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Enabling Transdisciplinary Research on Social Cohesion in the City

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ENABLING TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH ON SOCIAL COHESION IN THE CITY

The Social Polis experience

Davide Cassinari and Frank Moulaert

Introduction

Transdisciplinary methodology in research crosses disciplinary boundaries to develop a holistic approach, often involving researchers, practitioners and other non-academics in the production of knowledge, which can actively contribute to solving societal problems (Max-Neef, 2005). This chapter discusses the transdisciplinary methodology which was applied in the European platform Social Polis, a concrete experience of cooperation between urban researchers, policymakers and civil society representatives. Social Polis is a social platform funded under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme for Research created to generate a European Research Agenda on ‘Cities and Social Cohesion’. The Social Polis platform has dealt with the complex problématique of social cohesion in cities, involving over three hundred stakeholders with different backgrounds. These stakeholders were brought together in a three-year, multilayered and plural debate with researchers, civil society organizations, representatives from European Union and United Nations organizations and national and local authorities, as well as non-governmental organizations, private-for-profit organizations and community organizations of deprived citizens and migrants. These agents have been involved in combating social exclusion in different domains in cities in Europe, South and North America, Africa, Asia and Australia. Social Polis is therefore an example of a large-scale, transdisciplinary project and illustrates how such a platform can be organized and how stakeholders involvement may be coordinated. Furthermore, it provides the opportunity to discuss some typical problems that frequently arise in transdisciplinary projects, as well as some possible solutions to these.

This chapter starts by briefly presenting transdisciplinary research and some of the arguments in support of it. Next, it discusses some practical issues common to different transdisciplinary projects. It focuses on why the Social Polis project adopted a transdisciplinary methodology, how this was applied and how the social platform addressed the different problems and difficulties arising in the course of the process. In its conclusion, the chapter sets out some future perspectives for transdisciplinary research and identifies challenges and opportunities for transdisciplinarity in the years to come.
1. What is transdisciplinary research?

In the past two decades, there has been a growing interest in the practice of transdisciplinary research, particularly in the social sciences; but a generally accepted definition of transdisciplinarity is still lacking (Jahn, 2008). In this chapter we define transdisciplinary research as research between, across and beyond disciplinary boundaries. It recognizes the dynamics of similarities across disciplinary bodies of knowledge (e.g. community development, social work, social planning) with disciplines referring not only to scientific domains but also equally well to practice fields. Its goal is the holistic understanding of the world or parts of it, and the challenges it holds through connecting knowledge and recognizing its unity (Nicolescu, 2002). In other words, researchers modify or adapt their approaches to make them more appropriate to the issues studied. Cooperation between scientists and practitioners working inside and outside academic communities is essential to transdisciplinary research. This cooperation often materializes in fields oriented to collective action, such as policy studies, spatial planning or transition governance and management.

From the 1970s onwards, criticism of what was considered to be ‘normal’ positivist science grew. Transdisciplinarity was introduced as an innovative form of relevant research alongside systems analysis, critical realism and postmodernism (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008). For Godemann (2006, p. 52), “transdisciplinary research refers to problems outside the scientific world which may only be solved by scientists in co-operation with experts in possession of practical experience from outside the academic world”.

Transdisciplinary research complements discipline-bound or even interdisciplinary research in fields characterized by complexity and uncertainty, in which social, technical and economic developments interact with elements of value and culture. As Pohl and Hirsch Hadorn (2007, p. 20) write, “There is a need for transdisciplinary research when knowledge about a socially relevant problem field is uncertain, when the concrete nature of problems is disrupted, and when there is a great deal at stake for those concerned by problems and involved in dealing with them”, such as poverty, health, migration, cultural transformation, climate change and bioengineering of new crops. Transdisciplinary methodologies have been used in fields as diverse as participative planning (Antrop and Roggea, 2006), policymaking, design, health care, environmental assessment and technology assessment (Thompson Klein et al., 2001; Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008). Interest in transdisciplinarity also arises from different stakeholder pressures on science: social movements (peace, environmental, women’s movements, etc.), trade unions, welfare state concerns and professional occupation groups, which participated in the establishment of new academic teaching programmes and new areas of scientific expertise (such as development studies, peace and conflict research, social work research). In brief, transdisciplinary research attempts to grasp the complexity of problems, take into account the diversity of life-worlds and scientific perceptions of problems, link abstract and case-specific knowledge, and develop knowledge and practices that promote what is perceived by different actors to be the common good.

