Report from T2S events, Fukuoka, 21-26 September 2018

16.11.2018

Introduction

The theme of the Transformations to Sustainability programme workshop in September 2018 was ‘beginnings and endings/endings and beginnings’.

Three projects (‘Transformative Knowledge Networks’ or TKNs) from the original ISSC T2S programme are winding down in 2018/19 while 12 projects funded under the NORFACE–Belmont Forum T2S programme are just starting up between September and December 2018. The workshop provided a meeting ground for the two cohorts of projects, mature and fledgling, to explore what could be learned from each other about doing transdisciplinary research for transformations to sustainability.

The agenda, list of participants, Powerpoint slides and handouts from the events are available in this Google folder and its subfolders:

https://transformationstosustainability.org/research/2018-transformative-knowledge-workshop-fukuoka/

Photos from the meeting can be found here:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/icsu/alms/72157697234915600

ACROS Fukuoka (workshop venue)
Opening round with TKNs: Summary of reflections from the TKNs, in their third and final year of research

1. The TKN members present appreciated the solidarity and supportive sense of community that had grown across TKNs (and with the funder, i.e. ISSC/ISC) over the course of the programme.

« I’ve never been through such a project. The sense of community around it is incredible! »
TKN representative

2. The researchers valued the social science leadership and particularly the foregrounding of the social framing of transformations to sustainability research afforded by the T2S programme, in a research environment dominated by natural sciences and technological or resource management framings. The ISC should continue to help to change the prevailing research culture by making the value of social science transformations research within the global environmental change arena more visible and help others see its importance.

3. Nonetheless, the three-year format of grant-funded projects is too short for this kind of engaged, transformations-oriented research. Two and a half years into the research, the teams felt, things are just beginning (in a sense, the research projects had been “a very long beginning”). The culture of competition and individualism begot by the standard research funding mechanisms is a major issue for science. Engaged, transdisciplinary research requires relationship and trust-building across different knowledge areas and research traditions, none of which can be rushed, and transformations happen over the timespan of decades, so any short-term research project/program only gets to get a glimpse of the processes it is studying. Some viewed short-term research programmes actually as ‘unintelligent’ for the topic at hand.

4. Research emphasized the “ongoingness” of their work; nearly everyone felt committed to staying engaged – unremunerated or with new funding – in the processes they were involved in.

The ISC noted that it plans to conduct a learning study on the first generation of the T2S programme, probably in 2019, to capture more systematically the potential learning about programme design, management and impact.

« We need to make the case for this transformative research. People are hungry for it. »
TKN representative

Report on Living Aulas Research School, Colombia, June 2018

1. The early career researchers (ECRs) had appreciated the freedom to design the learning process they wanted. They are currently designing a second edition of the research school.

2. One senior researcher pointed out that ECRs need support to do transgressive, generative research. The connectivity across the TKNs has been conducive to this.

3. Some weaknesses of the research school identified by the participants were a certain lack of critical engagement with the content, and a level of superficiality, due to lack of time. A
suggestion to help prevent this happening was to engage an ‘elder’ or elders in the design process. At the same time, others thought that there was a value in the ECRs working this out for themselves; the T-Learning meeting that followed directly on from the research school had helped to some degree to pull strands together.

22 September

Opening

The meeting began with an ice-breaker exercise: sharing objects the participants had brought with them to represent a beginning or ending (or both). The objects gave us a glimpse of the issues facing the participants contemplating the beginning or ending of professional or personal projects. For example, several people brought seeds of various kinds, representing not just central artefacts in their research projects but also the idea of combining in a tiny entity the legacy of hundreds or thousands of years of cultivation and the potential to germinate, flourish and produce nourishment; the harvesting of seeds marks the end of the growing season and the capacity to begin another one. One person brought a tiny globe, reminding us that Planet Earth is our beginning and our end. Another brought baby socks, symbolizing the beginning of a new life, for child and parent, and also the end of the old way of conceiving of time.

