Guiding Principles for Co-learning — Framework

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Living Cities & Communities

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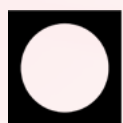Conectados por la naturaleza urbana
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Introduction and purpose

This practical framework introduces five principles for co-learning within international transdisciplinary (TD) research for sustainable development in cities:

- **(i)**   **Mutual learning**

- **(ii)**   **Context-based learning (local knowledge)**

- **(iii)**   **Citizen involvement/ownership**

- **(iv)**   **Gender equality**

- **(v)**   **Openness and inclusiveness.**

The framework, based on co-production and decolonization of knowledge, also includes a self-assessment set of guiding questions for each principle to identify gaps and aspects that are omitted (e.g. epistemologies; groups) and tackle power dynamics within collaborative learning processes.

The purpose of this framework is to facilitate knowledge exchange for co-learning in transdisciplinary research and shed light on the balance power distribution between marginalized cultures/stakeholders and dominant ones.

Why do we need co-learning in transdisciplinary research?

In TD research projects focused on sustainable development, there is a strong need of co-producing knowledge. To tackle today's real-world problems and promote the common good it is critical to incorporate diverse perspectives and learn from a variety of ontologies and epistemologies.

However, professionals from academia, civil society, and government involved in these projects may have limited experience working collaboratively outside of their discipline or area of expertise due to traditional working habits approach's lack of the necessary tools and methods to integrate various work cultures, different thought processes (both scientific and societal), and objectives. As these groups of professionals from science and practice produce knowledge differently, it is important that the guidance provided within TD projects facilitates open communication and constructive dialogue between the parties, enabling them to work together towards a unified objective.

Such collaborative efforts are essential to the effective resolution of sustainability challenges and require the development of a shared understanding that crosses disciplinary boundaries. By promoting reciprocal learning and the exchange of knowledge, and avoiding one direction knowledge transfer, we can build stronger relationships between academia and industry, ultimately driving progress towards a more sustainable future.

Furthermore, in international TD research where collaboration is set between global north and south countries, cities and groups of professionals, questions of power and justice are highly relevant and should be taken into consideration at the very beginning of the partnership. It is also important to have a written agreement where possible pitfalls are described, and mitigation measures previewed. Repeating possible predatory practices of traditional research can be avoided or remediated by, for instance, widening the group's capacity of reflexivity including decolonization of knowledge as an amplifier of justice and fairness within the collaborative effort. Transfer of knowledge in one direction while addressing global, or mutual issues is no longer suitable for achieving innovation for sustainable development, both in terms of problem understanding and problem solving.

Meanwhile, the collaboration between Global North-Global South partnerships can face various centrifugal forces that can negatively impact its cohesiveness. These forces may include cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences, unequal power dynamics, and diverse expectations of the partners.

The Guiding Principles of Co-learning intends to orient TD research professionals from sciences and society and set a base to creation of a space or platform for exchanging knowledge and mutual learning, considering particular equity aspects relevant to the project at stake.

Who is this framework for?

All participants in a TD research project are involved in co-learning and co-production of knowledge. The guiding principles framework is thus targeted at such a consortium as a whole, and can be implemented by project participants in different roles in the project: by work package and task leaders, leaders of living labs, researchers, learning activities organisers, and other participants who act as "boundary spanners" in the project.

Principle 1 — Mutual Learning

We will take notice of the need for balancing directions of learning and avoid typical Global North-Global South, academia-practice, men-women, government-citizens single-directional knowledge transfer approaches. We will acknowledge that there are no absolutely right, or wrong solutions proposed to solving problems addressing the project theme. We are aware that the solutions proposed may be developed based on different ways of thinking.

Guiding Questions:

1 What theories guide the co-learning process? Are they reinforcing any type of oppression or promoting any type of silencing (epistemologies, ontologies, stakeholders, e.g.)?

2 Did the project agree upon theoretical concepts that are important to the project's goal?

3 Are experiences, data, and/or already established knowledge being exchanged between work packages, clusters and cities? Does this exchange sufficiently promote reflection in order to enable new knowledge creation? Are the borders being crossed or more permeable?

4 Is the exchange multi-directional? Is the exchange horizontal? Are the different civil society groups (academia, NGOs), governments, city actors, cultures, genders, and knowledges being acknowledged equally? Are there any dominant voices, disciplines, organisations, culture, countries, or groups? Are there any dominant topics or themes? If so, what are they? Why is the unbalance occurring? It may be necessary to focus on certain topics/themes occasionally. But the reasons why it is needed should be clarified to the group and the group should agree.

5 Is Indigenous Knowledge or traditional knowledge included in the research development and its products? Documented knowledge from one geographical context may not be applicable, or may even be harmful, when applied to other contexts. Indigenous knowledge and traditional techniques can offer a unique knowledge value and should be identified within the learning process.

Principle 2 – Context-based learning (local knowledge)

The project's co-learning space will equally reflect different societies, knowledges, and needs, e.g. if the project has partners from both Global South and Global North. We want to acknowledge the importance of context-sensitive knowledge production and learn from all processes developed at and by case studies, living labs and pilot projects.

