GC Insights: Fostering transformative change for biodiversity restoration through transdisciplinary research

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Abstract

Despite being considered one of the most pressing global issues, biodiversity loss and the degradation of ecosystems is continuing at an alarming rate. In December 2022, COP15 saw the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity
35   Framework, where four overarching international goals for biodiversity and 23 targets Despite global awareness of biodiversity loss, biological diversity continues to decline at an alarming rate with the degradation of many ecosystems accelerating as a result of climate change, resource exploitation, habitat fragmentation, and land use change. While research and impact assessments on biodiversity loss and its drivers are being researched, knowledge alone is not enough to solve the biodiversity crisis. It is vital that we, as a scientific community, fundamentally transform the way in which science is
40   conducted and communicated so that it can be effectively integrated and used by other sectors and decision-makers. This manuscript uses the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework as a foundation to discuss how the scientific community can take part in transformative change and promote transdisciplinary research that can be effectively used by policymakers to address the biodiversity crisis.

Introduction

45   *"Calls for 'transformative change' point to the fundamental reorganisation necessary for global conservation initiatives to stem ecological catastrophe. However, the concept risks being oversimplified or overcomplicated, and focusing too little on power and the political action necessary for change" (Fougéres et al., 2022).*

Continuous and large scale degradation of ecosystems by means of anthropogenic interference is one of the many pressures that is leading to irreversible biodiversity loss and, with it, the loss of potential knowledge about the world around us
50   (Wilson et al., 2016). While societal efforts and policy regulations are attempting to prevent and restore nature are genuine, they often fall short of meeting their targets. In the EU, for example, 81% of protected European habitats are reported to be in poor condition despite legislation such as Natura 2000, designated under the Birds and the Habitats Directives, that represents the is the largest coordinated network of protected areas in the world (Naumann et al., 2020). It is hoped that the four goals and 23 targets outlined in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) (Convention on
55   Biological Diversity, 2023) will catalyse effective action but to achieve this, transformative change and informed governance will be needed.

The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) defines transformative change as a "fundamental, system wide reorganisation across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and

60 values" (Transformative Change, 2021). Carrying this notion to the intersection of science and policy, we hereby recommend a plural and transformative way to do science by integrating transdisciplinarity, connectivity across disciplines and sectors, and informed policymaking through scientific advice for timely and maximum impact. We understand this radical shift in our scientific approach will bring with it many challenges; however, this may be our last chance, as noted already more than 20 years ago "to bring with us as much of the environment and biodiversity through the bottleneck as

65 possible" (Wilson, 2001). Thus, we propose meaningful strategic action on biodiversity by establishing biodiversity benchmarks and baseline data, fostering connectivity across disciplines and sectors, and encouraging the research community to actively engaging in policymaking to ensure timely and relevant scientific evidence reaches decisionmakers.

Methods of promoting transdisciplinarity for transformative change

Transdisciplinarity favours a holistic approach that facilitates a systemic way of addressing challenges across scientific

70 boundaries. Effectively comprehending how ecosystems function, develop, interact, degrade, and are impacted by anthropogenic processes is fundamental to establish impactful policies and methods to prevent further degradation and promote effective restoration. By adopting and integrating a transdisciplinary approach, scientists are better able to understand the multifaceted dynamics of changing of ecosystems, allowing the direct and indirect consequences of these changes to be understood and sustainable strategies to protect, conserve, and restore ecosystems to be identified (Naveh,

75 2005). However, conducting transdisciplinary scientific research requires both a theoretical and practical transformation in how we conduct our research as scientists. Scientific communities should not only collaborate in diverse groups that encompass various scientific disciplines and sectors but should also carefully assess how to achieve effective and usable outcomes through such collaborations.

As outlined by Rigolot (2020), for transdisciplinarity to be effective, it must be well planned and effectively implemented.

