

Engaging with societal partners

Transdisciplinary research strives to integrate different perspectives and ways of understanding the world to solve complex social problems based on collaboration of diverse participants (including researchers and societal partners¹). This means that, unlike conventional research, which is carried out by researchers only, the central process in transdisciplinary research evolves around the interaction of researchers and societal partners. Who the partners are differs widely depending on the design of the research project and the specific local situation. Societal partners have an interest in the problem or place being researched, for example, because they are impacted by the problem or proposed solutions, or because they are in a position where they may exert influence over the course of the research or decision. Such interested partners may include local communities, local governments, government institutions at higher levels, elected officials, NGOs, businesses, neighbors or adjacent land owners, and many more. In some situations, the term “stakeholder” or “societal partner” is used to simply refer to “non-researchers.” In any case, it is important for researchers to recognize that these partners bring their own expertise, skills, experiences, activities, and resources to the project that the researchers do not have, and their involvement is a key element that makes research transdisciplinary. The partners are also the ones who will have to live with the outcomes of the research, and whose involvement is crucial to defining, achieving, and continuing the real-world goals of the project.

Investigations of the practice of TDR reveal that researcher-societal partner interaction takes diverse forms that can be thought of as a continuum between two poles. At one end, which might be loosely described as “researcher-heavy,” researchers take the initiative in the project, framing the problem, setting the goals, controlling the budget, and in general have more power over the process. At the other end, societal partners collaborate on an equal footing and are fully involved in the framing of the problem and goals, and in the planning and implementation of the research. Many projects can be situated somewhere along the continuum between these two poles. Various terms are used to describe the level of engagement of stakeholders, ranging from informing or contractual through contributory; or consulting to co-producing, participatory, and democratic. There is no single best approach to engagement with societal actors, and depending on the nature and stage of the research and the local conditions, different strategies for collaboration might be appropriate. Therefore, who to involve and how to engage need to be explicitly considered early in the planning of the research and reassessed throughout the project.

¹ A common term used to describe these societal partners is “stakeholders.” However, in an effort to decolonize the language used in science, and especially for TDR, we avoid this term here (literal “stakes” were used to claim Indigenous lands as the private property of new settlers as they colonized areas previously occupied by Native peoples). Furthermore, consider the distinction between “stakeholders” and “rightsholders” – to acknowledge that different parties don’t just have an interest in an issue but have legitimate legal rights (often previously not respected or upheld).

Further reading:

- Bammer, Gabriele. 2021. [Stakeholder engagement primer:6. Making engagement effective.](#) Integration and Implementation Insights. November 18, 2021.
- Moser, S. (2022). [Identifying and Effectively Engaging Stake- and Rights-holders \(Job Aid\).](#) Resilience Metrics toolkit.
- Schneider, Flurina, and Tobias Buser. 2018. [Promising Degrees of Stakeholder Interaction in Research for Sustainable Development.](#) *Sustainability Science* 13 (1): 129–42.