Sarah Moore and Susi Moser (ISC) presented the background and objectives of the T2S programme and the workshop [see slides 5-22, ‘T2S workshop 2018’]. The programme was originally established
by the International Social Science Council (ISSC)\(^1\) to enhance the social science contribution to addressing the challenges of global environmental change and sustainability. The unique emphases of the original programme include:

- A focus on social transformations rather than only technical solutions
- Supporting genuine, balanced international research collaboration across the Global North and South, including through leadership from the Global South
- Fostering new ways of doing research for sustainability, notably interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research
- Building capacity to do this kind of research (in terms of social science capacity, capacity for international research collaboration, and postdoctoral research careers)

These ambitions were carried over into the new Belmont Forum-NORFACE (BF–NORFACE) iteration. The specific role of the ISC in the consortium, and the reason why it has convened this workshop, is to help advance the integration and synthesis of knowledge across the projects, to help communicate among and beyond the projects, and to continue to build a research community and resources around social transformations to sustainability.

Participants were keen to hear more about the mechanics of the programme (including how NORFACE and the Belmont Forum research programmes work and how the projects will be assessed). Some of this could be clarified on the spot; the funders will have to follow up with respect to the project-level reporting and evaluation.

The questions and discussion also touched on various aspects of communication of research, such as:

- The ethics of communicating about ongoing research. The ISC stressed that there is no pressure to publish immature results or details of work in progress – contributions to the communications effort of the programme are welcome but they may draw on many sources of inspiration, not only the ongoing empirical research.
- Since all the projects will be doing communication and outreach work, the main role of the ISC is to help extend the reach of that work, amplify the messages and make the social transformations community more visible.
- What the ISC especially wants to help communicate is the value of: doing research on transformations to sustainability with a social framing; doing internationally collaborative research across the Global North and South; and involving non-academic partners in the co-design of research and the co-production of knowledge and solutions.

**Research Marketplace**

The 12 new projects subsequently presented themselves in a ‘research marketplace’ (see ‘Research Marketplace Guidelines’) using posters which stayed up during the duration of the workshop. Questions, comments and suggestions on the projects were offered on post-it notes throughout the workshop, and participants answered questions during coffee and lunchbreaks and reflected on these inputs in the final sessions of the workshop.

\(^1\) The ISSC merged with ICSU (International Council for Science) in July 2018, to become the International Science Council (ISC).
Researchers from all projects – old and new – were encouraged to find points of connection (similarities, challenges, theoretical or methodological approaches, geographies), and to go deeper into uncertainties and areas of not-knowing.

The session and subsequent cross-project exchanges led to initial ideas for collaboration and joint activities (e.g., a special issue on research methods).

23 September

Focus on impact and evaluation

A session on ‘impact, outcomes and evaluation’ was organized partly because of the interest of the three TKNs in discussing the challenges of monitoring and assessing the impact of their work as they enter the final phase of the projects; and partly to encourage the new projects to think about the relevant issues from an early stage, and to anticipate the challenges, as they begin developing their own ‘theories of change’ and monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) plans.

In addition, this was an opportunity for the T2S community to give some feedback to the funders about their conceptions of impact and how to capture it.

Adrian Ely gave a short introductory presentation [See ‘Impact presentation Ely’] around the framing, drivers and challenges of the impact agenda, stressing at the outset that the UK context and experience were just one of many. He highlighted the inconsistency between the rather broad definitions of impact allowed in principle by research funders in the UK and the constrained frameworks and metrics actually encountered in application and reporting processes. Typical
inquiries into ‘impact’ seek evidence of ‘unidirectional, linear collision of research with the world’, an approach that does not easily reconcile with co-designed and co-produced projects. Moreover, political power, which often remains ‘invisible’, is the criterion by which impact is judged; timeframes of project impact evaluation is disconnected from when outcomes emerge in the real world; and accountability is not easily balanced with learning.

A number of participants then gave invited three-minute inputs followed by break-out and plenary discussion.

