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# Establishing Science-Society Networks for Transdisciplinary Teaching in Higher Education: The Case of Albania and Kosovo

Jonas Meyer, Friedrich M. Zimmermann and Audrey O'Grady

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## Abstract

The two Western Balkan countries Albania and Kosovo are in a phase of economic, social and environmental transformation for many years. This implies tremendous sustainability challenges such as air pollution, insufficient waste management and rural-urban migration tendencies. A lot of local stakeholder groups and civil society actors are searching for ways to tackle this situation. A new coalition between higher education institutions, society, and especially businesses can play a key role when developing transdisciplinary collaboration for education, training and knowledge exchange. This paper tries to argue about the role of transdisciplinarity in higher education in terms of networks as frameworks to develop long-term and impactful collaboration between science and society. The discussion is based on the results of the EU-funded TEMPUS project ConSus (Connecting science-society collaboration for sustainability innovations) where partner institutions from Albania, Kosovo and three EU countries are establishing a regional transdisciplinary network for sustainable development. Therefore, the network's statutes framework will be presented. It will be the basis for a discussion of possible opportunities and challenges when establishing such a network. As a result, the authors point out that regional transdisciplinary networks are of great importance in order to significantly tackle sustainability challenges. This is necessary when it comes to establish collaboration efficiently and to raise

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awareness within society as well as to propose and apply joint sustainability solutions.

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**Keywords**

Transdisciplinarity · Albania · Kosovo · Science-society-networks · Sustainable development

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## 1 Introduction

Transdisciplinary teaching and learning in higher education is a crucial prerequisite when aiming at tackling real world sustainability challenges. Students get in direct contact with societal stakeholders and organizations, become familiar with hands-on challenges and try to resolve them jointly in a scientific way.

Although exposed to environmental, societal and economical challenges, the two Western Balkan countries are lacking in transdisciplinary higher education experiences. The EU-Tempus funded project “ConSus” is an attempt to establish a transdisciplinary network in both countries. This network functions as an incubator of scientific and societal stakeholders in order to develop both sustainability innovations as well as transdisciplinary co-operations in higher education teaching and learning.

The objectives of this paper are to (1) outline the role of transdisciplinary teaching in higher education and networks as incubators for transdisciplinary collaboration; (2) review successes and challenges of higher education in Albania and Kosovo regarding science-society collaboration; and (3) draw future prospects for strategic transdisciplinary collaboration networks with the ConSus science-society network as a good practice example.

Consequently, the authors would like to answer the following research questions:

- How can higher education promote sustainable development through transdisciplinary teaching?
- What is the state of art regarding transdisciplinary collaboration on sustainable development in higher education teaching in Albania and Kosovo?
- Which strategies can contribute to science-society collaboration in higher education teaching with regards to sustainable development?

### 1.1 Higher Education Institutions as Key Institutions to Promote Sustainable Development in Society

Sustainable Development is understood as a learning process in order to bring change on environmental, social and economic challenges society is faced with (c.f. three types of sustainable development approaches by Scott and Gough 2003).

These learning processes need to be facilitated and promoted by education in order to build capacities, to think critically and to equip learners with skills for action. However, education for sustainable development also needs direct interactions with society (as stated as one of the six general goals of the UNESCO Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, UNESCO 2005). Higher education institutions and especially their educators and scientists have to fulfill the role as a bridging actor with society: Firstly, their expertise is crucial to tackle sustainability related challenges. Secondly, they function as learning facilitators for their students. Thirdly, they act as academic contact points for collaboration with societal stakeholders.

For this kind of collaboration between higher education institutions, students as well as societal stakeholders, transdisciplinary approaches became more and more important. Jahn et al. (2012) developed a conceptual model consisting of three phases where collaboration between scientific and societal stakeholders take place. Shortly described, these steps consist firstly of a problem transformation by forming a common research object. Secondly, new knowledge will be produced together. The third phase is dedicated to the evaluation of this new knowledge and its contribution to scientific and societal progress (transdisciplinary integration). The results will be implemented in each community (scientific and societal) by developing strategies, concepts (societal) or methodical and theoretical innovations (scientific). This will lead to new problems in both communities and the recurrent formation of a common research object. Such collaboration is seen as mutual learning processes and is not intended to replace established disciplinary practices. It is rather seen as complementary ways of extending viewpoints by integrating knowledge from societal stakeholders. As this concept is understood rather as a research approach than a theory or methodology, transdisciplinarity in teaching and learning needs a lot of additional theoretical, methodological and practical pre-requisites and skills incorporated by the academic staff. Furthermore, collaboration with external stakeholders needs to be established in order to create case studies (Balsiger 2015; Scholz et al. 2006).