The involvement of non-academic actors such as practitioners and lay people, especially end users of particular solutions or products, is a central feature of transdisciplinary research. Practitioners may play a central role in defining the main focus of the research, in order to ensure that the identified problem has both scientific relevance and practical interest (Tress et al., 2003). Practitioners may be consulted for achieving a deeper understanding of the issue, and may also have a joint research role. In our vision of transdisciplinarity, non-academic and final users should not just be a source of information but also have a certain degree of influence in the research process. Alternative concepts of research combining different fields in different ways can be found in Table 5.3.1.
Chapter 5.3

Table 5.3.1 Definitions of research styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Style</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transdisciplinary research</td>
<td>- This literally means research between, across and beyond disciplinary boundaries. It recognizes the dynamics of similarities across disciplinary knowledge (e.g. community development, social work, social planning). Disciplines are not only scientific disciplines, but also practice fields. Its goal is the holistic understanding of reality through the connection and unity of knowledge (Nicolescu, 2002). Researchers modify or adapt their approaches to make them more appropriate to the issues studied. Sometimes, a new ‘discipline’ may emerge, e.g. political ecology, cultural geography, complexity theory (physics, philosophy, cybernetics) to facilitate cooperation between existing disciplines to address particular challenges, for example, climate change, declining social cohesion, democratic deficit, etc. Essential to transdisciplinary research is cooperation between scientists and practitioners inside and outside the scientific communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-disciplinary research</td>
<td>- Research outside the scope of one’s own discipline but using its established methodologies. An example would be a cultural anthropologist researching spatial design practice. There is no natural transfer of methodology or cooperation between the disciplines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary research</td>
<td>- A self-contained, non-integrative mixture of disciplines in which each discipline retains its methodologies and assumptions. Cooperation between researchers is mutual, but not interactive (Augsburg, 2005). For instance, in the field of healthcare, specialists in different aspects of health or the human body and mind may work together for one patient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pluridisciplinary research</td>
<td>is concerned with studying a research topic in several disciplines at the same time. For example, a Picasso Cubist painting studied by an art historian, a theologian, a mathematician, a philosopher, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdisciplinary research</td>
<td>- Originally used to describe research which interactively uses methodologies from several established disciplines with a transfer of methodology and methods between them. For instance, substandard housing may be examined in one project using the methodologies of construction, public health, spatial planning, politics, geography, sociology, community development, etc. Today interdisciplinary research mainly refers to research that has developed a shared methodology across disciplines to address one theme (Jessop and Sum, 2003; Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1991; Nicolescu, 2002; Augsburg, 2005).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.1 Critical issues in transdisciplinary research

The application of transdisciplinary methodologies implies dealing with several practical concerns: participation, development of a coordinating team, and cross-sectoral and cross-actor integration. It is crucial that stakeholders from different fields of practice are included on an equal footing and to guarantee right from the beginning the joint specification and execution of a research agenda which is relevant for policymakers, social movements, NGOs, entrepreneurs, politicians and any other people concerned. Transdisciplinary methods, like action research and forms of theory-practice-dialogue, should integrate tacit, experience-based knowledge, as well as systematic and evidence-based research. To address issues of social cohesion in the city, as is the case in Social Polis, translation and bridge-building beyond academic boundaries should foster learning within and across cities and identify local power structures, as well as the potential for groups and places to shape urban development.

The complexity and multidimensionality of social cohesion should be taken into account. This requires a systemic, relational, holistic and integrated approach which is also path-sensitive and context-specific (Miciukiewicz et al., 2012). Context-sensitive models are needed which structure the multiple problems concerning social cohesion and involve non-western research epistemologies and perspectives. For example, adopting economy of affection or informal socialization perspectives changes the perspective on who is a stakeholder and gives a much more
prominent place to settlement inhabitants, movement and organization leaders, street vendors, etc. within stakeholder practice communities (Macharia et al., 2013).