80 Researchers suggest the transition to a transdisciplinary approach can be accomplished within a framework which recognises

that knowledge is organised within a pyramid of four hierarchical layers as shown in Fig. 1. The bottom layer of the pyramid

is composed of knowledge within empirical disciplines – the life sciences, Earth sciences, engineering sciences, and social

sciences. Collaboration, connections, and communication occur across and between all levels in a process of mutual

learning. Understanding the relevance of our own scientific expertise to other scientific disciplines and non-academic sectors

85   can be the first step to thinking and subsequently working in a more inter and transdisciplinary manner. Interacting with non-

academic sectors and joining diverse working groups can also help to break down silos (Knapp et al., 2019). However, for

transdisciplinarity to become the norm rather than the outlier, both its challenges and benefits need to be recognised by

institutions and purposefully incorporated into the way in which the organisation functions.
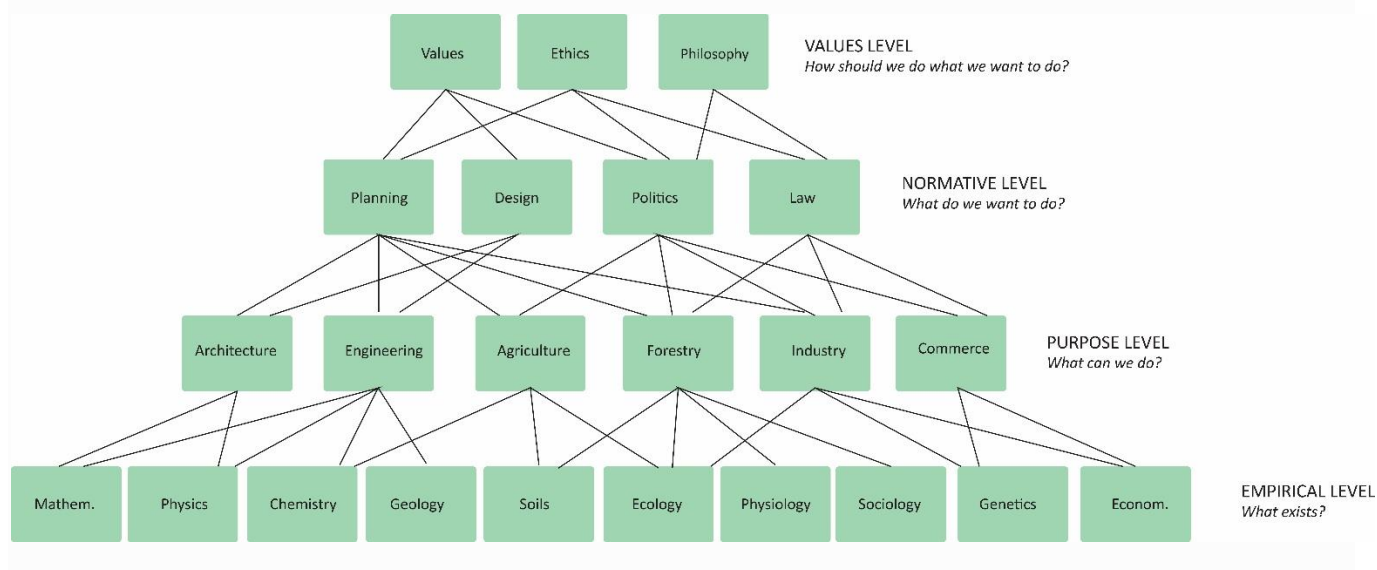
90   **Figure 1.** The pyramid of transdisciplinarity: continuous coordination/exchange between all hierarchical levels (adapted by

Carrasco from Max-Neef, 2005).

95   **Embracing connectivity through a systems approach**

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Modellers may think of connectivity as a process based dynamic model, whereas statisticians may consider it from a Bayesian perspective, involving multilayered two way interactions, across science, society, and policy, where feedback from one component or discipline continuously morphs the results of the ones it feeds into. It is, in essence, a basic version of how nature should operate: through an efficient feedback mechanism and information exchange, constantly morphing, changing, and evolving. Where transdisciplinarity in scientific practice encourages advances and provides new perspective (Knapp et al. 2019), one can think of connectivity as the core, allowing these perspectives to be further shaped, changed, broken, and rebuilt through continuous feedback. The benefits of connectivity and iterative learning processes to scientific practices are further stimulated by transdisciplinarity and the engagement of external stakeholders and community participation (Angelstam et al., 2013).

