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Combining Complementary and Related Expertise in Transdisciplinary Projects

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A combination of complementary and related expertise ensured the success of the workshop The City and Agriculture. Renewing the Dialogue. Can this insight be applied to transdisciplinary research in general?



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Transdisciplinary Research as a Buzzword or a Bypass

With the growing popularity of transdisciplinary research (TR), some specialists warn that the term might be used in scientific texts, policies, and funding applications as a mere “buzzword”, a phrase mentioned to appeal to the audience’s sentiments rather than with the aim to properly implementing it (e.g., Wickson et al. 2006). These researchers call for a more precise definition of TR and the implementation of quality assurance measures (Jahn et al. 2012, Pohl et al. 2017, Wickson et al. 2006), in particular, the problem-oriented integration of complementary disciplines and non-scientific actors early in research. Participants from different disciplines are expected to relate to the issue of concern in comple-

mentary ways. Their different backgrounds are meant to ensure that diverse problem definitions are heard, and that feasible solutions for the various stakeholders are designed. But is the quality of TR sufficiently addressed by including complementary disciplines? Another cause for potential flaws in TR seems to be barely addressed: assumptions which are heavily disputed within a discipline might be introduced into TR projects as uncontested facts, thus bypassing disciplinary quality control. Participants with different disciplinary backgrounds might be incapable of scrutinizing their respective assumptions.

The workshop *The City and Agriculture – Renewing the Dialogue*¹ took place on 14 June 2018 at the Bollwerkstadt Bern. It was organised by members of the saguf working group *Urban Agriculture* (including representatives from various Swiss universities, FIBL [Research Institute of Organic Agriculture], AGRIDEA [Center for Agricultural Advisory and Extension Services], and fRaCP [Fédération Romande d’Agriculture Contractuelle de Proximité], the SGA [Swiss Society for Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology] and the SHRS [Swiss Rural History Society]) and brought back to mind my thoughts about quality assurance in TR. This did not happen because quality was an issue at the workshop. Rather, I noticed

that two characteristics of its organisation could hinder misuse of TR as a buzzword and a bypass. First, the workshop confirmed that the early integration of participants with complementary expertise enabled the formulation of multiple problem statements on the relationship and the dialogue between cities and agriculture. Second, some participants had highly related expertise and shared knowledge on the same disciplines and issues, enabling them to mutually challenge the reasoning they presented in the workshop. This experience led me to wonder if these two features can be viewed as allies that can jointly contribute to the quality of TR. Therefore, in the following workshop report I focus on how success was achieved because the participants had both complementary and related expertise.

The Workshop *The City and Agriculture – Renewing the Dialogue*

The initiative to organise a workshop on the dialogue between the urban and the rural socio-economic spheres was born after the 2016 saguf conference *Urbane Agrikultur – Impulse für eine nachhaltige Transformation von Stadt und Land (Urban Agriculture – Stimulus for a Sustainable Transformation of City and Countryside)*. During this conference, various definitions of urban agriculture became apparent. Moreover, the conference

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affirmed that the attraction of urban agriculture arises from its potential to renew the dialogue between the urban and the rural (Moschitz et al. 2017), which has become abstract since the declining dependence of cities on supply from their immediate rural surroundings. Thus, the idea to set up another event focussing on options to foster this dialogue arose. Given the historic and sociological perspective of urban-rural relations (e.g., Newby 1978), the saguf working group *Urban Agriculture* envisioned teaming up with the SRHS and the SGA. The idea found resonance, and funds were secured from the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences' support programme for cooperation projects among its member companies.

tent, structure, location, and invitees for the event. We planned an expert workshop featuring two introductory speeches followed by parallel group discussions and concluding with a short summary session. The first speech was meant to reflect on the contingencies and constancies of urban-rural relations. A historic perspective was found fit for that purpose. The second speech was intended to introduce recent efforts to transform relationships between cities and agricultural sites. An expert-activist engaged in such initiatives could open minds to potential game changers for more sustainable urban-rural relations. The group discussion were meant to address four dimensions, each offering options for analysing and changing urban-rural relations: knowledge

phase, some differences in perceptions on the topic became apparent, and these differing perceptions were not neglected. The organising team proposed suggestions to discuss some of them at the workshop. Additionally, the organizing team chose to not allow the group moderators to define the issues they wanted to discuss themselves. Instead, it was decided to coordinate the issues, which resulted in a process of creating, selecting, and amending issues. The invitees were also selected by the whole organising team, which aimed to include a range of institutions dealing with the workshop topic. Most project team members came from academia, so non-scientific experts were desired. These processes indicate that the organising team aimed to prop-

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From the beginning of the project, the organising team's work style was characterised by its members' substantially different backgrounds. Their various expectations of how to prepare and conduct a workshop demanded immediate attention. Despite the members' support for the project, it took a while to understand and handle the working conventions among colleagues from diverse scientific and non-scientific organisations. Deliberation was needed for simple questions: which online platform should we use to communicate and share documents? How should we handle deadlines and responsibilities? Where and when should we meet? When procedures were agreed on too swiftly, common understanding was not ensured. Achieving agreement on whether the content or the structure of the event needed to be conceptualised first was especially difficult.