## **1.2 Networks Functioning as Incubators for Strategic Transdisciplinary Collaboration**

Networks play an important role and have already been discussed regarding their potentials in teaching and learning on sustainable development (e.g. c.f. Special issue of the Journal of Cleaner Production on “Learning for sustainable development in regional networks”, Dlouhá et al. 2013a). The establishment of networks in times of the knowledge society are crucial in order to reflect the demands of facilitating learning processes, co-producing resources and knowledge as well as maintaining cooperation and communication efforts. Additionally, they have the advantage of reaching a wider audience and promoting innovative learning approaches to stakeholders of different backgrounds and expertise (Dlouhá et al. 2013b). Within such transdisciplinary networks combining stakeholders from science and society the

level of interaction is emphasized by putting the learner at the center of attention. For this, it needs an open but structured communication and participation among all stakeholders.

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## 2 The Case of Albania and Kosovo

The two Western Balkan states Albania and Kosovo face considerable environmental challenges. Among others, they consist of rising greenhouse gas emissions, contamination of water resources and insufficient wastewater collection. In addition, socio-economic challenges have seen only some improvement. For example, there is success with reducing poverty and reasonable economic growth. Also educational issues (quality and access) as well as healthcare have been improved in both countries (UNDESA and UNDP 2012; World Bank 2015). However, rural migration, causing brain drain as well as unemployment, especially amongst the youth, are still critical challenges to be tackled.

### 2.1 Higher Education Institutions in Albania and Kosovo and Transdisciplinary Networks

The role of regional higher education institutions in contributing to solutions is getting more and more important. Their scientific and methodological knowledge is crucial in order to tackle environmental, social and economic challenges. Overall, there are 59 higher education institutions (46 private) with 132.213 students in Albania and 26 universities (22 private) with 120.921 students in Kosovo (EACEA 2012). With regards to Albania only a few universities implemented strategic plans or structured initiatives regarding the promotion of education for sustainable development (e.g. University of Tirana, University of Durres, European University of Tirana, Polis University and Agricultural University of Tirana) (Dlouhá et al. 2014). Also in Kosovo only a few initiatives on education for sustainable development exist. E.g. a course on “Strategies of Education for Sustainable Development”, provided at the University of Prishtina at the faculty of education (Beka 2015; Kabashi-Hima 2011). Apart from that, the University of Peja, the Riinvest College and the Universum College as partners within the ConSus project are now setting initiatives on implementing education for sustainable development, e.g. in specific programs and courses.

However, networks promoting education for sustainable development or even fostering on transdisciplinary collaboration do not seem to exist in both countries yet, although there is still interest from both scientific and societal institutions (Dlouhá et al. 2014). As a result of an identification and evaluation mapping conducted by the Albanian and Kosovar partner institutions of the ConSus project regional stakeholders were identified and listed as promising partners for a future science-society network on sustainability innovations (ConSus 2014). In this first

attempt 15 organizations from Albania and 24 from Kosovo have been identified as potential partners for transdisciplinary collaboration in sustainability related teaching and learning. According to a short survey conducted by the same partners they seem to have some experience in initiating activities and collaboration although not based on strategic guidelines.

## 2.2 The ConSus Project: Initial Situation and Goals

Started in December 2013 the EU funded ConSus project (“Connecting Science-Society Collaboration for Sustainability Innovations”; [www.consus-tempus.com](http://www.consus-tempus.com)) is a first attempt to tackle sustainability challenges in Albania and Kosovo by (1) identifying and mapping sustainability related key players and networks in Albania and Kosovo; (2) establishing a regional network with members from both higher education, research as well as society; (3) developing and describing teaching methods and materials for higher education aiming at science-society collaboration and (4) providing professional development activities through training sessions on different sustainability related topics.

These specific objectives are driven by the motivation to strengthen the connection of different increasingly interdependent stakeholders of higher education institutions, research and society. Additionally, one of the main goals of this project is to promote mutual learning opportunities in order to acquire systemic and holistic thinking necessary for establishing transdisciplinary collaboration.