The notion that engaging stakeholders and society is key for reversing biodiversity losses has been widely acknowledged by intergovernmental actors (Díaz, 2019). This engagement is an integral part of generating change which has enough momentum for transformation and impact. While stakeholder engagement in scientific processes and projects often falls short for conceptional reasons and lack of best practice examples (Lavery, 2018), small scale land practices frequently adopt sustainable approaches that are locally optimised to consider both the needs of the community and their environment. Evidence shows that considering the needs of the local population, including indigenous communities, through knowledge exchange and assessment provides greater research context, subsequently delivering more relevant and useful outcomes, and for the purposes of this commentary: aids the possibility for transformative change (Fougéres et al. 2022). This is particularly relevant when discussing the GBF and biodiversity related goals with the environmental health of lands that are managed by local and indigenous communities being observed to decline more slowly (Díaz, 2019). Furthermore, the atrophy in regional heritage and identity and the loss of local and indigenous knowledge has been shown to have significant adverse effects on biodiversity (Wilder et al., 2016).

The global nature of the biodiversity crisis demands that we transform the way in which we connect and collaborate across political borders to find solutions and achieve the goals and targets set by the GBF (Convention on Biological Diversity,

120   2023). Ecosystems span international boundaries, and nations managing such expansive ecosystems may fail to appropriately

account for biodiversity due to conflict or international policy when weighing national interests against those of their

neighbours (Dallimer & Strange, 2015). Often fragile ecosystems/biodiversity hotspots, such as the Eurasian grasslands and

primary forests, the Sonoran Desert, Amazonia, and the Sahel, adjoin one or more international borders and subsequently,

their management demands institutionalised cooperation. For this, it is essential that transboundary cooperation is established

125   among scientists, policymakers, and local and regional authorities, to ensure delegation of responsibilities to facilitate the

timely sharing of information, resources and management approaches. Ensuring greater integration between adjacent nations

by means of centralised data monitoring platforms and international forums (Bruckman et al. 2018), promoting dialogue, and

encouraging the development of shared interests is vital for building evidence based policy for greater impact.

More transdisciplinarity is needed for evidence informed policymaking

130   Embracing transdisciplinary, connected science can help us find and move towards solutions that will enable us to meet

global biodiversity targets. However, to meet the targets and goals of the GBF, we must also ensure that the underlying

issues, various policy options, and their potential consequences are considered by policymakers and integrated into evidence

informed policies. For transdisciplinary science advice to be transformative, it needs to be relevant, clear, timely, accessible,

and useful to the policymakers who determine the priorities, biodiversity targets, and their implementation (Šucha &

135   Sienkiewicz, 2020). It is therefore vital that scientists and their transdisciplinary teams understand the information needs of

policymakers and the policy landscape in which they operate (Topp et al., 2018).

Organisations such as IPBES continue to produce excellent summary reports for policymakers for this purpose. However,

the integration of science into the policymaking process requires a village rather than just a few individuals or organisations.

Policymakers often need context specific information that is tailored to individual policy discussions and legislations. Since

140   this information also needs to be relevant to their region and may even need to be in the policymaker's native language, it is

important that scientific organisations and research institutions recognise their key supporting role in contributing to

evidence informed decision making at a regional scale. To participate in and promote transformative change, we therefore

encourage the scientific community to not only generate transdisciplinary scientific information, but to institutionalise the

integration of this research into formats that are accessible and useful for policymakers. This transformative change requires

145 the engagement of both individual researchers who are willing to engage with policymakers to understand their needs and

share relevant and timely information and scientific institutions that create opportunities and activities for science to policy

interaction. We encourage readers to consider how they can integrate these important aspects into their work and institutions.

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170 **Competing interests**

The contact author has declared that none of the authors has any competing interests.

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