Developing a multi-scalar approach is also an important dimension of research on social cohesion in cities. Scale-sensitive research links micro- and macro-studies and analyses from different perspectives of complexity. There is a need for specific urban accommodations of socio-ecological coherence at different scales with their respective, sometimes opposing dynamics. Building such accommodations requires researching multilevel-governance arrangements and the relations and roles of institutions (at different scales) in establishing horizontal networks of communication between territorial actors.

1.2 The roles of stakeholders and of practitioners in transdisciplinary research

Participation of practitioners in transdisciplinary research and individuation of stakeholders can vary depending on the focus and goals of a project. Participation can adopt different forms, involve different actors and different roles, or be effective, or token or symbolic. Practitioners may be involved in a transdisciplinary project as stakeholders, but can also be part of the scientific core or the coordinating team of a transdisciplinary project, as is the case in Social Polis, as is illustrated in following sections. A broad and generic definition of a stakeholder is any person or organization who is affected by the social context and effects of the research project, or who can contribute to the process of knowledge production. The stakeholders involved in a transdisciplinary project can include professional practitioners, NGO actors, policymakers, activists and academics, but in general any type of (potential) user of the research results and methodologies of the project.

1.3 Coordination of transdisciplinary research

The management of transdisciplinary research requires specific skills and means. Of special importance is the capacity to cross boundaries, create synergies, develop skills and implement the necessary tools (Hollaender et al., 2008). Therefore, instead of a laissez-faire type of leadership, an active coordination team is required for the smooth functioning of a transdisciplinary project. This coordination, which can be pursued by a small team of delegated actors or distributed among the project team members, involves:

- Identification and clear delimitation of expected tasks, and reasonable time frames for pursuing them, as well as for publication and dissemination of results;
- Management of communication between participants, which should be intensive and continuous, and, for this purpose, requires constant monitoring and an active role for the coordinators in overcoming problems and blocks;
- Management of the tension between heterogeneity and effectiveness, which is difficult to overcome in highly complex networks. Specific tasks of the coordination team in this respect involve conflict resolution, building of mutual trust and commitment, and promoting the pursuit of shared goals. Transparency and reflexivity are also key factors here;
- Cognitive integration of knowledge – research outputs and policy solutions – to enhance application of transdisciplinary results in real-world situations.

This smooth functioning of the transdisciplinary process requires a well-designed coordination strategy, apt to be rearranged during the evolution of the project. For these reasons it is very
important to constantly receive feedback and to carry out intermediate evaluations with the purpose of improving the coordination strategy. The coordination team is usually composed of researchers with extensive long trans- and interdisciplinary research experience, but it may also include also practitioners with research participation experience.

2. The Social Polis experience of transdisciplinary research

Having discussed the foundations of transdisciplinary research and some general features of transdisciplinary research projects, this section presents the experience of the Social Polis platform and derives some relevant lessons for transdisciplinary research.

2.1 Overall objective

Social Polis is a transdisciplinary project in urban studies, public policy and collective action. It was set up as an open social platform for dialogue between scientific and policy communities and civil society practice networks, to develop a research agenda on the role of cities in social cohesion and key related policy questions. The research agenda, which was commissioned by the EU Seventh Framework Programme for Research and also communicated to other funding agencies, was a result of a critical review of research to date undertaken by Social Polis researchers from different social science disciplines, on the one hand, and information gathering, open dialogue and collaborative agenda setting within a multi-stakeholder setting on the other.\(^2\)

This research agenda has been built in two steps. First, a broader research agenda with high-priority topics for research on urban social exclusion and cohesion was developed. The second step led to a focused research agenda comprising two major societal challenges and five specific topics. The research agenda was collectively formulated, discussed and reworked by individuals and groups of people with academic, civil society and policy backgrounds with great knowledge of real-life problems concerning social cohesion in cities. The formulation of the research agenda implied a back-and-forth process between the scientific core of the social platform and the stakeholders. The agenda was discussed and amended several times following the feedback emerging from a large conference, from online interaction between scientists and actors from the practice field and from more restricted meetings with stakeholders and scientists. Some stakeholders joining de facto the scientific core took a central role in the final editing of the focused research agenda.