13 partner institutions from Albania, Kosovo and three European Union countries are working together in order to accomplish these objectives. Partner institutions from Albania are the European University of Tirana, Polis University, Agricultural University of Tirana and the Centre for International and Comparative Studies (all Tirana), as well as the University of Durres “Aleksander Moisiu”. The partner institutions from Kosovo are the Universum College, Riinvest College and the Institute for Development Policy (INDEP) from Prishtina, as well as the University of Peja “Haxhi Zeka”. Finally, the partner institutions from the EU countries are the University of Limerick (Ireland), the Leuphana University of Luneburg (Germany), the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Vienna, as well as the lead partner University of Graz (both Austria).

## 2.3 Activities of the ConSus Project

The main activities of the ConSus project are related to the specific objectives introduced above. Therefore, the first year was dedicated to the identification of the regional key players and networks of science, research and society dealing with sustainability challenges in Albania and Kosovo. The outcomes will be presented in a later stage of this paper as a pre-requisite of the establishment of a future transdisciplinary network. In the second year, the training activities as well as the development and description of teaching resources were conducted.

The **teaching resources** are seen as an essential outcome of the project. These are either *teaching methods* describing didactical and methodical processes, or *teaching materials* which impart sustainability topics in teaching and learning. More than 20 *teaching methods* have been described during the project. All of them share the aim to impart topics in a structured, participative and cooperative way. They are also characterized by different group sizes, social settings, integration of stakeholders and lengths. Some examples are World Café, Model CANVAS or Interactive Backcasting.

The teaching *materials* were developed and described by the academic staff of the Albanian and Kosovar partner universities. This type of resource is characterized by tackling a specific sustainability challenge in the respective countries and by the integration of external stakeholders from society. They consist of a detailed description, and a handout or presentation if applicable. Out of the more than 80 teaching materials examples include agriculture field trips, ecotourism case studies, corporate social responsibility workshops, teaching sustainable development to children training, development of social entrepreneurship business models or brain storming of specific social challenges. All teaching resources will be published on a web platform on the project website, with free access for those interested in these topics.

In order to provide mutual learning opportunities for the academic staff of the Albanian and Kosovar partner institutions six **training sessions** were conducted on different sustainability related topics with a strong relationship to Albanian and Kosovar challenges. The contents reach from multi-stakeholder learning and sustainability communication, regional development processes, ecology education elements, creative and transdisciplinary methods, strategy development to ecological sustainability and global change. All training sessions share a similar structure starting with a theoretical introduction and discussion of sustainability elements followed by in depth process with practical seminars using participative methods. Additionally, field trips to organizations or companies were conducted to enhance the knowledge and to discuss possibilities for interaction as a basis for science society collaboration or as good practice examples of science-society collaboration. As an added value, the participants (which mostly also were the authors of teaching resources) got the opportunity of a structured exchange and discussion of their teaching resource ideas and consequently were able to implement the feedback and hence improve the resources.

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### 3 Methodology

A literature review on the role of higher education institutions in sustainable development, on networks and transdisciplinary approaches was conducted at first in order to build up a theoretical framework. Moreover, a survey was conducted during the project to identify possible industry and institutional partners from Albania and Kosovo for transdisciplinary collaborations in teaching and learning

(ConSus 2014). Results of this needs analysis are the basis and the structural elements for the development of the ConSus network (ConSus 2016). The establishment of this regional science-society network on sustainable development is the most crucial part of the ConSus project. This relates to its structure, its introduction and implementation, as well as the question how this network can gain strategic importance for future sustainability challenges as well as opportunities. Despite of the fact that each region has its specific sustainability challenges, institutional structures and network frameworks, the results of ConSus are essential for scaling up processes, e.g. as best practice cases for establishing transdisciplinary networks in other countries or/and regions.

## 4 Results and Discussion

The statutes of the ConSus-network consist of three pillars, Organization, Governance and Program (c.f. Table 1). The structure and the content was agreed by the project representatives of the partner institutions at the biannual management meetings, in Skype conferences and discussions via E-Mail. As a result of these communication channels the terms of references have been developed and agreed on.

The starting point of the establishment of a transdisciplinary network in this project was a survey among interested organizations (those identified in ConSus 2014) asking for their specific needs and benefits. Members from scientific institutions answered that they expect a better integration of sustainability related topics in higher education, a better exchange of information among stakeholders from science and society in order to understand the market as well as research papers addressing transdisciplinary and sustainability related topics. On the other hand, stakeholders from society expect stronger cooperation with research institutions and more expertise on specific topics for use and application in businesses and companies. One crucial topic which remains open is the challenge of funding such collaboration networks (ConSus 2016).

