How ‘international’ is IATEFL? We might expect the Global Issues SIG to have a wider, more international feel to it than some other SIGs, but even our membership is mainly concentrated in Europe, with only 3 or 4 members in Africa at the last count. So what can we do to expand, be relevant to, represent, support and link up with teachers of English all over the world?

Early this year, GISIG decided that we would like to create more links with teachers in Africa especially because we thought Africa had its fair share of social and global issues which needed to be considered in ELT. We were interested in learning how teachers in Africa deal with these social issues in their English classes. So we jumped at the chance to deliver the first AfricaTESOL Pre-Conference Event jointly with YLTSIG in Dakar in April this year.

Under the guidance of Harry Kuchah Kuchah, we planned the day with four YLTSIG presenters and five GISIG presenters including committee members, Linda Ruas, Chris Sowton, Rose Aylett as well as Fatou Kine Gueye, a teacher from Senegal and Aymen El Sheikh, Vice President of AfricaTESOL. The Pre-conference theme, ‘Africa in the World, the World in Africa: Quality secondary English language education for local and global understanding’, which reflected the interest of AfricaTESOL and both YLTSIG and GISIG, and focused on bringing the UN Sustainable Development Goals into the English class.

In the opening joint plenary Harry Kuchah and I discussed what ‘global’ means to secondary level learners in sub-Saharan Africa, introducing practical classroom tasks such as working with Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech. In the workshop sessions, Chris Sowton presented a carousel of tasks to engage learners through pictures, stories, music and the natural world; Rose Aylett introduced Bloom’s Digital Taxonomy and how blogging can be used to develop creativity; and Aymen El Sheikh gave a very interesting talk about ‘glocalizing’ through EIL. The PCE ended with the launch of a joint GISIG / YLTSIG competition for teachers to submit learners’ work on the Sustainable Development Goals.

In order to help contextualise the content of GISIG sessions at the PCE, Fatou had linked up GISIG presenters with teachers at her state secondary school, Grand Yoff, in Dakar. From January to April, we shared photos, short introductory videos, links and opinions about teaching English via a WhatsApp group. The teachers at Grand Yoff, and all those we met at the AfricaTESOL conference, were buzzing with life, energy, interest and interesting plans, and several Teacher Association (TA) leaders approached us to ask if we could collaborate with their members. We have since found IATEFL members to work together with groups of teachers in Benin, DRC and Senegal via WhatsApp. The fact that ELTA-Guinea Bissau (GB) had already been working with gender and environmental issues made them our next GISIG natural partner and we have been working productively with colleagues from this very low-resourced context since May.

ELTA-Guinea Bissau puts us to shame. They have no books, very little contact with teachers or trainers outside the country, very unstable jobs and pay, very expensive and unreliable internet, and little support from the Ministry of Education, with no National Curriculum or tests. Despite these challenges, they are still able to create time and show commitment to writing materials and organising many awareness-raising events about gender issues, child protection, and environmental protection. We have recently produced a Joint GISIG/ELTA-GB Newsletter and have been developing our WhatsApp group with real-time interviews, quizzes and discussions about English language and ELT.

Drawing from these experiences, Ali Djau (SG of ELTA-GB) and I were invited to give a presentation, at a recent British Council/Hornby Trust networking week for 25 African TAs on how IATEFL SIGs can work together with teachers in Africa and other less privileged parts of the world. We have since helped organise links between GISIG and African Teaching Associations and WhatsApp groups in The Gambia, Angola, Mozambique and Sudan.

GISIG has learned a great deal from this experience, about teaching English in challenging circumstances, how African TAs work, and many other ways to work with global issues. We have also learned that WhatsApp
groups are such a great way to get teachers in low-tech contexts thinking, comparing, discussing and sharing; it is also excellent for contextualising any face-to-face training. We hope to continue pursuing existing and exploring new partnerships across Sub-Saharan Africa as part of our mission. If you would like to help make IATEFL more international, be put in touch with one of the groups in Africa, or would like a lively, eye-opening WhatsApp group to learn something new, please contact me, Linda Ruas at: gisig@iatefl.org

Linda Ruas