2.2 Social cohesion as a problématique

Problem identification and problem reformulation have been key steps in the Social Polis collaborative process. Grasping the inherent contradictions in constructing social cohesion was a milestone in the collective learning process. Instead of defining social cohesion once and for all, Social Polis participants perceived social cohesion as a multidimensional and multi-scalar problématique ‘in construction’. Social cohesion concerns such diverse issues as the sense of belonging, citizenship and social inclusion – and all this at various spatial scales: in the neighbourhood, the city and society at large. As a first proxy, in the transdisciplinary endeavour of Social Polis ‘social cohesion’ is understood “in its general sense of the cohesion of society as a whole, and not simply as a problem of the poor and excluded” (Novy et al., 2012, p. 1873). The discussion of the concept of social cohesion with local, European and global networks of stakeholders has been particularly fruitful as it allowed actors to acknowledge the difference in meaning of the
concept for twelve specific urban fields of action or existential fields. The approach “shows the complexity and multidimensionality of social cohesion as a problématique, a discursive field dwelling on the paradox of apparently opposite aspirations of belonging and differentiation. It systematizes social cohesion as an ‘open concept’, distinguishing between its socioeconomic, cultural, ecological and political dimensions” (Novy et al., 2012, p. 1873). The consequence of this approach is that, as a problématique, social cohesion escapes the simple problem-solving strategies usually linked to conventional policy domains, but reorders problems and therefore solutions according to logics negotiated across stakeholders and researchers.

Another crucial aspect of the Social Polis understanding of social cohesion is the strong urban dimension of this problématique. The city has been approached from different perspectives: as an agora, a market place, a territory of collective consumption, the core of a division of labour and a public space of political deliberation. The city is the place where the desire for individualization interacts with the need for social cohesion. This explains the necessity for urbanites to participate in different roles in practice-oriented or practice-based research on social cohesion and connected collective action, as the city is the place where the strongest social inequalities and segregation mechanisms are concentrated and where actors have room for developing socially innovative strategies.

2.3 The challenge of stakeholder involvement in Social Polis

Social Polis was built from a scientific community (a scientific core composed of eleven institutions – lead partners according to European terminology – plus a broader researchers’ network) and a very broad practice and policy community, involving more than two hundred stakeholders. Considering the size of the project, the width of the fields covered and the problematization approach that is used, the challenge of stakeholder involvement is very ambitious, as many of the problems reported in the literature on transdisciplinary research could (and did) occur, thus creating obstacles to the project.

In Social Polis, the general objectives negotiated with the European Commission were translated into operational objectives and adapted to the different working realities by the actors involved. For community-based organizations, collaborating in the platform was also a way to obtain small amounts of funding for their own projects in the field of social cohesion and to access researchers working on urban social cohesion. For researchers, it was a unique opportunity to cross academic boundaries, to learn about practitioners’ knowledge and try out new methods of problem formulation and participation. The integration of representatives of city administrations in the transdisciplinary endeavour was more difficult because they are used to contracting out applied research in order to solve particular, clearly definable problems. Transdisciplinarity, however, problematizes and poses questions in a different way, due to multiple perspectives and the valorization of diverging interests of actors. This process requires time and a willingness for reflection and for questioning the assumptions about the world that have until that point been guiding actions (Miciukiewicz et al., 2012).

The most significant problems in stakeholder cooperation, as experienced in Social Polis, include: heterogeneity of participants (institutions, NGOs, research bodies, each with different approaches, different goals and different time frames); physical distance between the participants; abstractness/breadth of the research topic (which can be a hindrance if stakeholders do not see a concrete gain from the participation process); communication barriers; and unequal distribution of resources. How these problems emerged and how they have been tackled is discussed in later sections of the chapter.
2.4 Overall structure of the platform and the logic of stakeholder involvement

Social cohesion is a global issue. Consequently, the Social Polis network includes participants from all over the world, but is mainly rooted in Europe. As the literature stresses, the geographical structure of the network should be as close as possible to the spatiality of the phenomena that are addressed — also crossing institutional boundaries and combining different spatial scales (Novy et al., 2013).

