



Look who's asking: Reflections on participatory and transdisciplinary research approaches and their societal relevance

Annette Breckwoldt, Priscila Lopes, Samiya Selim, Prateep Nayak, Ingrid van Putten, Elodie Fache, Hugh Govan, et al.

Background

1. Science with and for the benefit of society?

- This question is still relevant, even after decades of efforts to foster participatory research, and many advancements in transdisciplinary research design.
- Research questions still seem to be framed and formulated outside the actual geographical, social, cultural and ecological setting in which the research projects are supposed to be anchored.
- Even though research pathways have become more diverse, the direction of the information flow still seems predominantly one way.
- The slow progress in transforming academic and funding environments for true 'level-playing-field' research projects does not help this mono-directional research tendency.

2. Research collaborations involving international 'north-south/east-west' teams requires self-reflection by asking:

- Who is framing and asking the research questions?
- What are the local questions?
- What's in for the people?
- Whose knowledge is used where (for whom, which processes)?
- What are the benefits for the resource users/managers/decision-makers of the countries where the research is taking place?
- Whose lens is used to undertake the data analysis, draw conclusions and write recommendations?
- What are our preconceived ideas?

Countries	Questionnaires	Integration of local questions?	
		Yes	No
Australia (Tas)	1	1	
Bangladesh	5	5	
Brazil	10	9	1
Fiji	X	1	
India	1	1	

Initial research questions

- Is a project... transdisciplinary, participatory, integrative?
 - ... co-creating knowledge?
 - ... meeting user's needs (of science, data, resources)?
 - ... pragmatic and meaningful?
- Has there been a change over past decades? To which effect?
- What change is still needed (i.e., research approaches, funding, projects organization)? How?

Preliminary survey (2019)

Email semi-structured questionnaire, 22 Questions, to direct colleagues of co-authors, on:

- Approaches and requests by the community stakeholders to investigate certain aspects
- Options and rationale to accommodate these (or not)
- Information from ongoing or past research projects focusing on marine protected or managed areas
- Project sites in Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Fiji, India
- ... More to come



Preliminary Results

- The majority of respondents has been approached by community members asking the researcher and the research team to investigate specific issues.
- Researchers were asked more often than they were able to accommodate the request.
- Mostly, local questions were interesting and aligned with original research interests.
- Mostly, projects were designed based on local people's previous demands.
- In most cases, this led to increased project relevance and increased application of project results and outcomes.
- People were as much and more or interested than if they would not have been consulted.
- It was a question of accountability to people, e.g. in terms of local ecological knowledge (LEK).
- Most often, time was a main consideration (as challenge and also benefit if long term relationship existed).
- Early consultation and involvement played a role. How are the communities approached? Rapport and trust building is extremely important.
- Respective funding frame and funding conditions were second after this.

Discussion and next steps

- Researchers have to be aware of the importance of humility (D. Armitage) and self-reflection, to deal with expectations and transparency, incl. a project's decision to 'empower local people to take and make own decisions'.
- The local understanding of the scope of projects and research may be a different one than the one in the project's proposal.
- Include those who are at the project's main engagement line, who will be first asked by the communities, those that are 'out there' every day (e.g. students).
- Research needs to be more explicit about the types and challenges of transdisciplinarity. Who is targeted for what, what time-intensity and timeline can be afforded (e.g. 2 year cycles of RARE foundation)?
- Can research take into consideration the contextualities (e.g. Fiji: women's right to speak up only in their origin community)?
- How can a project become sustainable, and/or gain independency of funding?
- Transdisciplinarity has an important role to take for sustainability - of project developments, of resource use, management and conservation outcomes!

Reference: Mauser et al. (2013) Transdisciplinary global change research: the co-creation of knowledge for sustainability. Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 5(3): 420-431.