CO-CREATION IN ACTION: practical recommendations for designing transformative spaces in research projects

AUTHORS: MAYTE BEEKMAN & JULIA WITTMAYER

INTRODUCTION

Tackling complex societal challenges requires collaboration between multiple actors - from academia, government, business and civil society. This can be organized through large-scale research projects, such as the EU-funded Horizon program. Within such projects, transformative spaces are emerging as key settings where academics and societal partners work together. These spaces serve a dual purpose. First, they foster the co-creation of new knowledge, by combining insights from academia and practice and providing space to reframe or critically analyze certain challenges. Second, academics and practitioners also collaborate in and for concrete and tangible actions in specific settings. This co-creation of knowledge and action is expected to contribute to tackling wicked problems and fostering transformative changes in society.

This brief offers practical recommendations for academics and practitioners interested in organizing transformative spaces within large research projects. How do you set up and design a transformative space? How can you facilitate learning between different spaces within your project? And how do you integrate insights across academic disciplines and with society?

The recommendations are based on our experience with five Wind Labs in the EU-funded JustWind4All project. These labs function as transformative spaces aimed at addressing the key challenges of just and sustainable wind energy development. In each Wind Lab, partners from science and society collaborate with stakeholders to explore how novel technologies and practices can contribute to fair and regionally adapted energy transitions in real-life settings.

ABOUT JUSTWIND4ALL

Justwind4All supports the acceleration of on- and offshore wind energy, including emerging wind technologies like airborne and floating, through just and effective governance.

We use a trans- and interdisciplinary approach that combines holistic impact assessment with energy systems modelling and multicriteria mapping to improve wind energy governance and energy citizenship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

DESIGNING SPACES FOR TRANSFORMATION

Creating transformative spaces where knowledge and action from both science and society come together can be challenging. One of the first hurdles is identifying topics, challenges or solutions that are relevant from both scientific and societal perspectives. This is best done through an iterative process. Societal partners know what topics are relevant to explore and what obstacles practitioners run into on the ground, while academics bring in theoretical frameworks and broader system insights. These should be discussed to arrive at a specific topic or challenge that is relevant for both scientists and practitioners to work on. A second challenge lies in the ambition of transformative spaces. Transdisciplinary projects within sustainability science often aim for transformative change, but translating that ambition into practice can be difficult. While a transformative ambition can help prevent the reproduction of existing unsustainabilities and injustices, it can be hard to define and even harder to sustain. Partners may have different interpretations of what "transformative" means, and ambitions may weaken or shift over time.

Recommendations to design a transformative space

- **Discuss and set a specific transformative ambition for each space.**

Each space should articulate a specific transformative ambition. This does not mean that every output or activity has to be transformative or radical. Rather, it is about offering a sense of direction. A strong ambition can serve as a guiding compass or dot on the horizon, helping teams to guide their activities– and see the low-hanging fruits supporting it.

- **Reflect on the transformative ambition regularly.**

To prevent ambitions from drifting or diluting over time, it is important to periodically revisit and reflect on the ambition. Are we still doing the right things, or is a slight change in direction needed? Tools from Reflexive Monitoring, such as the Dynamic Learning Agenda, can help to support this process (see the textbox below).

- **Invest time and resources into co-creation.**

Co-creating knowledge and action is demanding. It requires time, resources, skills and trust. Some partners may already be experienced in transdisciplinary collaboration, while others are newer to it. Sometimes it can also be necessary to hire specific expertise or to spend extra development time on a certain task. Be prepared to allocate extra time, bring in specific expertise, or support capacity building to ensure meaningful participation and joint learning.

- **Ensure joint leadership.**

Often academics are put in the lead of a transformative space, which runs the risk of the space being too far removed from practice. On the other hand, only a practitioner in the lead may raise concerns about them being perceived as 'partial' or defending a certain interest. Co-leadership by an academic and practitioner brings together the strengths of both worlds: deep theoretical grounding and a strong connection to networks and on the-ground-knowledge.

REFLEXIVE MONITORING IN ACTION AS STRATEGY FOR LEARNING AND DIRECTING

In JustWind4All, we used principles and tools from Reflexive Monitoring in Action (RMA) to guide the learning process of the Wind Labs and to keep their ambitions high. RMA is a method developed to monitor and evaluate transformative solutions and initiatives. These initiatives are complex to monitor, because they are often confronted with unforeseen circumstances, or unforeseen opportunities and may have to change both strategies and goals along the way. This requires a monitoring strategy that is aimed at learning and improvement, and that can change along with the initiatives themselves. RMA can help project members to address systemic challenges by turning these into learning objectives and opportunities for concrete actions.