The Social Polis platform organization began with the ‘scientific community’, which unrolled its relations and fields of interest to other communities (communities of practice, policy communities, etc.). The practice and policy communities have become involved with Social Polis in four main structured forms (Social Polis, 2008):

- 1st form – Stakeholders Network 1: the stakeholders with whom the core scientific partners had traditionally worked through joint research, action-oriented research, policy analysis, consulting, etc. The Stakeholders Network 1 includes members from different sectors, concerned with a range of themes and operating within various institutional and governance frameworks. They are users known to the core scientific partners through effective cooperation in previous research projects (privileged witnesses, policymakers and evaluators, policy panel members, and grassroots representatives).
- 2nd form – Stakeholders Network 2: stakeholders with similar expertise as Stakeholders Network 1, but who had had a looser relationship with the scientific core before the project started or/and were involved through indirect contacts of the researchers network and the Stakeholders Network 1.
- 3rd form – inner circle of stakeholders: a group of Social Polis stakeholders from different sectors, but with skills complementary to those of the scientific community and those of the ‘practice’ and ‘policy’ community.
- 4th form – practice and policy subcontractors of Social Polis: stakeholders who organized workshops or delivered papers, reports and educational resources, and produced audiovisual materials under Social Polis grants.

This complex structure was coordinated by a coordination team in the sense defined earlier. Not all cooperation went smoothly. For instance, some stakeholders who became involved after the project started, especially smaller stakeholders, were not always able to keep up with the group process. Occasionally, the platform structure had to be adapted to provide room for new stakeholders. The platform structure was designed as an initial guideline, new roles were decided during the process and some flexibility was needed for implementing new ideas as, for instance, in the creation of the role of stakeholders as authors and editors of some of the call texts, or as designers of blogs or policy-oriented memoranda.

To facilitate the analysis of the highly interlinked dynamics of urban social cohesion and look for better matches between stakeholder interests and their role in Social Polis, most stakeholders were attached to one of twelve existential fields which Social Polis had identified in urban life. Twelve existential fields divide the large urban field of social cohesion and facilitate the organization of the research work in thematic working groups. ‘Field’ refers to the dynamics of the relationships within each field (e.g. between actors in housing systems) but also among fields (e.g. housing and urban ecology).

The first phase of the project served for initial brainstorming and expression of the variety of research needs arising from different communities of practice and geo-regions, and involved a large-scale workshop and the intensive use of broadcasting-like modes of online communication.
Conversely, the communication with the stakeholders in the second phase, which had been thought of as a phase for focusing the research agenda and institutionalization of the platform, consisted of small-scale stakeholder workshops, meetings in small groups, personal e-mail communication and a large international conference in Vienna. Through the Vienna conference, feedback from a wide range of stakeholders was brought to the fore; but some participants who had no time to read all the preparatory material sometimes found the discussions difficult to follow and experienced difficulty linking their concerns to the agenda. For them, small workshops seem to be an easier form of participation to contribute to the research agenda. In fact, most stakeholder contributions were collected during small workshops rather than through electronic communication or during large-scale events. Local stakeholder workshops offered an opportunity for refining the research agenda, enriching conceptual debates on social cohesion and linking reflections on different urban existential fields. These workshops also supported the strengthening of local networks and helped with discussing local problems while connecting them to Europe-wide issues. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the participation of stakeholders in research theme selection and priority setting was less intensive than their involvement in expressing research needs in the first phase. In other words, stakeholders were much more active and interested in proposing topics than in elaborating and developing them.

The third phase focused on strengthening bonds within the platform and collaborative production of the challenges and topics which were later to be proposed to the European Commission as potential call themes for subsequent work streams in the Seventh Framework Programme. The collaborative writing process was organized in small transdisciplinary groups; these groups prepared transversal challenges and topics on urban social cohesion, drawing upon research needs which had previously been expressed (phase 1) and then refined (phase 2) by the wider community of stakeholders. This third phase secured actual editing of the topics by the most committed stakeholders of Social Polis and specialists on relevant issues. But it was also the period in which internal bonds within the platform were strengthened, and trans-sectoral teams were formed which would build new consortia to respond to research calls relating to ‘Cities and Social Cohesion’. In the end, one challenge and one topic were integrated into the call texts of FP7 (7th Framework Programme for Research), SSH (Socio-Economic Sciences and Humanities research).

