



Partnering for Change: Link Research to Societal Challenges

Video Transcript

Phase 1: Problem Framing

[Dr. Christian Pohl] From a theoretical point of view, transdisciplinary projects are split in three distinct phases: the phases of 'problem framing', 'jointly conducting research', and 'exploring the impact'. During the coming weeks, I'll guide you through these project phases and introduce the major tasks, challenges, and milestones of each.

Whenever I introduce a further step of this theoretical approach, I'll refer to this scheme. It summarises the major phases of a transdisciplinary project and illustrates the exchange between key players of signs in practice. You'll find a PDF with this complex process attached below. If you like, please take some time to carefully recapitulate each of these steps by yourself.

The first phase of a transdisciplinary project is about jointly envisaging a project and framing goals, problems, and research. Or in short, the first phase consists in 'problem framing'. The main task of the first phase is to jointly frame the transdisciplinary project. Key challenges are: to identify relevant understandings of the problem situation, to clarify who to involve, to match societal knowledge demand and research questions, and to define achievable project goals.

Transdisciplinary research projects typically start with a topic. Compared to a research question, a topic is not yet defined. This figure shows several such topics. For instance, poverty, disease, land degradation, or starvation. In contrast to disciplinary research, transdisciplinary research starts with acknowledging that a topic is complex and that there are manifold ways to address it.

For example, this figure illustrates the different perspectives on the problem field of 'starvation'. A company might have business ideas about how to address starvation, whereas a governmental agency might think about a food programme. An ethical investigation might ask questions about the just distribution of resources among the living, whereas an economic investigation of starvation might look at economic drivers.

It is key to make the different understandings explicit and known to all participants. The question of who to involve includes considerations about expertise, power, and interest. A transdisciplinary project has to bring together the expertise needed for a comprehensive understanding and management of an issue. Furthermore, if a transdisciplinary project wants to make a difference, those affected by it in a negative or positive way have to be included as well as those who have the power to make a change.



'Involve' does not automatically mean that they are physically present in the project. Think, for instance, of a project addressing illegal tropical timber export. The people illegally harvesting and exporting wood would probably not be present in the project meetings. Still, as a relevant stakeholder, they have to be taken into account. A tool often used to clarify who to involve is a stakeholder analysis.

Another key challenge is to clarify the contributions a transdisciplinary research project can make to the societal issue at stake. Addressing this challenge means to specify how exactly scientific knowledge production will be linked to the societal problem. A further challenge is to clarify the project goals from the perspective of those involved. Transdisciplinary projects might end in frustrations, because goals and how achievable they are within the frame of a project were not discussed beforehand.

A tool for such discussions are the outcome spaces. The tool asks those involved to clarify what project outcomes they expect. Such outcomes might concern the situation on the ground, the knowledge on it, or learning processes among the participants and beyond.

At the end of the first phase of problem framing, there is, ideally: a shared problem that is socially relevant and scientifically interesting, a team of researchers of different disciplines and actors of different sectors of society willing to work on it, clarity about the group members' different ways to frame the problem, and finally, a set of achievable project goals.