After the initial phase, the organising process sped up. We learned how to deal with contradictory conventions and iteratively agreed on the responsibilities, con-

transfer, socio-economic relations, communal and agricultural institutions, and national land use and agricultural policy. Teams of moderators would introduce and lead the group discussions. Along with the organising team, approximately 20 experts from communal and national governing bodies, farmers' organisations and consumer initiatives would be invited to attend the event. The last session was planned to be brief. We expected that the participants would appreciate not having to prepare presentations within the groups. We decided to instead provide written summaries of the discussions and control their quality by integrating the participants in the review process.

Agreement on the working conventions did not lead to immediate consensus on the workshop content. During the planning

erly realise a transdisciplinary approach in the workshop design.

Most invitees accepted invitation to the workshop², resulting in an audience of around 25. The event opened with *Peter Moser* (SHRS) adapting food regime theory to the Swiss context. From there, he suggested that organising principles in the food and agriculture sectors overlapped rather than superseded each other. Additionally, he argued for food regime changes corresponding to shifts in how actors conceptualise agrarian production.

The second speech was given by agronomist *Reto Cadotsch* on the recent formation of sophisticated enterprises in which peasants and consumers share liabilities, such as *L'affaire tournerève*³ in which he participated. After both speeches, the audience

1 Original titles: *Stadt und Landwirtschaft. Erneuerung des Dialogs*, and *Ville et agriculture. Renouveler le dialogue*, respectively.

2 The workshop outline can be accessed at the working group's website: naturwissenschaften.ch/organisations/saguf/projects/urban_agriculture.

3 www.affairetournereve.ch

was requested to bring their questions to the group discussions.

The group discussions became lively. The first group elaborated on the need for new means to transfer knowledge on agricultural production. Ambitious entrepreneurs strive to increase the sustainability of agriculture in rural and urban sites, but their efforts frequently remain unconnected. Much knowledge on the food system lies in the food industry and is not accessible to facilitate new urban-rural partnerships. New entrepreneurs in agricultural production might be supported by platforms for knowledge exchange to find common understandings of sound agricultural production.

In hindsight, the workshop design enabled interesting debates on recent and potential changes in the dialogue between cities and agriculture. This success was achieved through careful preparation and related expertise.

The second group discussed whether the economic and social ties through which food is distributed to urban centres should be changed to strengthen relations between producers and consumers. The discussants saw a need to improve information flows in exchange situations but wondered how many consumers would be willing to slow down their grocery shopping to process the information provided. Competitive, intense exchange relations could be put on equal footing by the adoption of national policies, such as food safety regulations, that do not hinder the development of small-scale processing units by applying risk minimisation standards designed for large-scale agricultural production.

The third group dealt with Lausanne's urban agriculture strategy, voted on a day before the workshop. Cities' levers of action on food policy were discussed. The group concluded that even though various departments govern food production, processing, distribution, and consumption, cities can influence food governance. Cities' options to bring about change in food and agriculture policy depend on their size, and the amount and ownership structure of farm-

land and of food-related firms within their jurisdiction.

The fourth group problematised discrepancies in the policies of the variety of national and regional governance bodies related to food and agriculture. Various ministries and cantonal governing bodies are responsible for food and agriculture policy and at times pursue divergent objectives. Cities might gain importance in agricultural policy as their share of the overall population rises. Independent actors, such as urban agriculture nongovernmental organisations, might foster communication among food-related governing bodies and increase the coherence of their policies.

Were the group discussions biased by the moderators' disciplinary positions on the theme and their prior selection of participants? At least in the group discussions I attended, participants and moderators mutually challenged their positions. For instance, when one participant argued for introducing floor prices for farm products, another participant objected and pointed to historical cases of severe overproduction resulting from such policies. Both speakers showed understanding of classic and political reasoning in agricultural economics. This led to a profound group discussion on how quality and price protection policies are related to the dialogue between the city and agriculture. It was precisely the experts' related expertise that initiated this in-depth discussion.

Conclusion: Complementary and Related Expertise in Alliance

In hindsight, the workshop design enabled interesting debates on recent and potential changes in the dialogue between cities and agriculture. This success was achieved through careful preparation and integration of complementary and related expert-

ise. Integrating complementary academic and non-academic expertise first led to the meeting of different working conventions. The resulting organisational issues likely arose from the participants' diverse backgrounds. The absence of such organizational issues in TR might indicate that they are being dealt with proactively, or that TR is being misused as a mere buzzword. Once the issues were resolved, the participants' diverse backgrounds contributed to the development of the four well-chosen themes: knowledge transfer, socio-economic relations, communal and agricultural institutions, and national land use and agricultural policy. The debates were enriched by the participants' related expertise, which en-

abled them to mutually challenge each other's reasoning. The success of the workshop might give a hint on how to systematically hinder bypass misuse in TR. TR organisation teams may consider not only to integrate experts from different disciplines but also pairing proponents of opposing positions within the same discipline.

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