2.5 Communication

Transdisciplinarity literatures stress the need for clear communication of research goals, in order to prevent false or unclear expectations of stakeholders, and thus help with averting disappointments. A broad scope of interests, as in the case of Social Polis, may not always be clear to all parties involved. In order to avoid disaffection, research questions for a project should be not only theoretically interesting but also clear and relevant for policy and practice (Antrop and Roggea, 2006).

The practice communities involved with Social Polis did not always have a clear idea about the benefits from the collaboration with the academic world and the European Commission. Although the ideas, goals and expected outcomes of Social Polis were clear to the stakeholders, the final purpose and the actual use of the research agenda needed further clarification. The agenda-building process was sometimes perceived as too abstract and too distant from concrete local concerns.

Strong organizational incentives (Stokols et al., 2008) and intermediate advantages, as well addressing key social issues and applications in local settings, can be of help here. The consortium
incentivized the delivery of intermediate results and worked to clarify, as well as renegotiate, the project’s goals, activities and implications for the stakeholders. The decision to fund workshops genuinely organized by stakeholders and to commission some practitioners to produce short papers on specific themes was much appreciated by the stakeholders. The workshops, which provided an arena for face-to-face discussion of the proceedings of Social Polis, not only became a motivational factor but also played a key role in making the complex research agenda more comprehensible to practitioners and for stakeholders to take new initiatives on their own (e.g. local training sessions on cohesion policy in particular cities).

Regular meetings and occasions for informal gatherings (e.g. social dinners) are vital for team building and the establishment of trusting relationships between the different project partners. Examples of other helpful communication tools might be the creation of an interactive website, an intranet, small publications in native languages accessible to regional stakeholders, the translation of the executive summaries of deliverables of particular practical relevance, as well as the establishment of a stakeholder-friendly database in order to keep stakeholders regularly informed about research progress. Knowledge produced in transdisciplinary research will be used not only by practitioners but also by researchers. Therefore, the whole logic of dissemination as a linear process has to be abandoned and substituted by a cumulative-circular approach of mutual learning (Miciukiewicz et al., 2012). This way of working does not sit easily with traditional academic hierarchies.

The newsletter and the mailing lists proved to be efficient tools for broadcasting news about Social Polis, as well as for circulation and publication of intermediate working documents. Many stakeholders gave positive feedback about the newsletter, as it regularly informed stakeholders about the evolution of the project, reducing the feeling of being a stranger in a process whose evolution and outcome are not always completely clear. Indeed, the more individuals, groups and organizations are involved in a multilingual and pluri-professional community of stakeholders, the larger the need for, but also the more difficult, customized communication becomes. Standardized messaging among large numbers of network members often results in growing numbers of misunderstandings and circulation of unwanted messages.

The first Social Polis website in particular, which was meant to be designed as an innovative tool for collective discussion, failed as a discussion platform. Maybe this ambition was illusionary, as it is very difficult to produce a website or a forum that draws large numbers of people to engage with it and contribute: “living” websites are updated frequently with fresh information and popular forums are animated by several members intervening every day. The form of the online forum was probably not so familiar for the actors of the platform who, for long-distance exchanges, are more used to personal e-mail communication, Skype and mailing lists. The experience of Social Polis proves that face-to-face communication and local events are more effective in actively involving broader networks of practitioners. Nevertheless, ICT tools proved their usefulness for long-distance collaborations that started previously as face-to-face contacts, or among people who had already created a link of trust through physical meetings, but they exhibited weaknesses as tools for igniting collaboration.

2.6 Time, organizational and financial constraints

Small non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which operate under strict financial and time constraints, have to deploy their resources in the first place where urgent issues for their clients arise. Broad debates on European research agendas are only of secondary importance to them. It is absolutely necessary to make sure that non-academic stakeholders, and small organizations
from the NGO sector in particular, receive funding beyond reimbursement of travel costs for collaborating in the platform. Social Polis addressed this issue through a substantial increase of the initial budget for projects – workshops, papers and audiovisual materials and educational resources – realized by stakeholders under the Social Polis small grants schemes. These schemes were really successful and greatly appreciated by stakeholders, but future transdisciplinary research projects should find more solid forms of remuneration and valorization of stakeholder inputs. Providing appropriate funding schemes to NGOs is one way to conciliate the broader perspective of a large project with intermediate and more concrete results, in the transdisciplinary spirit of conciliating scientific issues with practical concerns of stakeholders. It reinforces the role of users, giving the opportunity for a more decentred functioning of the project. Furthermore, this solution partly balances the economical asymmetry between academic partners who are paid for their involvement in a research project and non-academic partners who often get their funding elsewhere.