Examples of activities that we used are:

- *Dynamic Learning Agenda:* can stimulate internal learning and sharing between labs. It collects the challenges that Wind Labs encounter and formulates them into learning questions that the labs can investigate during the project.
- *Timeline workshop:* helps to look back and collect achievements challenges, lessons learned for each of the labs.
- *Eye-opener workshop:* a format that you can use to share the insights of the labs with others inside or outside the consortium interactively.
- *Reflexive interviews:* regular, short check-in interviews where you reflect together with the lab on their initial ambition, discuss challenges and collect lessons learned.

FACILITATING A LEARNING PROCESS ACROSS TRANSFORMATIVE SPACES

When a project includes multiple transformative spaces, working on a shared or related challenge, facilitating learning and exchange across these spaces becomes both crucial and complex. Each space operates in a unique context, with its own focus, approach and activities. The day-to-day workload can leave little time for learning and reflection between spaces.Still, a shared learning process can be highly valuable. It can help to identify common dilemmas or lessons that arise during the co-creation process, such as balancing inclusivity or navigating when to open up discussions and when to focus. It can also help to distill cross-cutting lessons about the shared challenge or topic the spaces are exploring. For example, in JustWind4All, the Wind Labs each tackled specific local issues, such as financial participation in the repowering of wind installations in Portugal or participatory practices for airborne wind energy in Germany. At the same time, they provided insights through experimentation in practice to the shared question of how wind energy governance can be made more just & effective.

Recommendations for facilitating a shared learning process

- **Co-create principles for engagement.**

At the start of the project, jointly reflect on how you want to work together. What do we find important when working together as academics and practitioners? What are our underlying values and principles, and how do we see our role in this process? Starting off with this conversation can help to bring different perspectives closer together and create a shared understanding of what it actually is that they are doing as transformative spaces.

- **Clarify why it is important to learn from each other.**

While each space has its own unique context and challenges, they are united by a shared aim and ambition. It helps to make explicit how both thematic insights (e.g. on wind energy governance) and process learnings (e.g. on doing co-creation in practice) can be exchanged. This shared purpose can be a strong foundation for mutual learning.

- **Set up a structured learning process.**

Methods such as RMA (see the textbox above) can provide principles and tools that help to set up and structure a collective learning process. This works best if it is embedded in a structure, for example, with monthly meetings, regular check-in interviews combined with a workshop a few times a year. These regular meeting points provide the room to take a step back from the daily work and reflect on what is being learnt.

EXCHANGING AND LEARNING BETWEEN LABS AND ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES

Transformative spaces in large research projects work on real-life challenges by making use of insights from different academic disciplines. However, integrating knowledge across disciplines, and between science and practice, is easier said than done. Partners in these projects often come from different sectors and therefore speak different "languages". This integration or even only a translation, requires skills and patience from both the researchers, the organizers of the space and their participants. A common challenge is misalignment in timelines: academic insights may emerge too late to feed into activities on the ground, while the practical need of a space may not be fully understood at the outset. Moreover, academic contributions can sometimes be too predefined or abstract, making them difficult to apply within the specific, action-oriented context of a lab. These mismatches can undermine the potential for meaningful transdisciplinary co-creation.

Recommendations for learning between labs and disciplines

- **Clearly define upfront what co-production means to you as a team.**

Co-creation can be seen as a spectrum: from fully co-created otuputs to more consultative or informative approaches. Clarify early on what level of co-creation is expected, feasible and valuable in different parts of the project. What does "real" co-production mean in your context? Having these conversations upfront helps manage expectations and align efforts across disciplines and actors.

- **Create an inter- and transdisciplinary dialogue.**

You can support learning within the project consortium by organizing an inter- and transdisciplinary dialogue (e.g. twice a year), where openness is encouraged and asking 'stupid' questions is welcomed and accepted. It helps to acknowledge the inherent difficulties in transdisciplinary collaboration while fostering a culture of 'learning by doing' and jointly exploring. This dialogue should be an activity written into the project proposal, to embed it securely in the project activities and allow everyone to attend.

- **Actively search for synergies and overlaps.**

Dedicate time before and throughout the project to find and enhance synergies between academic and practitioner activities. Synergies often emerge gradually and need to be discovered or nurtured along the way.

JUST WiND 4 ALL

Funded by the European Union

JustWind4All is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency (CINEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them (Grant Agreement 101083936).