

Partnering for Change: Link Research to Societal Challenges

Video Transcript

Phase 3: exploring impact

[Dr. Christian Pohl] A transdisciplinary project that addresses politicians and governmental officials by its research might think of a policy brief as an adequate outcome. The third phase, in that example, includes the planning and development of the policy brief. It further includes observing and exploring in how far the policy brief changes policy-making in the intended direction and what other unintended consequences the policy brief might have.

Gross and Hoffman call such interventions as policy briefs 'real world experiments'. This means we should understand them as interventions in complex systems. They might have other effects than the intended ones and unintended side effects.

Interventions should thus be observed to learn about the affected system and to adapt the next intervention, taking surprising insights into account. This learning process might not necessarily come to an end, as any new intervention might have new unintended consequences. We stress the unpredictable character of such interventions by calling the third phase 'jointly explore ways to impact in science and society'.

Key challenges of the third phase of a transdisciplinary project are: to jointly reconsider ways to impact, to jointly develop and test ideas, measures, and solutions, and to jointly evaluate impact. Usually, participants of transdisciplinary projects come along with more or less elaborated ideas of how the project will have an impact and on whom. For instance, a researcher might think a policy brief will be read by policymakers who will become aware of a problem and develop policies to address it. It is usually not considered what policymaker exactly means, nor whether any laws or initiatives on the team of the transdisciplinary project are on the political agenda.

A tool that helps clarifying what is meant by having impact is the theory of change. The idea is that the participants jointly clarify what the impact of the project should be for what target group. This includes specifying the target groups, the intended impacts, the activities or pathways that should induce the impact, as well as criteria to measure impact. For instance, if the policy brief is about less snow in the lower mountain areas because of climate change, a target group could be the communities in lower mountains that depend on ski tourism. And an indicator of success could be that less snow in the winter is taken up as a recurring item in community meetings.

That would be one pathway of impact. And the theory of change would summarise all pathways the project aims at. A PDF with the theory of change is attached to this video. Please take some time to think about some more activities, potential outcomes, and impacts, either in the previous example or in your own projects.

Transdisciplinary projects should provide both products that translate gained insights into the realms of science and the realms of practice. If members of the target groups were already part of phase one and two, the co-produced knowledge might already be in an adequate form. If not, members of the target groups have to be involved in the third stage. Jointly with them, the knowledge produced so far has to be assessed for its relevance, for practice, and science, and to be transferred into products that match the requirements of the respective target groups.

Although the theory of change might have been clearly spelled out, there are still unintended effects a project might have. To check for further impacts of a project, as well as whether the intended impacts were achieved, there is the most significant change tool of Davies and Dart. The tool asks participants at the end of the project to review the whole process and to identify what they see as the most important impact the project had on them.

The participants have to describe this impact by telling a story. These stories can be collected, and the group can decide which stories they judge collectively to be the most important ones. The stories can be also compared with the pathways of impact laid out in the theory of change.

At the end of the third phase of a transdisciplinary project, there is ideally: products that translate gained insights into the realms of science and practice, observations on the intended and unintended side effects the products have, and ideas about how to adapt to the next series of products in order to react to the unintended side effects.