

Understanding context

TDR and [Transformations to Sustainability](#) practitioners generally recognize the significance of context for co-production. Contexts emerge from an engagement with research for praxis – an imperative to bring about significant, just, and equitable transformation that is sustainable. Hence, the contexts that are considered include not just social, economic, or ecological ones, but also political, technological, and, most critically, the visions and aspirations of the communities that are part of a hybrid alliance. Key to this process of understanding context is the notion that it is not simply about place or the “local,” but defining context in terms of issues, problems, and pathways that are of relevance.

Case studies of TDR reveal that a successful understanding of context emerges where the actors involved address these questions:

- How did a problem emerge, and how is it framed by different societal actors?
- What are the current and future challenges to bringing about substantive and meaningful change?
- What is the idea of praxis in the project, and how centrally are issues of equity, justice, and inclusion addressed, especially with reference to class, race, ethnicity, or gender?
- What are the existing possibilities for alternative imaginaries, and how might these be expanded?
- Which factors enable or constrain necessary action strategies?
- What are the local, regional and global policy, legal, institutional, and regulatory frameworks that can affect desired outcomes?

Effective use of these questions in TDR practice requires a contextualized use of inter- and transdisciplinarity. Both problems and solutions, as well as challenges, are contextualized. Contexts can be internal and external, and the “how” questions can be best incorporated if we recognize that systems operate at multiple scales; and that science, policy, and, societal frameworks and institutions influence context in diverse ways. Finally, we need to understand that decision-making contexts are complex and unique, and that context applies to interactions between multiple complementary and conflicting goals, and processes of change. Incorporating tools such as stakeholder analysis, Theory of Change, “5 why’s” and similar exploratory, collaborative processes can help transdisciplinary practitioners collectively reveal and analyse the many dimensions of context that can be relevant for shaping a project and its potential impact.

Further reading:

- Odume, O. 2021. [Pathways, Contextual Crossscale Dynamics Science-Policy-Society Interactions Transdisciplinary Research African Cities](#). *Environmental Science & Policy* 125: 116–25.
- Schneider, Flurina, Aymara Llanque-Zonta, Onintsoa Ravaka Andriamihaja, R. Ntsiva N. Andriatsitohaina, Aung Myin Tun, Kiteme Boniface, Johanna Jacobi, et al. 2022. [How Context Affects Transdisciplinary Research: Insights from Asia, Africa and Latin America](#). *Sustainability Science* 17 (6): 2331–45.