

When Science Is Too Slow and Practice Too Narrow: Why Sustainability Demands Transdisciplinary Work

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Within the praxis of sustainability, transdisciplinarity is a lens that is already a proviso to our understanding of the nature of wicked problems. But how can we define a genuine transdisciplinary approach/work? These are the questions I continue to ask myself as a practice-oriented researcher. Does science feed from practice more or vice versa? What tensions usually exist between the two, and how can these be resolved/facilitated? What does a transdisciplinary process look like, and how can we implement it? These questions are relevant to me because I come from both worlds. I have worked on the field as a planner, a policy advocate, and a development worker and now, I have started my academic career as an early-stage researcher. Transdisciplinarity is a running debate in both science and practice. One side often dismisses the other as either insufficiently rigorous or insufficiently grounded.

Practice is frequently reduced to a space where “theories” are tested by some academics. I have come across many sustainability researchers who would only talk to managers and workers to validate their frameworks, talking to practitioners who they see as informants and data points who cannot help reshaping the research. Conversely, science is often perceived as slow, abstract, and detached from the urgencies of the “real world”. A few former colleagues would detest working with academics and their vague, convoluted vocabularies. We would dismiss blue-sky questions that cannot translate into an immediate action point, and some colleagues can be outrightly anti-intellectual. However, I am glad I have taken up TISE for grad school. TISE made me realize that despite this tension, transdisciplinarity is not a lost cause. In fact, what I learned is that it can work when time is taken to build trust and value different kinds of expertise from the start, most especially in sustainability work where the costs of fragmented knowledge are simply too high.

I am still learning to practice the everyday work of translating concepts and navigating institutional constraints as a budding academic working with practice-oriented stakeholders. This reaffirms my experience that working between science and practice is difficult, but it is necessary and it is far from impossible. Yes, working in between is uncomfortable and demanding; but it is precisely in this in-between space that I see more grounded and reflexive pathways for change emerging.

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