**Heila Lotz-Sisitka** suggested that what we work on shapes or should shape how we think about impact and evaluation. She offered the metaphor of ‘attunement’ instead of ‘impact’, and the importance of ‘not doing violence’, in Isabelle Stenger’s terms, to the actual research work (or the project partners and the work they and you do in the world). She suggested that we look to surface indicative narratives of what we study. In the context of T-Learning, this might mean we look for evidence of imagination, crossing boundaries, cognitive justice, uncanny justness, empathy, attunements in thinking, shifts in culture, deep reflectivity, transformed collective activity, processes of emergence, and, ultimately, structured change and shifts in culture.

**Leah Temper** first emphasized that the work we do happens at different levels, requiring evaluation and tracking of impacts at all these levels. She cited the pedagogical use of the EJ-Atlas as a proxy for impact in the Acknowl-EJ project at that global level, but also noted that repression of people or of Atlas-based information or legal threats could be considered somewhat paradoxical indicators of impact. At the case-study level, she pointed out that each of the case study communities they work with has their own perspective on impact. Tracking change in local communities (changes in power relationships, leadership shifts, etc.) can be done, but is often slow to emerge. Importantly, she felt, what is meaningful impact should be determined together with the communities. She also evoked discursive impact (media work) and transformation within institutions – the professional advancement of project participants and development of curricula in line with transformations approaches – as key indicators of impact.

**Seema Kulkarni**, representing a non-academic institution, noted that indicators of impact would include changes in understanding and knowledge about sustainability among her constituents, and contributions to the literature and to civil society networks and action. Do the activities lead to changes in gender relations, to giving voice to people who previously didn’t have one, to different practices in policy-making or a new discourse? Do new ideas get introduced into the academic context so that people learn in new ways about resources such as water? Does the technocratic discourse in the water sector become more human-centric?

**Samuel Codjoe** noted that impacts are cumulative, sometimes easily visible, yet other times less so, and that any impact we make builds on the great deal of work that has already been done; furthermore, our impact as researchers can sometimes be negative for the communities or for the longer-term ambitions. He emphasized that, depending on one’s interpretation of key terms (such as ‘migration’), the choice of targets or indicators of ‘impact’ would be very different. This should be made explicit.

**João Porto de Albuquerque** advocated engaging constructively with the impact agenda, while being critical of it. Co-production is itself a way of engaging with the impact agenda, since it involves including different views and perspectives on impact. One important indicator would be whether a team works constructively with the tensions involved in ‘co-production’, e.g., how to do data collection in a generative, rather than colonizing or extractive, way? Can we capture changes in relationships? Can we find evidence of how we changed perceptions and understanding at different levels, given that we work at one level but our problems are multi-level?


Sarah Moore, representing the ISC, shared that impact for the ISC was linked to the mission of the International Social Science Council to advance the social sciences globally – in practice, this means supporting more research on social transformations framed by social scientists, fostering collaboration across the Global North and South and promoting transdisciplinary (co-designed and co-produced) research with non-academic partners. Beyond facilitating that kind of research, the ISC is looking for evidence that this kind of research is effective, in order to support its mission to have an impact on the level of the science system.

Erica Key, representing the Belmont Forum, emphasized that looking for impact and evaluation is not a ‘box-checking’ exercise. She explained that the ‘co-’ is key to the BF strategy. The BF talks about ‘value-added’ rather than ‘impact’. They look at how the research has changed the research participants and if the research has been transformative. They want to hear about failures and negative impacts, not just the successes. The BF reporting template tries to capture all voices, not just the academic researchers. The template is phased (i.e., it changes over the course of a research project). They are also keen to follow up with post-award evaluation (that is informed by honest interim reporting). Projects should provide a data narrative. The BF is also interested in ‘legacy learning’ (learning beyond the project direction, i.e. ripple effects from the projects).

The participants then broke into small groups to discuss the inputs and the following questions before a plenary discussion:

- What do we (research funders, managers and teams and individual researchers) aim to achieve and leave behind?
- Why think about this from the start of a project?
- What really matters in short-term projects on long-term transformation?
- How do we capture that in our monitoring and evaluation frameworks?
- How does it change from beginning to end of the process?
- What responsibilities do we have for the ending or continuity of what we start?

