

TUM Alumnus Uchendu Eugene Chigbu was born in a rural town in Nigeria. Already as a teenager, he was concerned about how rural areas could be developed further and the lives of the local people improved. To learn more about this subject from an international luminary in this field, he went to TUM in Munich – and ended up staying for his master's, a doctorate and to be a postdoctoral researcher during a period of 13 years. Uchendu Eugene Chigbu quickly established an international reputation through his leadership in large-scale development projects. He now applies the knowledge he gained at TUM in Africa in his role as Professor of Land Administration at the Namibia University of Science and Technology.

Professor Chigbu is committed for fair land use in Africa.



Professor Chigbu, why is Land Management an African concern?

Actually, it isn't just an African concern. It is everyone's concern. How we can sustainably develop spaces outside of cities – in other words, how we deal with rural areas, how we measure, distribute, advance and preserve them, is as important for Europe and Bavaria as it is for Africa. The significant thing about the situation in many emerging countries such as Africa is that ownership, property and land use rights are often anything but legally binding there. Only about ten percent of land in Africa is formally registered and thus legally protected property. The fact that the remaining ninety percent is not clearly defined in terms of who owns the land and who is allowed to use it gives rise to land conflicts and great uncertainty among the population. There can be no long-term planning or investment. National and international investors buy up large areas of land and often displace the people who live there. Naturally, the indigenous population is particularly affected, but so are marginalized groups in society, women, the elderly, the youth and the sick.

Have you always been interested in this subject?

Even as a child and teenager, I was aware that the lack of regulations on land use paves the way for injustice. My mother always complained about in the village. Back in Nigeria, I did a bachelor's in Estate Management, which largely corresponds to a degree in Land Management. After that, I went to England for my master's degree where I explored Business Management. However, I quickly realized that I wanted to return to the roots of my interest.

Is this how you came to TUM?

I had set myself the goal of doing a master's degree in Land Management. So, I started to research where best to study this subject. One name kept coming up each time I searched Land Management, and that was Professor Dr. Holger Magel.



AFRICA

TUM in Africa

In 2018, TUM launched an initiative on Africa. In addition to cooperating on individual projects, long-term partnerships are being promoted in the key areas of teaching, research and entrepreneurship, which are supported at TUM by the Africa Network, spanning various departments. The aim is to use local partners, new methods and adapted technologies as examples to promote sustainable development on the continent. A first area of focus is Ghana, where TUM is involved in the University KNUST. To date, there are already a total of 140 projects and exchange agreements between TUM and institutions in 20 African countries. Under the leadership of the Chair of Land Management, for example, the „ADLAND“ consortium is working on the conception and implementation of responsible and smart Land Management.

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There were students sitting there from many places I had never been to before.

At that time, he was Full Professor for Land Management at TUM and is considered an internationally renowned luminary in this field.

As at time, he had established a highly acclaimed Master degree program at TUM that was well known and talked about far beyond the borders of Germany. He was also President of the Internationale Vereinigung der Vermessungsingenieure (International Association of Surveyors) at the time. To cut a long story short: My interest was piqued – along with the curiosity to participate in his Master programme and personally get to know Prof Magel. During this period, he served as my teacher at TUM and my mentor. Everything fell into place. Studying at TUM and understudying Magel clearly shaped the rest of my professional life.

How so?

When I first walked into the lecture room at TUM, I was totally taken by surprise. I had come from England, where we had always been around thirty to forty people in the class and we learned a lot from literature. At TUM, we were 12 people in class and each one was from a different country. With me there were students from China, Mongolia, Brazil, Cambodia, from Ghana, Thailand, from Jamaica and other places I have never been to before. So, rather than learning only lecturing, we were encouraged to talk to each other and learn from each other. So, I didn't have to read books to find out what the land management situation is like in China, I was able to know it from my Chinese colleague. I got all the information firsthand even before I could read about them. I immediately got a global perspective on everything I learned. Of course, there was intensive theoretical class work done every school day from am until 5 pm, but the entire program was so wonderfully practical – also because of the regular internships and excursions in Bavaria and around Germany.

Did you get out and about a lot?

Oh, quite a lot, I got to meet about seven different Bavarian mayors during my time at TUM (laughs). They narrated to us directly, the Bavarian rural and urban development practices. Among them was the Mayor of Weyarn, whom we visited and he also visited us in class and explained the conditions and problems he dealt with in his day-to-day work. We went on field trips to individual communities, met several mayors and municipal employees who worked on the ground to address the challenges we had previously discussed in class. They told us about the problems in the field and how they addressed them. It was very hands-on learning. Professor Magel made sure that established guest lecturers were always invited from around the world to teach us in the classroom. Speakers from Great Britain,

from the Netherlands, from Cambodia, from Ghana and many other countries. It was all incredibly exciting and broadened my horizons immensely. Professor Magel is a fantastic networker. He always knew just the right person for each topic.

Did that rub off on you?

