



Belmont Forum

# Transdisciplinarity

## A political perspective on knowledge and participation


Meeting the Challenges  
of Transdisciplinary  
Sustainability Research

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# The role of Science: your answers!

The job of science is to uncover objective truth (mixed answers)

*yes perhaps for some but....*

Natural science is not the most important thing that matters to address urgent sustainability challenges

Societal knowledge and Indigenous and Local knowledge are also important

*So.....*

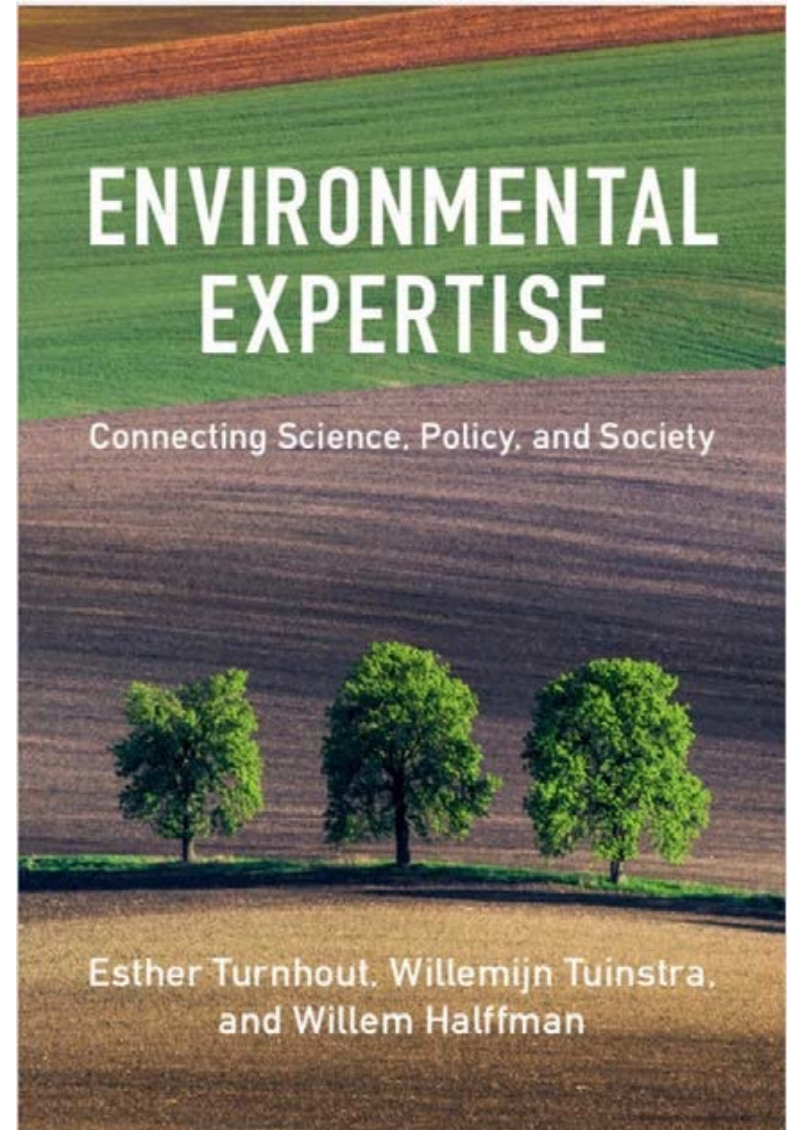
To engage, or not to engage, that is not the question





# Research inevitably engages values

- Science and policy are not separate
- Facts do not speak for themselves: facts and values are entwined in frames
- Knowledge does political work: it is articulated in, strengthens, and/or marginalizes specific framings of environmental problems and it helps shape concomitant solutions
- Inequities within and between knowledge systems - including authority, funding and capacities - lead to certain frames gaining dominance over others