**Synthesis of the discussion around impact**

All agreed that the alignment of researcher and stakeholder expectations is critical and perhaps the defining feature of co-produced research. Stakeholders should be involved to some degree in the design of indicators of impact and of the monitoring, evaluation and learning plan; researchers must be conscious of their accountability to research participants and alert to negative indications of transformation. They should be humble about impact and, more importantly, engaged in their communities.

The T2S projects would ideally like to measure their impact *inter alia* in the following dimensions:

- Changes in **processes and approaches** – how things are done, how research is done – these are as important as changes in outcomes, and for this we need to document practices.
- Changes in **real-world social arrangements and structures**.
- **Empowerment** of communities and initiatives – giving them voice and visibility, shifting the power relations, reframing of dominant narratives, changing discourses and conceptualizations in policy making.
- Changes in **perceptions**, thinking and understanding.
- **Education** – reinsertion of learning into education and the curriculum, in formal or informal modes.
- **Relationships** as an indicator of social sustainability. Is the research environment humane? Have networks been enlarged (cross-project or beyond)?
These impacts – and how we measure them, however, will always be driven by the explicit or implicit theories we hold. We need to build greater awareness of these assumptions. In relation to the how of evaluation of impact, it was noted that there are different ways of doing evaluation – different approaches and cultural ways of surfacing impact (e.g., rituals) that can be tapped, as well as new ones to be created. Monitoring and reporting are not just about completing logframes. Evaluation can and should be creative, generative and validating. There is, moreover, a rich literature on evaluation as a discipline that is worth consulting (see, for example, some selected references in Annex A for an incipient list that will be supplemented and shared).

One caveat was to be careful about the invention of the ‘baseline’, which was mentioned often but which should be recognized for the construction – and snapshot in time – that it is, rather than a manifest, static and/or objective entity. Similarly, it is notoriously difficult – particularly in complex systems – to prove or illustrate causality and contribution of an intervention to a particular result.

Additionally, concepts and measures of impact are not straightforward – they are always changing, including in the course of a research project, and must constantly be revisited.

In the end, the trend of the discussion on impact was captured well in the term coined by Andy Stirling, who proposed that we aim for ‘reflexively accountable learning’: we must aim to learn continuously from our activity and experience, but we also have a responsibility to those who participate in our research and more broadly to those for whom the research is intended – all should benefit from the learning.

**Japanese storytelling workshop**

Storytelling being a key means of sharing knowledge and connecting with people, participants were introduced by Dr. Tara McGowan to a Japanese traditional form of picture storytelling called ‘kamishibai’, literally ‘paper theatre’, which today is being used in various settings around the world to help effect social change. The participants practiced and performed their project stories in kamishibai style.

Lizzie Sayer, Communications Officer at the ISC, reminded the participants that the techniques they had learned and practiced in the storytelling workshop – narrative structure, use of images, focus, zoom, etc. – were relevant to and could be used in their own communication around their research.
24 September

Fieldtrip hosted by the Rainwater Society Initiative (morning)

The field trip to the Rainwater Science Centre and Convivial Rainwater Centre (a private home designed and owned by 82-year-old architect Mrs. Kakudo), which are part of a project around rainwater harvesting and flood control funded by JST, gave the workshop participants a taste of the local culture, landscape and sustainability challenges, and focalized some of the issues and challenges faced by the T2S projects, such as: understanding the human and social (including intergenerational) dimensions of environmental change; the need for a focus on social transformation rather than only technical solutions; involving society in the definition of problems and the search for solutions; how to assess the impact of research and interventions; the sustainability of the research intervention or its results.

Open session and feedback (afternoon)

Participants proposed topics for focused discussion in break-out groups and reported back in plenary.

