Inter and Transdisciplinarity in Social Sciences

Approaches and lessons learned

Symposium on Sustainability Science, 19 December 2016
Overview

1. The ISSC: short intro
2. ID and TD research
3. ISSC ‘s initiatives:
   • *Transformative Cornerstones*
   • *World Social Science Report 2013*
   • *Transformations to Sustainability programme*
   • *Global Initiative on TD training*
4. Conclusions
The primary international body representing the social, behavioural and economic sciences

Established in 1952

A membership based organization

- International disciplinary associations
- National academies and research councils
- Regional social science councils
- Universities and research institutes

Formal associate relations with UNESCO and UN ECOSOC.

67 members including:

“to knit together social science scholars of the world... with the expectation that this will increase international understanding... to raise the level of social science research in the belief that greater knowledge in these fields will benefit mankind... to promote research in fields crucial to the establishment of a peaceful world order...”

www.worldsocialscience.org
Our mission:
To increase the production and use of social science knowledge in all parts of the world in order to contribute to solving global priority problems.
What is interdisciplinarity? What is transdisciplinarity?

MONO  MULTI  INTER  TRANS

Source: Bunders et al, 2009

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Beyond disciplines
• Problem-solving
• Participatory
• Process-oriented co-creation

Klein, 2004
The call for more transdisciplinary research on sustainability has focused sharply on the social sciences:

Social science knowledge is indispensable knowledge

But what can social science contribute?
Transformative Cornerstones of Social Science Research for Global Change

www.worldsocialscience.org
• International Editorial Team and Scientific Advisory Committee
• 150+ authors from 23 disciplines and all regions of the world
• External peer review (40+ reviewers)
• Co-published with UNESCO and the OECD
• Publication formats: print, OECD iLibrary, UNESCO portal
Transformations to Sustainability

- Accelerating social transformations to a just and sustainable world
- Advancing the social science contribution to sustainability research
- Developing a global knowledge network and resource base on social transformations.

Funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)

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T2S programme principles

• Integrated research across disciplines (ID), geographic and sectoral boundaries, led by social scientists

• Solutions-oriented research based on the co-design and co-production of knowledge

• Transformative science

• One principal investigator or project leader from a low or middle-income country
Multistakeholder Steering Committee

Comprising

• ISSC President as chair
• 3 social scientists
• 1 natural scientist
• 1 humanities scholar
• 3 stakeholder / user group representatives (e.g. business, civil society, policy, practitioners)
• 1 science-policy expert (researcher or practitioner)
• 1 representative of UNESCO’s SHS sector
• 1 representative from Future Earth
• ISSC Executive Director (ex officio)
T2S process and selection

- April 2014: Call for pre-proposals
- May 2014: Pre-proposal selection (500+) – six months
- Dec 2014 / March 2015: Call for TKN proposals (88)
- July 2015: review panel meeting
- August 2015: final selection

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T2S evaluation panel

Different models:

• A) First ranking through expert evaluations, followed by a multistakeholder panel

• B) Multistakeholder panel of people working in boundary organisations
Global Initiative on TD Training

Skills building initiative:

• Development of core training modules, incl. methods, case studies, exercises, M+E component

• Adaptable to context, topics, and audiences

• Trainings in different countries and regions

Led by ISSC, ICSU, Future Earth, START, TD-NET

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Current initiatives:

• Trainings in the context of Belmont Forum Actions (food-water-energy nexus), Future Earth, T2S, LIRA 2030

• Development of an international pool of trainers

• Web-based platform of resources
Lessons learned from

• Importance of co-design, and involving all stakeholders from the start
• Importance of building TD skills
• TD research takes time
• Multi stakeholder panels are different
• Need for indicators for valuing and evaluating TD research
Thank you

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**Transformative social science cornerstones**

The social science questions that have to be asked regardless of the concrete issue being addressed
• Lenses for understanding climate change and other processes of GEC as social processes embedded in specific social systems, past and present

• Tools for critically questioning and rethinking the shape and course of those systems in the future

• Transformative because they work together to contest such processes and inform action for deliberate transformation towards equitable sustainability
1. Historical and contextual complexities

- Distinguishing different yet connected stressors and drivers of global change; understanding the interdependency of peoples’ vulnerability to a spectrum of “crises”

- Dealing with differences across geographical, cultural, personal, professional contexts and identities

- Learning from history
2. Consequences

• Living with global change: Taking stock of threats and impacts across different groups and regions

• Identifying social boundaries and tipping points

• Measuring success: Improving the outcomes of specific actions and instruments
3. **Conditions and visions for change**

- Understanding how we can change behaviour and social practice
- Speeding and scaling up processes of change
- Building consensus on the directions for change
4. Interpretation, subjective sense making

- Understanding the nature and role of values, beliefs, assumptions, interests, worldviews, hopes, needs and desires

- Exposing blindspots

- Explaining indifference and denialism
5. Responsibilities

• Foregrounding normative agendas

• Fostering global and inter-generational justice

• Safeguarding ethical approaches
6. Governance and decision making

• Coming to grips with policy processes, understanding political will

• Making knowledge work

• Building relevant institutions and structures at different levels
• Bringing scientists together with policy and decision makers, practitioners, as well as actors from civil society and the private sector in the co-design, co-production and co-delivery of knowledge, policy and practice

• Building open, networked knowledge arenas that involve new forms of collaborative learning and problem solving in specific social-ecological settings
Implies moving beyond

- Instrumental interpretations of relevance (the language of impacts and uptake) in which “science proposes, society disposes”
  - stakeholders basically absent or treated as passive recipients of scientific knowledge
  - agendas and practices organized around second-hand notions of what these actors need and want
... moving beyond

- Reliance on research findings percolating through informed publics, the media, and think tanks to influence policy debates

- Dependence on linear mechanisms of advice and the authority of ‘notable individuals’ in science
... moving beyond

- Involving ‘users’ only in research management and governance
- Interacting with ‘users’ purely as witnesses; contributors of data to analyses framed by scientists