**Table 1** The ConSus network statutes framework

Statutes of the ConSus network				
<i>Organization</i>				
Vision	Mission	Objectives		
<i>Governance</i>				
Members	Steering Committee	Secretariat		
<i>Program</i>				
Networking	Education & Training	Research	Dissemination Activities	Policy influencing

Keeping these needs in mind, the project partners tried to develop a concept of a network's framework (ConSus 2016 and Table 1):

In terms of "**Organization**" the *vision* of this network is to enable collaboration between actors from science and society towards a more sustainable social, economic and environmental development. This leads to the *mission* which is to empower partner's collaboration through education, research, training, knowledge transfer and encouraging partnerships promoting sustainable development. Thus, the main *objective* is to connect experienced stakeholders and those new to sustainable development and to increase their impact, to share information and to enhance sustainability. Four specific objectives were agreed on:

- "To foster education and learning for sustainable development in Albania and Kosovo and in the broader region of the Balkans"
- "To strengthen the collaboration between HE institutions and regional stakeholders (research institutions, NGOs, enterprises, regional development agencies, etc.) in Albania, Kosovo and in the broader region of the Balkans";
- "To be inclusive, i.e. open for everyone who is interested, develop strong relationships and shared responsibilities among the stakeholders, better connection between people and organizations from different disciplines";
- "Thematic focus on sustainability related issues in order to address regional challenges and demands" (ConSus 2016).

The "**Governance**" of the ConSus network will be provided by the members, the steering committee and the secretariat. All *members* meet regularly in order to adopt the report of the steering committee and to elect it for a new period. They also comment on and adopt the strategic directions and policies of the network. The members and target groups consist of diverse backgrounds:

- Scientific sector:
  - Higher Education Institutions
  - Research institutes
  - Think Tanks
  - NGOs affiliated to Universities or dealing with scientific research
- Societal sector
  - NGOs (which do not focus on scientific research)
  - Networks operating in the field of sustainable development
  - Enterprises (and networks)
  - Practitioners and experts in the field of sustainable development
  - Initiatives in the field of sustainable development



– Public sector/others:

- Government officials responsible for sustainable development strategies and policies
- Representatives of institutions of the European Union
- International organisations (e.g. UN, OECD, GIZ, etc.)
- Members of National Sustainable Development Councils
- Other sustainable development networks in Europe
- Stakeholders outside the traditional sustainable development community, but with a strong interest

The tasks of the *steering committee* are to develop the policy of the network and appoint other committees or working groups when necessary. It also establishes links with other networks and stakeholders, supports the members in exchanging knowledge and good practices as well as developing collaboration. The steering committee will also present a yearly activity report and convene the member's meeting regularly. It consists of a chair who is representing the network. In order to manage such a network a *secretariat* will be established. The secretariat keeps the network-website updated, organizes the ConSus member's meeting, national meetings as well as the workshops, training sessions, other outreach activities and research projects. It will facilitate the knowledge exchange and foster joint projects among the network members.

The “**Program**” consists of five pillars. Its aim is both to serve the needs of the members and to tackle sustainability challenges in the respective project countries.

- (1) *Networking* will enable the members to get access to other members, networks, information, databases and activities. Specifically, there will be a transnational ConSus conference every two years, annual national ConSus seminars, as well as a member support desk at the secretariat
- (2) *Education and training* activities will provide transdisciplinary teaching and training opportunities in sustainable development. They will be offered by the resource platform and already developed workshop and training concepts. Case studies and the involvement of regional stakeholders will be part of university courses
- (3) *Research* will be conducted by the ConSus members through research studies, journals, policy papers and project reports on regional sustainable development issues.
- (4) *Dissemination activities* will help to publish the outcomes of the network, to connect to the society and to attract future members of the network. This will be achieved by the website as a platform for information exchange and the provision of teaching resources. Furthermore, workshops at higher education institutions will support the dissemination of the network outcomes to teaching staff and students.

- (5) *Policy influencing* aims at raising influence in the relevant public decision and policy making sectors of both countries. This will be done by promoting the importance of sustainable development to society through reports, policy briefs, discussions as well as expertise on priority issues. Furthermore, annual conferences and workshops should be conducted.

