, especially those addressing the intersectional nature of social categorizations and drought vulnerability. Consideration of the gender relevance as one aspect in the respective research theme is an asset.

Course offers

Scholarship recipients will benefit from integration into INTERVENE's comprehensive capacity building program, which includes a series of specialized virtual webinars and knowledge exchange opportunities. Final themes of five virtual webinars will be decided by the project Community of Practice in close collaboration with the project team. Envisioned themes include: i) A specialized webinar focusing on the social impacts of drought with consideration of disability and other vulnerability factors; ii) One webinar exclusively for women participants, supporting gender equality objectives; iii) Student research webinar where scholarship recipients can present their progress and findings.

Potential participation in hands-on workshop on hydro-economic modeling tools connected to a Stakeholder Workshop (SWS, scheduled for first quarter 2026) and/or a Drought Resilience Symposium (DRS, scheduled for 2nd quarter 2027).

These capacity building activities will strengthen students' abilities to contribute meaningfully to drought resilience policy and practice in East Africa while fostering connections with the broader Community of Practice. The webinars and workshops will enhance technical skills in drought impact assessment and provide opportunities for knowledge exchange with regional and international experts working at the intersection of water security, climate resilience, and gender-sensitive approaches to drought management.

Timeline and student deliverables

| Deliverable | Description | Timing |
|--|---|--|
| Application with supervisor support | Complete application package including research proposal and letter of support from thesis supervisor | By June 15, 2025 |
| Shortlisting / selection of successful candidates and notification of award | To be jointly undertaken by INTERVENE Project team from IIASA and LVBC. | By end of August 2025 |
| Participation in introductory webinar | Join the first webinar to meet the INTERVENE team and other scholarship recipients | September 2025 |
| Research plan | Detailed research plan with timeline, methodology, and expected outcomes | October 2025 |
| Webinar participation | Active participation in the scheduled webinars throughout the project period | Throughout scholarship period |
| Interim progress report | Document describing research progress, preliminary findings, and any challenges encountered | First half 2026 |
| Engagement with Community of Practice | Interaction with the broader INTERVENE Community of Practice and INTERVENE international research team through virtual or physical meetings | Throughout scholarship period |
| Presentation at student research webinar | Present research findings at the dedicated student research webinar | June-October 2027 |
| Final report | Comprehensive report of research findings, including implications for drought resilience in East Africa | Based on scholarship end date (18-24 months after start, no later than October 2027) |
| Research brief for policy makers | Short policy-relevant summary of research findings for dissemination to stakeholders (max 2 pages) | As above for Final report |
| Thesis submission | Final thesis submission to university including acknowledgment of INTERVENE Project support | According to university timeline |

Financial support

Awardees will receive a grant of **6,000 €** to support their proposed research activities. The payment shall be used to increase the time and scientific rigor the students can contribute to their thesis/dissertation and to participate in the ongoing activities of the INTERVENE project. The grant will be disbursed in three equal installments, one upon signature, a second upon acceptance of the interim progress report, and a final installment upon presentation at student research webinar and submission of final report.

Application Guidelines

The INTERVENE Scholarship Program seeks applications from dedicated Master's and PhD students conducting research related to drought resilience in East Africa. All applications will undergo a rigorous evaluation process by a selection committee composed of representatives from IIASA and LVBC. The selection process aims to identify promising research that contributes to enhanced understanding of drought resilience while ensuring regional and gender balance among recipients.

Selection Criteria

Applications will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

1. **Research relevance:** Connection to drought resilience challenges in East Africa. Preference will be given to research with emphasis on the Lake Victoria Basin.
2. **Scientific quality:** Sound methodology and research approach that demonstrates academic rigor.
3. **Gender dimension:** Integration of gender aspects and intersectionality considerations in the research design as applicable.
4. **Practical application:** Potential for research outcomes to inform policy and practice related to drought preparedness and response.
5. **Innovation:** Novel approaches or perspectives that advance understanding of drought resilience.
6. **Academic excellence of the student:** Evidence of academic excellence and research capability.
7. **Support from supervisor:** Strong endorsement and commitment from the thesis supervisor.
8. **Base institution:** The student must be enrolled in a PhD or Master research program in an East African University. Preference will be given to students who are at the beginning or middle of their research. When the thesis is already in an advanced state of close to completion, the student shall demonstrate the additional value of the scholarship.
9. **Feasibility:** Realistic research plan that can be completed within the scholarship timeframe of between 18 and 24 months.

Applicants may be called for a brief virtual interview in English.

If applications are of similar quality, the one with the earlier submission date will be selected.

Eligibility for Funding

To be eligible for the INTERVENE Scholarship Program, applicants must:

1. Be currently enrolled as a Master's or PhD student at an accredited university in one of the EAC member states (Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo)
2. Be conducting research related to drought resilience in East Africa
3. Have a thesis proposal approved by their university department
4. Not be in the final stage of their thesis research
5. Have the support of their thesis supervisor
6. Be able to commit to participating in INTERVENE project activities, including webinars, reporting requirements, and other Visibility and Communication initiatives.
7. Be able to complete the research within 18-24 months

The program encourages applications from persons with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups, in line with the project's commitment to inclusive research. The INTERVENE project aims for an even distribution of scholarships across gender and country. In case of any questions please contact Sylvia Tramberend (trambers@iiasa.ac.at) and/or Paul Kariuki (kariuki@lvbcom.org).

Required Documents

Applicants must submit the following documents in English:

1. **Application form:** Completed application form (attached to this call) with personal information, university affiliation, research proposal, and Letter of motivation.
2. **Curriculum Vitae** (max. 2 pages)
3. **Academic records:** Transcripts and certificates of completed degrees
4. **Letter of support** from the University assigned thesis supervisor confirming the student's academic standing, research progress, and endorsement of participation in the scholarship program
5. **Proof of enrollment** at an accredited university in an EAC member state

All documents should be submitted electronically to IIASA (trambers@iiasa.ac.at with cc to kariuki@lvbcom.org and joseph@iiasa.ac.at and knights@iiasa.ac.at) with the subject line "INTERVENE Scholarship Application" by **June 15, 2025**. Incomplete applications will not be considered.