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Fischer, Daniel ; Schmid, Bernhard ; Seidl, Irmi

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Transdisciplinarity: A productive provocation



 **Prof. Dr. Daniel Fischer**

Wageningen Research & University |
Strategic Communication Group |
Wageningen | NL |
daniel.fischer@wur.nl



 **Prof. Dr. Bernhard Schmid**

University of Zurich | Department of
Geography | Zurich | CH |
bernhard.schmid@uzh.ch



 **Prof. Dr. Irmi Seidl**

Swiss Federal Institute for Forest,
Snow and Landscape Research
(WSL) | Birmensdorf | CH |
irmi.seidl@wsl.ch

Transformative sustainability research aspires to expand problem framing and knowledge production beyond the boundaries of academic disciplines to contribute to real-world change. Transdisciplinarity has emerged as a key approach to such research and in the meantime is openly promoted in international reports and funding initiatives like *Horizon Europe*. Behind these developments are vibrant communities of researchers and practitioners – a part of which is gathered in the Special Focus of this GAIA issue – who have formed to advance method, content, and the institutionalization of transdisciplinary research. This is realized, amongst others, by regular gatherings like the *International Transdisciplinarity Conference (ITD)* and the recent inauguration of a *Society for Transdisciplinary and Participatory Research* in Germany.

GAIA has supported this type of research and its community from its outset and provided a home and intellectual exchange space. After decades of sophistication and institutionalization, transdisciplinary scholarship today is experienced and nuanced. Yet, the editorial guidance of this Special Focus *Creating spaces and cultivating mindsets for transdisciplinary learning and experimentation* has shown us that the topic of transdisciplinarity still seems to call for rethinking and questioning fundamental issues and clarifying the roles that scientific inquiry as well as academia and practitioners can and should play in real-world change.

Some of the most pressing questions pertain to the “otherness” of transdisciplinary perspectives: which academics and which practitioners are to be involved in the research, what knowledge do they bring to the table, how does practitioner knowledge differ from academic knowledge, how can we question and critically evaluate the different kinds of practitioner knowledge without subjecting them the procedures of disciplinary academic inquiry, and how can transdisciplinary research collaboration between academics and practitioners be evaluated by funding agencies and others? These questions, and more so the answers to them, have implications for how we design a space for institutionalized transdisciplinary research, how we educate students and collaborate with practitioners within these institutions, and how we define and assess its success and impact.

These reflections indicate that there is a need for keeping these fundamental questions and tensions “alive” to harness the potential of transdisciplinarity as a productive provocation. The collection of papers in the Special Focus section, with its special focus carefully curated by esteemed guest editors, contributes to both fundamental and current explorations of transdisciplinary research practices in transformative sustainability science.

The development of this issue was overshadowed by the loss of our esteemed colleague *Julie Thompson Klein*, a leading thinker and pioneer in inter- and transdisciplinary research. The Special Focus, in which she herself is featured, is also a tribute to her work, as her legacy will continue to inspire and influence the future of the field.

Daniel Fischer, Bernhard Schmid, Irmi Seidl