Creating transdisciplinary research spaces for sustainable development

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Already in 1992 the challenge to deepen the cooperative relationship between the scientific and technological community and the general public to foster sustainable development was addressed by the UN (Agenda 21, Chapter 31.1). Since then a series of attempts have been made to develop transdisciplinary sustainability science as a new culture of research to provide both, knowledge about and transformative impacts to unsustainable situations. It aims at creating research constellations that allow for overcoming the subject | object divide, i.e. the divide between researchers and their research field. A joint identification of problem fields and knowledge production through mutual learning is considered to be key to generate knowledge which is socially and culturally robust, i.e. knowledge that can be understood, discussed, and processed by all parties involved and that serves societal transformation, taking into account the ambiguity, complexity and contradictions as a fundamental feature of knowledge. Transdisciplinary research spaces as discussed here are constituted in and sustained by cultural difference, e.g. in professional backgrounds, origin, gender, roles and responsibilities of the involved people. They are created by identifying, acknowledging and overcoming historically grown boundaries and can be conceptualized as (trans-)cultural research spaces. By making boundaries visible, accessible and thus negotiable it is possible to address sustainability challenges with a higher sensitivity towards power relations, hidden potentials and possible causes of conflicts, and to integrate different cultures of knowledge and cognition. In this presentation we address culture(s) in sustainable futures on the level of research practices in terms of cultures of knowledge and cognition and on the level of research outcomes in terms of producing culturally robust knowledge. Based on long-term experiences in transdisciplinary sustainability research we present theoretical and methodological considerations to foster transdisciplinary research cultures for sustainable development.

Keywords: transdisciplinary sustainability research, cultures of knowledge and cognition, culturally robust knowledge

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