

Context & Abstract ITD Conference (13-17 September 2021, online): Different perspectives on how to assess societal impact in transdisciplinary and participative research

-> Conference Streams and Questions

Integrative TD: advancing concepts and methodologies

How can we increase the capacity to integrate expertise from multiple fields of knowledge (i.e., systems thinking, participatory action research, humanities, arts, design, amongst others) and professions to advance transdisciplinary concepts and methodologies?

-> Real-time contributions: an online workshop session of 90 minutes

Friday, 17/Sept/2021: 1:30pm - 3:00pm

Link to session in conference program: https://www.conftool.org/itdconf2021/index.php?page=browseSessions&form_session=117

Conference website: akademien-schweiz.ch/de/current/events/itd-conference-2021

Keywords: societal impact, impact assessment, transdisciplinary research, participatory research, impact pathways

How to assess societal impact of research: Approaches and experiences from different transdisciplinary and participatory research fields

Josefa Kny¹, Rachel Claus², Janet Harris³, Martina Schäfer¹, Brian Belcher²

¹Technische Universität Berlin, Germany; ²Royal Roads University, Canada; ³University of Sheffield, UK

At the backdrop of a growing interest in tracking and assessing societal effects of transdisciplinary research in the scientific and political arena, a recent OECD policy paper notes that we should take advantage of the “considerable opportunities for mutual learning across different sectors” (OECD 2020: 40). In the workshop, we want to take up this desideratum. In the proposed online workshop, we aim to bring together scholars from transdisciplinary research areas of sustainability sciences, research-for-development and health research to elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of their respective approaches of monitoring and assessing societal impact of research from a conceptual and empirical stance.

Based on a preliminary literature review conducted by means of a backward snowball approach (starting from a set of relevant papers retrieved published in pertinent journals from the research areas concerned), we identified several tentative commonalities and questions to frame the workshop discussion:

Firstly, we reaffirm the lack of conceptual clarity concerning key terms of impact assessment while comparing different research areas, as discussed by Belcher and Palenberg (2018) in the international development context and by Harris et al. (2018) for participatory health research. Thus, key questions are: To what extent are the same conceptual and terminological underpinnings understood and applied differently in various research communities? How could a common understanding support the development of context sensitive methods for tracking impact?

Secondly, the central challenges of traceability and (causal) attribution are discussed in all research fields considered against the background of the complexity of transdisciplinary endeavours and societal effects (Beckett 2018, Douthwaite et al. 2017, Lux et al. 2019). While the concept of ‘impact pathways’, that is “the sequence or hierarchy of changes and events that map out how things will change” (Vogel 2012: 44), is to some extent used in all discourses (Biggs et al. 2014, Fritz et al. 2019, Temple et al. 2018), it so far remains an open question to what extent the challenges and respective methodological advances might match or differ according to their field contexts.

Finally, across all of the disciplines in our workshop, visualization of the links between activities, results and effects is used to facilitate joint reflection and to create a visual boundary object, which can serve as a starting point for monitoring concepts (Breuer et al. 2016, Deutsch et al. 2021). This leads to the question: How can visualization and narratives be used to increase understanding of impact pathways?

Addressing these questions could be a useful basis to learn from one another and, eventually, combine methodological elements. Therefore, in the workshop we want to address the following questions in an open discussion format:

1. What are the main concepts and terms used in relation to assessing societal effects in the respective research area and how are they defined?
2. What are the key challenges in methodologies to trace and assess societal contributions of research?
3. What is the role of visual and narrative change models in facilitating discussion about societal effects, and how are they used?

We invite scholars from the different research fields to contribute brief responses to these questions from their own experience. The discussion will be structured by asking participants to complete a short template before the workshop, if they like (see below). The filled out templates will be accessible online. In the workshop session, we will present a first synthesis of the handed in contributions as a starting point for discussion. We then will deepen the comparison of the existing approaches and identify conceptual and methodological similarities and differences in small groups (breakout rooms). Based on the identified strengths and gaps of different approaches, documented in a Miro board template, we will jointly discuss whether and how to synthesize methodological elements to advance their overall application in transdisciplinary research projects and strengthen comparability in the last part of the workshop. We will conclude with a collection of open questions and suggestions for joint meta research activities on the topic in a Miro board.