Cluster of interests around joint publications, communication and dissemination:

- Using digital media in new ways. Many of the suggestions related to making more or better use of other media or platforms for communication, such as podcasts such as Radiolab, or online media, such as the Conversation. A forthcoming guidance note on communications from the ISC will include some tips on this.
- Producing collaborative review papers, special issues and an edited volume
The TKNs want to kick off a book series on the social dynamics of transformations to sustainability with an integrative book project offering broad, cross-TKN theoretical and methodological contributions. Some considerations for such an initiative:

- Ensuring academic and political rigour
- Targeting the next generation
- Giving value back to the communities engaged in the projects

Generally, there is a need to address “open access” publishing. This is of immanent important with regard to the impact of the impending ban on publishing in paywalled journals by certain European funders ('Plan S')

- Suggestion to build a shared list of open access publications

Increasing the library of tiny books

**Cluster of interests around mutual exchange and learning**

- Organizing ‘feedback-shops’ for the projects to share and test ideas, plans and draft publications
- Learning more about the TKNs’ concepts, frameworks and approaches
- Comparative research – methods, challenges, approaches, countries, scales, literature. For the next meeting a comparative spreadsheet could be filled in of e.g. methods, sites, underlying theories, etc.
- Collecting and exchanging T2S programme participants social media addresses (e.g. Twitter handles) to enhance communication across and beyond the group

**Cluster of interests around community and capacity building**

- Suggestion to share/off er opportunities for students across case studies
- Suggestion to hold the next workshop in a research site
- Suggestion to engage more with early career researchers in research conferences/meetings

**Other closing thoughts**

- The environmental impact of travelling to the meeting was a concern for everyone; future meetings should be arranged to as to minimize environmental impact and expense. As one participant said, what does it mean to preach sustainability when I don’t embody it?
- Hope was expressed that future T2S projects would be led to a greater degree by researchers in the Global South.
- The workshop had been important in making the participants feel like part of a community that faces similar issues and challenges.
- The end of the workshop was not an ending, but a beginning, for both the ‘old’ and ‘new’ projects.

**Post-meeting:**

Two concrete proposals for activities were submitted by cross-project groups before the end of the events:

- A webinar around mobilities and methodology as relevant to the T2S projects
- A special issue, eliciting contributions from each of the 12 projects, related to conceptual approaches/methodologies for research on transformations to sustainability
The well-attended session was introduced by Heila Lotz-Sisitka, noting the common thread of challenging and changing power relations in sites of transformation across the three transformative Knowledge Networks (TKNs) and in transdisciplinary, transformative research. After Sarah Moore (ISC) introduced the ISC’s T2S programme, which serves as the umbrella for the three research initiatives, each of the TKNs briefly presented their core research themes and how ‘power’ has manifested itself both in the transformation processes they study and in the research process itself.

Ursula Oswald Spring offered some initial reflections, reiterating the need for science itself to transform to better address the power dynamics emerging in the research process, to effect a cultural shift in thinking, and for transgressive processes that challenge existing (and unsustainable) power relations to emerge.

In the discussion that followed (moderated by Senior Programme Adviser, Susi Moser), panellists addressed a number of questions, including:

- The nature or understanding of different kinds of ‘power’
- The ways in which power can manifest negatively or positively
- The ways in which oppressive power can be transgressed and power imbalances transformed
- The ways in which social science research methods can help to enhance individual and collective agency for transformation
- The role of researchers in engaged research with communities and how power dynamics have surfaced and been addressed
- The power dynamics within research teams
- The ways in which grappling with power dynamics is a form – in Donna Haraway’s words – of ‘staying with the trouble’
- The ways in which each panellist had experienced and grappled with their own internal power issues (i.e., how we all are asked to decolonize our hearts and minds)
Belmont Forum-NORFACE T2S session at the World Social Science Forum 2018

The Belmont Forum–NORFACE Transformations to Sustainability programme: Re-structuring the field of sustainability research for sustainable and secure futures - a formal launch of the T2S projects

26 September, 16.30-18.30

The session was introduced by Professor Kaoru Sugihara, Vice-Chair of the Future Earth Committee of Japan, who presented the background to the programme and commented that the keyword in this session was not sustainability, nor development, but transformation – he was expecting the new projects to be transformative.