3. Prospective for transdisciplinarity

To sum up, the growing complexity of present urban realities and the uncertainty of possible futures, wherein social problems and challenges are too multidimensional and ill-defined to be dealt with by a single discipline or profession (Thompson Klein, 2004a), create both a need and an opportunity for transdisciplinary research and practice. The increasing prominence of ideas of social cohesion that are put at the heart of political agendas calls for a transdisciplinary problematization of environmental, social and economic dimensions of urban and regional life. Burning societal issues such as poverty, uneven development, malnutrition, ageing, environmental injustice or restructuring of health care systems can be addressed only by broad cooperation between social, economic, natural and technical sciences, and policy and practice communities organized at different spatial scales (Novy et al., 2013).

In light of the theoretical and case-based reflections on transdisciplinarity and relevant societal issues we presented in the previous sections, Thompson Klein's so-called problem solution approach to social science holds important observations on transdisciplinarity (Thompson Klein, 2004b). First, we are mindful that many 'problems' do not exist by themselves, but are constructed and enacted through particular (ideological) viewpoints or lenses. This does not mean that problems constructed in contrast to 'self-emerging' problems would be less important, but that to appreciate them at their real value their (social) construction process should be retraced. This is, for example, carried out in a Sociology of Knowledge Approach, as put forward by Moolaert and Van Dyck (2013).

Second, the inclusiveness of transdisciplinary networks should not be conflated with the ability to produce uncontested knowledge, and transdisciplinary research should undertake meta-ethical reflection on values and imaginative speculation upon other possible ethical choices relating to different values. This would also allow one to compare value systems as part of the societal and ideological climate of their time, and to figure out to what extent these value systems have an impact on public policy and collective action.

Third, search for imaginative and socially inclusive responses to societal problems in transdisciplinary research requires imagining alternative futures (Hillier, 2008) on the one hand, and finding a balance between immediate, intermediate and long-term research outcomes and proposed policy directions on the other.

Fourth, a focus on societal challenges in transdisciplinary research should not repress methodological reflection on the transdisciplinary methodologies used to bring different people
Davide Cassinari and Frank Moularta
together in trans-sectoral networks and to enact knowledge in transdisciplinary research pro-
tesses and outputs. In fact, research methodology is as much a priority of transdisciplinary
research as is dealing with societal questions; it is indeed our experience that methodological
progress can be quite instrumental to successful cooperative research among agents from a diver-
sity of science and practice communities.

Fifth, transdisciplinary research needs a clear strategy with respect to policy making. The
translation of transdisciplinary research outcomes into visible policy results that are of interest to
involved members of practice communities and laypeople is a condição sine qua non of successful
transdisciplinary endeavour. At the same time, successful transdisciplinary research achievements
may be inspiring to scientists and encourage them to take up transdisciplinary research.

Sixth, transdisciplinary networks, which are successful in involving senior members of the
policy community and delivering policy solutions, may with time transform into think tanks;
when this happens they should make sure to enhance a reflexive governance system, checking
the influence of its most powerful members and thus keeping the network from turning into an
exclusive, hegemonic think tank.

Last but not least, due to limited sources of funding there often exists a tension between the
need for establishing greater sustainability of existing transdisciplinary networks and the forma-
tion of new networks. Time and sufficient resources are absolutely crucial for building mutual
trust and capitalizing on evolving social bonds and synergies.

Notes
1 A social platform is a network of civil society organizations, institutional and academic actors, function-
ing as a forum for discussion, dialogue, participation and co-production of social values and products –
or any significant contribution to social innovation.
2 See the special issue of the journal Urban Studies on ‘Social cohesion and the city’ (July 2012).
3 See Miciukiewicz et al. (2012) for details.
5 A challenge is a broader research topic, with a larger budget than a topic.

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