

*Intended for STREAM 2: Science and Governance in a Diverse World:*

*Science plays an important role in bringing the dynamics and challenges of the Anthropocene to decision-makers; but how well do we understand the relationships between science and governance across the range of actors, institutions and cultures of our diverse social and political systems? This stream welcomes papers that examine science-policy interface, adaptation pathways, knowledge systems, transdisciplinary approaches and other theoretical and practical research exploring connections between science and governance.*

# REFLECTIONS ON THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE GENERATION IN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Sustainable development is an emancipatory concept entitling all members of human society to both a just share of resources and an equal voice in organizing a sustainability transformation. A strategic goal framed by UNESCO (2005) is the development of *knowledge societies* by means of more democratized knowledge and knowledge production for equal self-representation, and self-determination in decision-making processes. Yet, despite its failure, the previous paradigm of growth is persisting due to its institutional strength and the sustainability paradigm's apparent failure to establish itself as a robust alternative. The global community is struggling to organize more equitable, just, and inclusive development. In light of this, key question of the present paper is how the scientific community can best organize research to operationalize the democratization of knowledge and knowledge generation. In accordance with sustainable development's experimental nature, we need to embrace diversity in transdisciplinary approaches. But to effectively harness its transformative power, we need also to find common ground. One way of doing this is focusing on successful transdisciplinary practice.

In current *global governance approaches*, scientists primarily provide synthesized quantitative knowledge for complex modelling of coupled human–nature systems, while the integration of the public remains experimental. In particular, the voices and agency of countries in the global South remain weak. While we have available an enormous amount of synthesized scientific knowledge on how to tackle global and climate change, power imbalance limits action and coherent governance structures. An emerging *sustainability science* makes headway on transdisciplinary concepts and practice by synthesizing mainly field data on a meta-level, but long-term experience is rare, especially at regional levels. Against such shortcomings, the *Eastern and Southern Africa Partnership Programme* (ESAPP, 1999–2014) offers cornerstones for operationalising transdisciplinarity. Four programme features were especially conducive to equity-based knowledge generation and institutional development: ESAPP's *epistemological foundations* as a transdisciplinary research partnership programme for sustainable development; a consistent but *adaptive management approach* for joint programme steering; a *dual structure approach* combining action research with basic research and capacity development; a *contextuality approach* consistent with the conditionality at local to global levels. Finally, situating ESAPP in time, space, and scale reveals the pivotal role that continuity plays in enhancing South agency in earth system governance. My analysis show that – despite what seems a Babylonian confusion in sustainability discourses and practices – the normativity in the context of sustainable development is indeed very powerful in guiding development-oriented research and collaboration today.