Melissa Leach, who had been involved in the scoping of the new programme in the early phases, was keen to see the outcome of the process as incarnated by the 12 selected projects. She had also followed the progress of the three projects from the original ISSC programme, and knew how challenging and rewarding they have been so far. With that in mind, she sketched some of the context, challenges and opportunities for the social sciences in leading research on transformations to sustainability [see ppt presentation ‘WSSF T2S2 26.09.18 Leach’]:

- Of course, the challenges of sustainability are in part physical and technical, but they are also deeply political and social. It is absolutely vital that questions of equity, fairness and justice be part of any discussion on sustainability.
- The social sciences and humanities have critical contributions to make in this regard. They won’t produce a social science ‘silver bullet’, but they will bring more nuanced thinking to questions of urgency, power relations and the aims, goals and beneficiaries of sustainability.
- Theoretically, social transformations to sustainability research must go beyond glib analyses, to show that it is rigorous, robust and sound. It should draw on the big social science debates, frameworks and approaches to give a richer picture of what transformation might mean, and examine the incompatibilities.
- There are major practical and political challenges facing researchers who want to do this kind of work – challenges that range from the lack of institutional support and recognition for inter- and transdisciplinary research, to the complexity of engaged, transdisciplinary approaches, to the sheer danger involved in challenging incumbent power in its many forms. One thing all the projects will need to do is to find ways to turn these challenges and risks into opportunities.

To conclude, Melissa Leach invited the T2S projects to show how they would chart new transformative pathways – towards sustainability and in ways of working.

The twelve projects rose easily to the challenge, presenting (in a maximum of three slides in four minutes [see ‘WSSF T2S2 26.09.18 intro&pres’]) research plans with a strong focus on empowering communities and civil society to reframe dominant narratives and conceptualizations of problems and solutions, in a wide range of sustainability challenge domains and settings: from human–wildlife interaction and water governance to artisanal gold mining, migration and intellectual property rights.

The full panel of 18 project representatives then took questions from the audience. One of the noteworthy questions about the prospects for career advancement in doing this kind of research. The panel was unanimous in affirming that this kind of research is currently what is exciting and transformative, and that there is no conflict with career goals. Many of them are already engaged long term in related research efforts and communities. However, there was an admission that early career researchers may be at some risk and that their supervisors may need to take care that they are fulfilling requirements for career advancement.
The panel of researchers were confident that the voyage they were embarking on was an important one and would make an exciting and significant contribution to knowledge.

At the end of the session Melissa Leach gave her impressions of the common themes, challenges or absences she had noted during the presentations of the projects and the subsequent discussion.

- She was impressed by the huge range of sites and regions and combinations – which would however spell a challenge for comparability.
- She wondered about the role of regional analytic traditions and strengths, rather than just empirical specificities.
- The way the projects talked about transformation was interesting. Many of the projects mentioned employing a ‘transformations approach’ or ‘transformations thinking’, as opposed to asking what transformation means in a specific place. But is there such a thing as a ‘transformations approach’? Professor Leach argued that it did not exist yet – perhaps in a few years it might, but even then it would be multi-stranded.
- It was great to see that every project was passionately normative, overtly challenging dominant models and introducing a plurality of views.
- Theoretically, they all intended to use some combination of structure and agency, linking ideas and action, in various ways.
- She was surprised by the scarce reference to history or to non-human ontology in the presentations – it might be something for the projects to reflect on.
- All are co-constructing research with non-academic stakeholders.
- All using mixed methods – an exciting array and innovative combinations. She reminded us that integrating methods is really about triangulating, bringing methods into dialogue, and suggested that we might do the same for theory.

Professor Leach’s inspiring final messages were:

- Don’t get hung up on process. Keep ‘discovery’ alive – we can discover a lot about the world through these projects.
- Stay upbeat and positive – we shouldn’t be naïve, but we do the world a service if we can produce positive, enabling narratives.
- There are only three reasons for doing anything – because they are interesting, important or fun – and these projects can be all of those things.
Annex A: Some references on evaluation