Networking skills are definitely something I picked up at TUM. I closely observed and analyzed my professors, how they led their research groups, how they prepared before and conducted themselves at conferences, how they fostered their networks. When Professor Magel retired, I - spent three years as a postdoc with Professor Dr. Thomas Wunderlich in Engineering Geodesy. Then I worked for Prof Magel's successor, Professor Dr. Walter de Vries until I moved to Namibia. They all were wonderful role models for me – especially when it comes to learning how to manage academic projects.

Do you need this skill today in your role as a professor in Namibia?

Every day. In my current position, I manage several networks, hold a number of executive positions and have a lot of academic responsibilities. Currently, I am the coordinator of the program Network of Excellence on Land Governance in Africa (NELGA) in Southern Africa. This program is owned by the African Union (AU) but is supported by the German Government, to strengthen human and institutional capacities for the implementation of the AU Agenda on land. In NELGA, I coordinate a network of more than 30

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universities from all over Southern Africa. It is sometimes difficult and complex to connect them all and reconcile their interests. But during my studies I have practiced putting myself in the position of my counterpart and looking at a problem from their perspective. I find this very helpful.

Are you still in touch with your TUM classmates from back then?

I am still very active with them in a WhatsApp group where we exchange ideas and experiences. All of them are working in Land Management all over the world. So, if I want to know how a problem is regulated in another country today, I access first-hand information from them. On top of that, three of my previous students at TUM are now working colleagues at NUST Namibia where I am now, and two of them even work in my department (laughs).

Has it always been clear to you that you wanted to pursue a career in academia?

To answer this question, we might have to go back to my childhood. I was born into a large family, the last of eight children. So, I have six older sisters and a brother. We were all loved very much. But since I was the last child, my family was especially interested in me making something of myself and not wasting my life. But I did not give any of them, especially my mother an easy time.

In what way?

Unfortunately, I never liked school. I just didn't see the point to it, I didn't like it and I never understood what I was supposed to do there. And so, I had to repeat several classes during my early schooling years. But my family didn't give up on me: they insisted that I continue going to school. I remember my mother, who never went to school herself, kneeling down in front of me one day and begging me to go to school. She said, "Uche (as she calls me), you have to go to school, just like your brother and sisters." And I replied, "But why?" And my mother said, "If you don't go to school, you'll be like a blind man. You will never be able to read and write, and anyone who cannot read and write will never know his way in life." Today, of course, I understand what she meant, but at the time I just couldn't see the point of going to school.

So how does someone who didn't like going to school become a professor?

Originally, my interest in Land Management led me to TUM. Then, I realized that, since I could not get into a regular job in Germany due to my poor German skills, I had to take my academic work seriously. In addition, Professor Magel supported international students in his department and kept them on site for research on issues concerning their own countries. When we went over certain things in class, he would often ask me, "Eugene, how would you implement this in Africa?" This question initially bothered me, as I was then thinking of looking for jobs in Germany. But as I matured in my stay with him, I realized it was his way of saying, "you have a responsibility in Africa." So, I embraced it.

Why?

I felt that it implied that my knowledge and qualifications were not needed in Germany. At some point, I addressed this with him. He explained to me how important he thought it was for his students and doctoral candidates to return to their home countries to implement what they had learned at his institute. That's why it was so important to him that we had practical learning

and exchanged ideas with each other to gain a holistic perspective. He would say, “You have the power and the knowledge to really make a difference in your home countries. So go and do it.”

And was he right about that?

Of course! With my research and publications, I raise awareness in Africa about how land management could be done realistically in Africa. I use my position as lecturer and academic networker to introduce ideas, recommended courses of action, and best practices are spreading through the networks I am strategically building. I now firmly believe that a well-written idea can have a real impact on society and improve people’s lives. One of the land management methods I introduced is now being implemented in municipalities in Namibia and Uganda by the UN-Habitat. Of course, beyond that, my primary role is to train the next generation. When I came to Namibia to my Department, I first implemented the model of TUM research groups there. I want to be a mentor for my students and junior colleagues and give them the knowledge and self-confidence that I learned from TUM and around the world.



I want to pass on the knowledge and the self-confidence that was given to me at TUM.

Prof. Dr. Uchendu Eugene Chigbu

**Master Land Management
and Land Tenure 2009,
Doctorate Land Management 2013**

Uchendu Eugene Chigbu graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Estate Management from the Abia State University in Nigeria. In 2005, he completed a Master’s degree in Business and Management in Emerging Markets at the University of Reading in the UK. He then studied a second master’s degree in Land Management and Land Tenure from TUM. In 2013, he added a doctorate in Engineering here. As a research assistant, he worked on several international development projects and was part of the “ADLAND” consortium and TUM’s Africa Initiative. In 2020, Uchendu Eugene Chigbu was appointed Associate Professor of Land Administration at the Namibia University of Science and Technology. Uchendu Eugene Chigbu is co-chair of the International Research Cluster of the Global Land Tool Network (UN-Habitat) and Coordinator of Network of Excellence on Land Governance in Africa (in the Southern African region).