



Partnering for Change: Link Research to Societal Challenges

Video Transcript

Career paths of 'Transdisciplinary'

[Tobias Buser] When engaging in transdisciplinary research, it is not only about how you approach the research process, but it has also implications on the career paths. So to discuss this, I've invited Christian Pohl, and Flurina Schneider, both are educators from our course. So to start, Christian, I would like to know from you, what was your first encounter with transdisciplinarity?

[Dr. Christian Pohl] I think my first encounter was during my studies of environmental sciences. At that time, the German philosopher Jürg Mittelstrass introduced the concept, also to some of our professors at that time. It meant bringing different disciplines together to address environmental problems. And one of our professors presented it to us, and I was very excited about it. That was my first encounter.

[Tobias Buser] And Flurina, when and how was your first encounter with transdisciplinarity?

[PD Dr. Flurina Schneider] I think it was also at the University when we learned on the term. So I have to say I cannot remember that I knew what it meant really, but what I remember is that I studied three very different topics, geography, biology, and law. And each of them has a very different scientific culture. And I had to learn how to master these different ways of thinking. And for me at the time, it was very obvious that different ways of thinking are needed, so I didn't really know what transdisciplinarity means.

[Tobias Buser] And when then going into your early career phase, what have been your main steps?

[PD Dr. Flurina Schneider] Well then, once I concluded University, I first went to the practice. I worked in organic certification. And after I think two years I went back to University for doing a PhD, and this PhD was located in a transdisciplinary project. So we were two PhD, both focusing on the issue of soil protection in agriculture. And my colleague was looking from a natural science perspective, processes of soil erosion, damage is occurring as a consequence. And I was looking from a social science perspective, more on what are the farmer's rationales, how do they perceive soil erosion, why they apply or not certain soil protection measures.

And we also really explicitly reflected on transdisciplinarity. We collaborated with stakeholders and with our supervisor team. We, for example, also wrote an article on what it means to collaborate together and with the stakeholders.

[Tobias Buser] And how was it with you, Christian, in your early career phase?

[Dr. Christian Pohl] Now when I hear Flurina, I think, I also did a PhD together with an engineer, I was in environmental science, he was an engineer. So that was a bit of transdisciplinary collaboration, in the sense of bringing a very application-driven and a research-driven discipline together. But it was not in my mind they were transdisciplinary. At that time I think, in the Swiss research community, transdisciplinarity became an issue in the Swiss Priority Programme Environment.

But then only when I was invited to do a postdoc, at the Collegium Helveticum with Dr Helga Nowotny, it came back to my mind that I would be very interested in studying researchers who do transdisciplinary research. And that's when I could do a four-year postdoc studying projects, how they bring disciplinary knowledge together, how to integrate and those things.

[Tobias Buser] So both worked in their PhD to some extent, or already quite fully, in transdisciplinary ways. I guess there have been more steps towards the position you have now, but I would like now to hear about where are you now and what are your tasks in your actual position? So please, Flurina.

[PD Dr. Flurina Schneider] So today I serve as a cluster head of the Centre for Development and Environment of the University of Bern. A cluster is a group of around 20, 25 people, all focusing on questions of land, land use, land management, land governance. We do research, but also implementation. So it's actually a very transdisciplinary group. And what I do, on the one hand, I manage this group, but I'm also involved in transdisciplinary research projects still.

I'm involved in teaching. For example, I developed a training course on how to do transdisciplinarity. And more recently, I started to collaborate with funding agencies, because I realised that it's really key to not just look at the project level itself, but more at the science policy level, and to think together with the people there: how can the conditions of transdisciplinary research be increased and improved.

[Tobias Buser] And Christian, where are you now?

[Dr. Christian Pohl] Can I go one step back, before.

[Tobias Buser] That's fine.

[Dr. Christian Pohl] What I've found in my research and my postdoc is that the researchers don't have really a clear plan how they do transdisciplinary research, and they don't have concepts and methods. So I thought, oh, it could be cool to develop such methods and tools. And luckily, I had the chance to do this when we created the Transdisciplinarity Net at the Swiss Academies. Together with Gertrude Hirsh Hadorn and Theres Paulsen, we really had the chance to build a network of inter- and transdisciplinarians



to develop a handbook, principles for designing it. So I think that was a huge chance at the time that we could do that.

And now I'm like Flurina, at the University, at the Transdisciplinarity Lab of ETH in Zürich. And together with my colleagues – we have three co-directors, with Michael Stauffacher and Pius Krütli – we develop teaching classes, bachelor, master, and PhD classes, where we teach students how to run transdisciplinary projects, how to collaborate among disciplines and their stakeholders. We also do transdisciplinary projects in different fields, urban development is one of the fields, another one is development studies. And I also do a lot of studies on inter- and transdisciplinary research, where I try to further develop the theory and the tools.

[Tobias Buser] This was a very rich and insightful discussion, this view into both of your careers. It's also very impressive to see what steps you have taken and where you are now at this positions where you can do what you really like to do. I hope this is also encouraging for you to pursue a transdisciplinary career. So thank you very much, Flurina, for the discussion. Thank you very much, Christian. And thank you for listening.