



T2S midterm workshop report

Virtual workshop, 28 May – 5 June 2020

v. 19.08.2020

Background

Under the exceptional circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the midterm workshop of the T2S programme in 2020 was held as a virtual meeting.

Over the course of five short sessions, including a keynote talk, the projects shared and discussed progress towards their objectives and what they are learning in relation to the politics of engaged research on transformations to sustainability, before and since the COVID-19 crisis, with a view to identifying opportunities for future collaboration and joint contributions to knowledge, policy and action for sustainability.

The agenda, slides and other outputs from the workshop are available on the workshop webpage: <https://t2sresearch.org/workshop2020/>

Participation

The keynote talk by Giuseppe Feola, 28 May, attracted 100 participants, including some from the first cohort of T2S projects of the ISC.

The following four sessions of the workshop, reserved for current project members, had an average of about 75 participants each, representing up to 125 unique individuals from all 12 projects, compared to the 54 confirmed participants of the physical meeting.

About 25-30% of the virtual participants of any session were based in low- or lower-middle-income countries, and about 53-58% of them were women. These figures are comparable to those for the planned physical meeting, suggesting that the virtual format enabled the participation of more people in general, but not of any demographic in particular. The two major factors affecting the possibility for project members to participate virtually were time zones and internet connectivity.

Feedback

31 people submitted feedback through an anonymous survey. Of those, two had attended only one or two of the sessions, while 29 had attended between three and five sessions. See Annex 1 for details.

Appreciation of the workshop

Most participants thought that the workshop had achieved two of the original four workshop objectives quite or very well, namely (1) learning about what the other projects are doing and learning, and (2) self-assessing progress at project and programme levels.

About half of the participants thought that the two other workshop objectives had been achieved quite or very well, namely (1) strengthening connections across projects, and (2) developing perspectives and plans for programme-level activities and engagement.

Nevertheless, participants appreciated that more project members could participate in the virtual workshop than in a physical one.

On the whole, the participants thought that the workshop was interesting and informative, and were motivated to engage in further discussion and exchange with other T2S projects.

Reflection: The virtual format poses particular challenges for networking, creativity and informal interaction, as well as for in-depth discussion. More experience with facilitation of virtual meetings may help to address these challenges in future.

Learning from the workshop

Key themes that emerged in the workshop:

1. Sharing and learning from other projects' conceptual and methodological approaches and experiences was helpful for the projects, notably in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. The fundamental difficulty in defining transformation, seeing it, capturing it, contributing to it; the questions of how to make the invisible visible, and how to measure transformation while it is happening; the idea of 'unmaking' proposed by Feola was useful to several participants; some participants noted a lack of critical thinking about transformation in the theoretical and methodological approaches.
3. The importance of the position of the researcher for the approach and potential contribution to knowledge about transformation.
4. The difficulty of achieving stakeholder engagement, even under 'normal' circumstances, but particularly at a distance. The impact of the digital divide on sustainability transformations in the post-COVID world.

Immediate workshop outputs

1. A follow-up interview with keynote speaker Giuseppe Feola has been posted on the T2S website.
2. The questions and answers from the workshop sessions are available on the workshop webpage.
3. The leaders of the break-out groups (on theory, methodology, ethics and politics/action) are drafting reflections on the themes of their discussions which will be posted on the workshop webpage.

Looking ahead

Participants expressed a desire for more regular, more focused meetings, with more time for discussion. This could help remedy the issue of not having had enough time to 1) strengthen

connections across projects, and (2) develop perspectives and plans for programme-level activities and engagement.

Suggested topics for future activities could be clustered around:

- Definition and theory of transformation – what transformation is and how to capture it while it's happening. Do we need a shared understanding of transformation and other concepts across the projects? What is the value of the social science framing and leadership of these projects?
- Methodology of engaged, co-produced research, including dealing with politics and power relations in co-production (how we study it, how we position ourselves, the language we use), and dealing with the disruption of COVID (as small projects in a big world, the digital divide, and engaging at a distance).
- The ethics of co-produced research, including the position and responsibilities of the researcher, the balance of different kinds of ethics (e.g. social and environmental), the ethics of short, time-bound research projects.
- Connecting research/action to sustainability.
- Conflicts around, governance of and access to water.
- Regional perspectives (e.g. from Latin America).
- Intersection of artisanal mining, agricultural frontiers and land registration issues.

Support was requested from the programme secretariat to, *i.a.*:

- Facilitate more interaction between the projects, including informal reviewing of project outputs.
- Alert project members to relevant literature on transformations.
- Promote cross-project writing and communicate about findings and outputs.

The mid-term workshop was jointly co-created by ISC staff, senior programme adviser Susi Moser, and six representatives of the projects. This approach was very much appreciated, worked well, and was responsive to the evolving COVID-19 situation. Future programme workshops should again adopt this planning approach.

Annex

T2S virtual workshop 2020 participant feedback