For attendees, this workshop offers an introduction into approaches of describing societal effects of transdisciplinary research in different research areas, an interactive reflection about their similarities and differences as well as first ideas on opportunities and how to combine them constructively to achieve rigorous and manageable concepts and methods in the future. We welcome scholars from the research fields of sustainability, development and health as well as other researchers interested in methodological advances of the assessment of societal effects to join the workshop.

We are looking forward to your contributions to the discussion! If you are interested in contributing, please fill out the template of questions provided below and send it to Josefa Kny (kny@ztg.tu-berlin.de) until **August 13th, 2021**. The filled out template should not exceed two pages.

TEMPLATE OF QUESTIONS

Name of your approach to assess societal impact	
Approach description Please summarize your approach and its application context/options in a few sentences or bullet points.	
Concepts used in the approach Please insert definitions for key concepts and components.	
Key challenges Please write down what you are struggling with concerning the application of your approach.	
Visualization and narratives Please add short information on whether and how you use visualization, narratives or other boundary objects in your approach.	
Strengths and weaknesses From your own perspective: What would you consider as strengths and weakness of your approach?	
Learn more If possible, please insert a link to a website, paper etc. where details of your approach and its application can be found.	

Literature (not included in ConfTool)

Beckett, Kate; Farr, Michelle; Kothari, Anita; Wye, Lesley; Le May, Andrée (2018): Embracing complexity and uncertainty to create impact: exploring the processes and transformative potential of co-produced research through development of a social impact model. In: *Health Research Policy and Systems* 16 (1), S. 118. DOI: 10.1186/s12961-018-0375-0.

Belcher, Brian; Palenberg, Markus (2018): Outcomes and Impacts of Development Interventions. In: *American Journal of Evaluation* 39 (4), S. 478–495. DOI: 10.1177/1098214018765698.

Biggs, Janice S.; Farrell, Louise; Lawrence, Glenda; Johnson, Julie K. (2014): A practical example of Contribution Analysis to a public health intervention. In: *Evaluation* 20 (2), S. 214–229. DOI: 10.1177/1356389014527527.

Breuer, Erica; Lee, Lucy; Silva, Mary de; Lund, Crick (2016): Using theory of change to design and evaluate public health interventions: a systematic review. In: *Implementation science : IS* 11, S. 63. DOI: 10.1186/s13012-016-0422-6.

Deutsch, Lisa; Belcher, Brian; Claus, Rachel; Hoffmann, Sabine (2021): Leading inter- and transdisciplinary research: Lessons from applying theories of change to a strategic research program. In: *Environmental Science & Policy* 120 (2), S. 29–41. DOI: 10.1016/j.envsci.2021.02.009

Douthwaite, Boru; Mayne, John; McDougall, Cynthia; Paz-Ybarnegaray, Rodrigo (2017): Evaluating complex interventions: A theory-driven realist-informed approach. In: *Evaluation* 23 (3), S. 294–311. DOI: 10.1177/1356389017714382.

Fritz, Livia; Schilling, Thorsten; Binder, Claudia R. (2019): Participation-effect pathways in transdisciplinary sustainability research: An empirical analysis of researchers' and practitioners' perceptions using a systems approach. In: *Environmental Science & Policy* 102, S. 65–77. DOI: 10.1016/j.envsci.2019.08.010.

Harris, Janet; Cook, Tina; Gibbs, Lisa; Oetzel, John; Salsberg, Jon; Shinn, Carolynne et al. (2018): Searching for the Impact of Participation in Health and Health Research: Challenges and Methods. In: *BioMed research international* 2018, S. 1-12. DOI: 10.1155/2018/9427452.

Lux, Alexandra; Schäfer, Martina; Bergmann, Matthias; Jahn, Thomas; Marg, Oskar; Nagy, Emilia et al. (2019): Societal effects of transdisciplinary sustainability research—How can they be strengthened during the research process? In: *Environmental Science & Policy* 101, S. 183–191. DOI: 10.1016/j.envsci.2019.08.012.

OECD (2020): Addressing Societal Challenges Using Transdisciplinary Research. STI Policy Paper. Hg. v. OECDpublishing.

Temple, Ludovic; Barret, Danielle; Blundo Canto, Genowefa; Dabat, Marie-Hélène; Devaux-Spatarakis, Agathe; Faure, Guy et al. (2018): Assessing impacts of agricultural research for development: A systemic model focusing on outcomes. In: *Res Eval* 27 (2), S. 157–170. DOI: 10.1093/reseval/rvy005

Vogel, Isabel (2012): Review of the use of 'Theory of Change' in international development. Review Report. Hg. v. UK Department for International Development.