## 5 Future Prospective

By developing and applying this framework in the first period the partner institutions expect a proper start of the ConSus network (Table 2). The program should be filled in order to attract more interested stakeholders to participate at the network. Therefore, the concepts of the training sessions and workshops will be used for further activities. Also the resource platform will be part of the network in order to provide a range of teaching resources to be applied in higher education teaching but

**Table 2** Possible opportunities and challenges of the ConSus network

	Organization	Governance	Program
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide range of members with different background can lead to promising cooperation opportunities</li> <li>• Scalability opportunities through memberships of public authorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Membership is open to each institution interested</li> <li>• Participation opportunities open for members</li> <li>• Members can attract a wide range of other institutions/individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different fields of expertise can be used to tackle a range of sustainability challenges</li> <li>• Concepts of training sessions, workshops and teaching resources are already existent, easy to implement</li> <li>• To inspire students with sustainable development through workshops and teaching resources</li> <li>• Establishment of transdisciplinary collaboration</li> </ul>
<b>Challenges</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fill mission, vision and objectives with activities relevant to the needs of members and target groups</li> <li>• Need for both long-term strategy and mid- and short-term view</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependent on the willingness of the member institutions (to take over the secretariat, lead of steering committee, etc.)</li> <li>• Active and committed leadership of the steering committee</li> <li>• Secretariat has to commit to an appropriate facilitation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is up to the efforts of the member institutions</li> <li>• Financial challenges to organize activities</li> <li>• Need for an establishment of a consistent and sustained program to be established</li> </ul>

also in continuing education. A very promising opportunity includes memberships of public authorities. They can help to scale up the network and to connect more intensively to relevant national or transnational stakeholders.

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## **6 Conclusion**

The establishment of a transdisciplinary network on sustainable development in Albania and Kosovo is a key objective of the ConSus project. Its aim is to conserve and further develop the outcomes of the projects as well as to act as an incubator of ideas and collaboration of scientific and societal stakeholders. These aims will be supported by the following conclusions:

### **6.1 Transdisciplinary Collaboration in Higher Education as Essential Requirements to Tackle Sustainability Challenges**

Firstly, there is a need for participatory and transdisciplinary developed solutions including all relevant stakeholders and actors in order to tackle regional sustainability challenges. Higher education institutions and their educators are key actors with their international and intraregional network, their expertise and teaching skills in order to create and promote transdisciplinary collaboration for teaching, learning, training and continuing education. Consequently, students will get the opportunity to learn hands-on with transdisciplinary case studies and participative methods together with concerned societal organizations and companies—the focus is on interactive, reflexive and social learning.

Currently, but especially in the case of Albania and Kosovo such collaboration is not yet well established, but is already—close to the end of the project—seen as a promising way to build up collaboration, especially on socio-ecological issues. Thus, the ConSus project encouraged educators from the partner institutions in Albania and Kosovo to develop such collaboration and create research-based teaching materials based on innovative and interactive concepts tackling actual sustainability challenges, and integrating societal stakeholders by using new participatory methods.

### **6.2 Science-Society Networks Help to Establish Strategic Collaboration and Activities**

Regional networks are the perfect instrument to overcome the lack of science-society collaboration in higher education teaching and learning (Dlouhá 2013b). They aim to raise awareness of sustainability related issues, challenges and opportunities and are able to tackle diverse aspects through transdisciplinary collaboration between

science and society. By embedding them strategically using specific forms of organization, governance and programs such networks can generate a lot of opportunities by making advantage of the wide range of members (individuals and institutions, private and public sector, NGOs and international organizations etc.) with different interests and expertise, as well as different forms of participation and commitment opportunities. The developed and available ConSus concepts of training sessions and workshops are an essential basis for the work in and the functioning of the networks. There are still challenges to be met and to be overcome, consisting of e.g. the proactive engagement of network members, the need for a long-term vision and mission, a reliable leadership of the steering committee and—in many cases most important—the lack of funding opportunities for the network and its activities. This crucial last point needs to be solved by applying new forms of public-private partnerships, by improving cooperation focusing on trust and by mutual learning processes—these approaches are promising frame conditions for further national and transnational funding (e.g. Erasmus + applications, funding for specific topics by ministries and by foundations).

### **6.3 The ConSus Network as a Good Practice Example for Regional Transdisciplinary Collaboration**

The experiences gained in the three-year project with its goals and activities in professional development training for university educators, in the development of transdisciplinary teaching resources and in the mapping of relevant stakeholders from science and society are a good pre-requisite for the final step: the establishment of a transdisciplinary teaching and learning network connecting higher education institutions with its wide spectrum of knowledge and research, education and training with key stakeholders, companies and institutions from the civil society. This transdisciplinary network will connect the key actors for economic, social and ecological change and would be to think tank for sustainable development in Albania and Kosovo.

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