# Prof. dr. Julia Steinberger

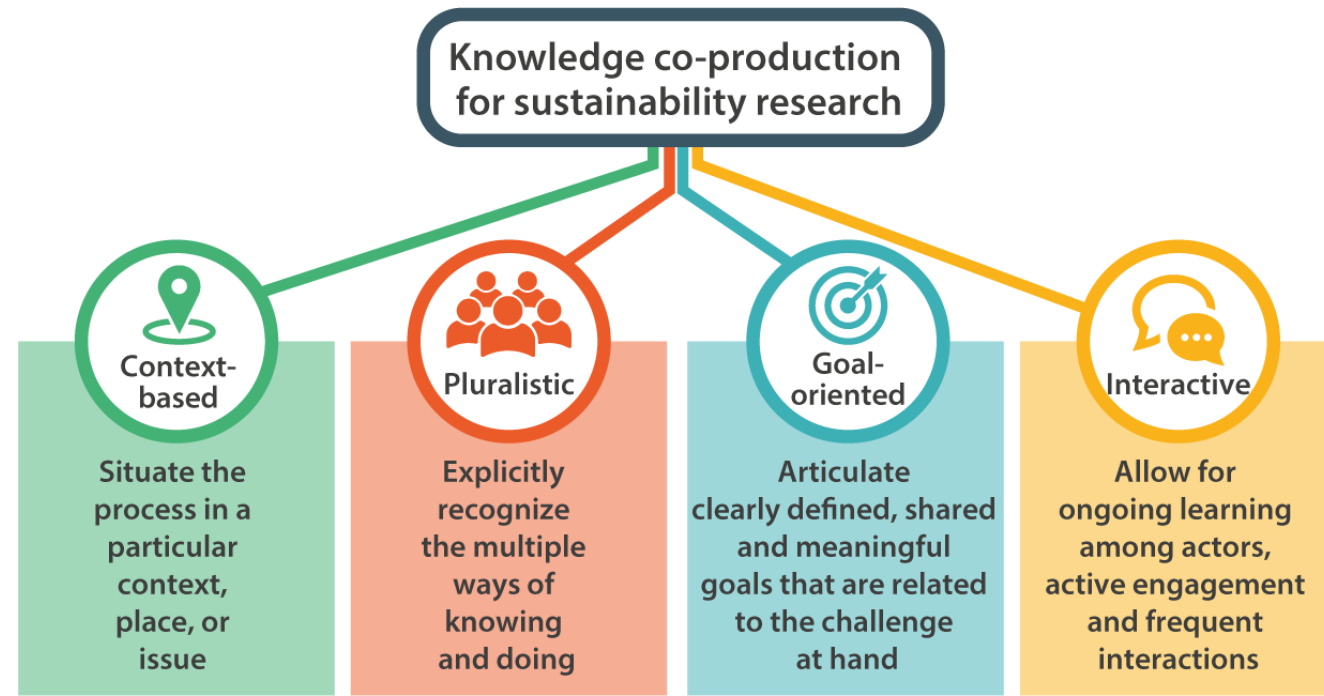


<https://youtu.be/j9LzajO1sWw> (21-28 minutes)

*..within these (IPCC) models we have entire things like imaginary technologies like carbon removal from the atmosphere that are only in the models in order to protect existing powerful industries. And when we're told within the IPCC "Oh, you shouldn't be political, you shouldn't be policy prescriptive". But we are acting in a politicised domain. Climate change has been politicized by these industries ...we have to give ourselves the right to not just observe.... If we don't fight to expose these interconnections.....we will reproduce it and we will constantly be contributing to make things worse.*

