

Setting goals collectively and managing expectations

Collectively agreeing on the societal issue to work on, a desired vision for the future, and on concrete but flexible project goals and research questions are central to transdisciplinary research. These are not just scientific tasks but rather negotiation processes among researchers and their societal partners.

The purpose of TDR is to develop evidence-based knowledge for improving problematic societal situations, dynamics, or trends. However, not everyone who knows about the problem, is affected by it, or has the power to change it necessarily has the same understanding of what the problem actually is. TDR brings actors with relevant points of view and expertise to the table to discuss and agree on a shared understanding of the problem at hand. Plurality of interests, access to (or lack of) knowledge, or unstructured information need to be considered in this process.

Developing a joint understanding of the problem goes hand-in-hand with discussing underlying values and developing a shared idea of what should be achieved: a vision for the future. With this shared vision, participants acknowledge that what they collectively declare to be good or desired is a value judgment or a political position that they make explicit (see *Normativity*). Project participants can either agree on such a vision, or decide that things are more complicated and that studying opinions about a desirable future should be an additional part of the research. The latter is referred to as developing “target knowledge.” Alternatively, the project can refer to an existing vision of a local community, political body, or society at large. Project goals are then set collectively based on this broader vision. For sustainable development, this approach can be done in accordance with a respective politically legitimized concept, such as the UN 2030 Agenda.

Proper goal-setting and explicit, upfront structuring of envisioned outcomes are central to the conception, design, implementation, and evaluation of transdisciplinary projects. A “theory of change” approach can be used to describe the underlying assumptions on how a transdisciplinary research project may lead to specific outcomes and impacts (see “Theory of change”). Since much can change over the course of a project, project goals need to be reviewed iteratively throughout the process.

Further reading:

- Mitchell, Cynthia, Dana Cordell, and Dena Fam. 2015. [Beginning at the End: The Outcome Spaces Framework to Guide Purposive Transdisciplinary Research](#). *Futures* 65 (January): 86–96.
- Pohl, Christian, Pius Krütli, and Michael Stauffacher. 2017. [Ten Reflective Steps for Rendering Research Societally Relevant](#). *Gaia* 26 (1): 43–51.
- Wuelser, Gabriela. 2014. [Towards Adequately Framing Sustainability Goals in Research Projects: The Case of Land Use Studies](#). *Sustainability Science* 9 (3): 263–76.