Guiding Questions:

1   Is there a plan to operationalise societal knowledge inclusion in knowledge creation within work packages, case studies and living labs?

2   Does the project's co-learning space facilitate local-global integration of knowledge, creating opportunities for mutual learning between local, place-based NBS and international cooperation and networks?

3   Have you reflected upon the project general framework (deliverables and logic)? If it is considered e.g. Global North dominated, then a review of the framework may be needed to meet the different political dynamics in different regions of the world.

4   Has a governance model (such as Mosaic governance) been applied, and does it consider geopolitics and local political power dynamics, to make it fully applicable in all contexts?

5   Is Indigenous Knowledge or traditional knowledge included in the research development and its products? Documented knowledge from one geographical context may not be applicable, or may even be harmful, when applied to other contexts. Indigenous knowledge and traditional techniques can offer a unique knowledge value and should be identified within the learning process.

Principle 3 – Citizen involvement and ownership

We want to move beyond the academic context-only and truly involve civil society and citizens in co-production of knowledge and co-learning. The co-learning space will include the perspective of historically marginalized groups as a tool for shifting the logic of colonialism within research and for enhancing project ownership.

Guiding Questions:

1 Is there an engagement plan for communities, citizens and NGOs?

2 Have the stakeholders from NGOs and/or the community been mapped?

3 What type of involvement is the project planning to provide to NGOs and community involved in the project (participation, consultation, information)?

Principle 4 — Gender equality

To avoid the risk of applying a patriarchal perspective while co-learning and co-producing knowledge in the project it is important to have clarity on how the project sees and manages gender equality, especially concerning the selection of knowledge sources, scientific production authorship, living labs leadership, and pilot projects implementation and maintenance.

Based on this principle, we will reflect on how gender can impact co-production of knowledge.

We want to amplify inclusiveness by responding to The UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 about gender equality, but also going beyond it, by applying intersectionality to address differences among the social category women.

We will pay attention to the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability and age using an intersectional feminism approach.

Guiding Questions:

1 Are we addressing gender or women? If women, what women are we focusing on?

2 How do the different cities, case studies or living labs include gender equality and intersectionality in their governance and participatory projects?

3 How will tasks be implemented in ways that emphasise the empowerment of target groups such as women, young people and older people in the co-creation process, drawing on the local expertise of people of different genders, ethnicity, abilities and socio-economic backgrounds? For example, is the project particularly targeting opportunities for financing to meet women's needs, aiming at fiercely inclusive local processes and rooted working methods to support women, providing more reliable social innovation?

4 How is the project considering reducing gender and age differences disparities related to the potential link between naturalness, place-identity and well-being?

Principle 5 – Openness and inclusiveness

We will reflect on methods applicable for creating open and welcoming forums for discussing a range of views and expressing different perspectives about the project's theme.

We will ensure that everybody can contribute and learn regardless of educational background, discipline, age, career seniority, gender, ability/disability, and language.

We will include a diversity of epistemologies, participatory methods, and languages in our communication including event materials.

Guiding Questions:

1 What methods are applicable for creating open and welcoming forums for discussing a range of different views and expressing different perspectives? Are the methods participatory?

2 Can everybody contribute and learn regardless of career seniority, discipline or sector? Are we aware of the impacts of different disciplinary backgrounds and working cultures to co-produce knowledge?

3 Are we reflecting on geographical distribution of partners and its influence on the learning process?

4 Is the project publishing capacity-building materials in other languages besides English? Are meetings and other communication among partners including a variety of languages?

5 Are we taking into consideration the different time zones, in particular when scheduling virtual meetings?

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How to implement the Guiding Principles for Co-Learning

① **Raise collective awareness about co-production of knowledge in transdisciplinary research and how to go transdisciplinary.** This should be done with a variety of approaches, including lectures, training and capacity building, distribution of reading materials, consortium partner meetings and workshops.

② **Identify pitfalls specifically related to the project rationale, context of implementation, and group of professionals.** Conduct a project proposal analysis followed by small group meetings with interested project partners and if relevant, establish a working group on these matters.

③ **Create a common ground for working together as a heterogenous group.** Be aware of the project's bottlenecks concerning co-learning and co-production of knowledge and adapt the Guiding Principles for Co-learning to your project's reality.

④ **Present the Principles to the group and ensure a common agreement.** A common set of principles for co-production of knowledge and co-learning should be agreed upon by partners. The process can strengthen and mobilize the collective capacity needed to guide sustainable development.

⑤ **Monitor implementation.** Monitor and keep track of the level of co-production over the project timeline.

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Potential challenges in implementing co-learning

1. Cooperation across different work cultures, for instance, disciplinary research habits, societal and government problems solving rationalities, different cultural values, different sector's goals.

2. Time and budget allocation available for capacity building on how to work transdisciplinary based on the project's principles for co-learning.

3. Group commitment - Embedding and adopting the principles in all the project's joint learning activities.

4. Individual and organizational availability for critical reflection and review within the consortium.

Project Partners

University of Sheffield

SLU

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ICLEI — Local Governments for Sustainability

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