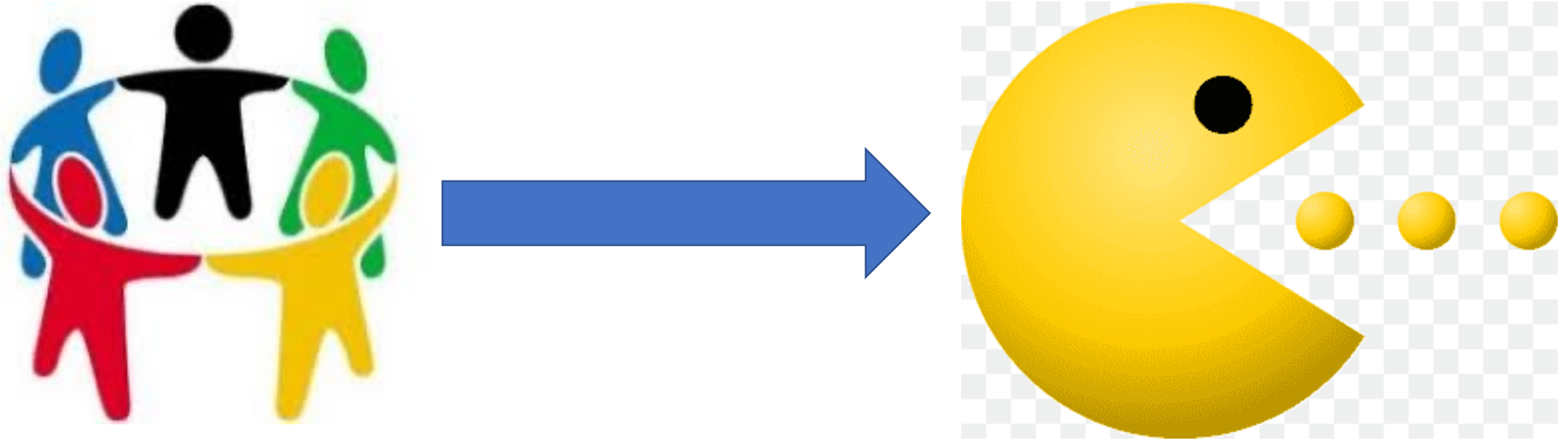
# Transdisciplinarity

- Participation in knowledge production, not just with stakeholders but with knowledge-holders
- Inclusive of diverse forms of knowledge
- Directly linking knowledge to action
- Ensuring legitimacy and uptake
- Often Local and context-specific
- Methodological guidance emphasizes careful design and facilitation of participatory spaces



- Norström et al. Nature Sustainability
- Lots of resources and networks available:
- Integration and Implementation Sciences (Gabrielle Bammer): <https://i2s.anu.edu.au>

# Problems of inclusion and diversity



- Ignoring power (everbody can join, we need all tools in the toolbox....)
- Prioritizing consensus and agreement
- Preconceived ideas about what diversity means



# Unintended consequences of participation

- Exclusion: who participates and who decides
- Repression of differences: expectation that stakeholders are 'reasonable'
- Privileging elites with knowledge and skills
- Limited conception of citizenship: stakeholders or consumers/clients
- Strengthening existing power inequalities, now legitimized with a participatory veil

je participe  
tu participes  
il participe  
nous participons  
vous participerez  
ils profitent



Turnhout et al., 2010 Participation as performative practice, Ecology & Society  
Cook & Kothari, 2001, Participation, the new tyranny





# Challenges

- Continued dominance of scientific and expert knowledge
- Creating equal power relations among diverse stake and knowledge holders often does not succeed
- Drive to consensus excludes perspectives even when they have a seat at the table affecting empowerment, legitimacy and effectiveness
- Impact stays within project boundaries due to detachment from political context
- Contribution to wider transformative change is restricted



# 1. How is the problem defined?

By whom?

With what legitimacy?

Too narrow, too technical?

What has been excluded?

# 2. What and whose values are at stake?

Who benefits from research?

Who is excluded?

Can this be justified?

# Pluralizing

- Multiple forms of difference, incommensurability
- Disagreement, contestation (agonism)
- Justifiable exclusions



# Three points of attention

## 1 Power

- Be attentive to unequal power relations and address them openly

## 2 Pluralism

- Make space to discuss and deliberate difference

## 3 Politics

- Question dominant framings, address political dimensions, reflect on in- and exclusion, engage wider political context