

Extending problem-definition, evidence & expertise? Participatory research imagined and practiced

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Over past decades we have witnessed a growing debate concerning the limited capacity of contemporary research to address the challenges posed by complex societal developments. This often led to a call for changing cultures and practices of knowledge production. In particular in certain health or in environment related research areas the limits of classical disciplinary organised knowledge production structures and their accompanying value systems and institutional logics have been highlighted. Framed as a democratic issue about who gets the right to participate in the problem definition and its solutions, this frequently led to the call for including new societal actors in diverse stages of the knowledge production. As a consequence, specific funding schemes have been created to foster the integration of such extra-scientific actors into the knowledge production cycles.

This paper empirically investigates the imaginations and concrete implementations of a research-funding scheme in sustainability research meant to foster participatory research and the tensions arising in the diverse realisations of the projects. In doing so, we understand the funding scheme as a kind of “technology of entanglement” – aiming at a systematic intertwinement of actors from both scientific and non-scientific backgrounds, trying to implement a broader socio-scientific script defining not only a new framework of action but also the actors and the spaces in which they are expected to act. This further involves the prescription of certain roles to participants and how they might adequately inhabit the designed space. The aim is thus to create a new kind of “knowledge regime”. By using the notion of regime we want to go beyond the epistemic level and focus our attention on the heterogeneous assemblages between people – be they researchers, non-scientific research partners or actors governing research; institutions and their ‘institutional logics’, i.e. the shared beliefs and practices; ideologies – in our case of transdisciplinarity as well as sustainability – and their accompanying prescriptions for producing and validating knowledge; and different forms of contestation (and workarounds) when it comes to performing this kind of research.

Yet actors often develop a different vision of the script to be aimed at, attempting to redefine or reject the regime's socio-scientific script. Actually, when looking at the research practices we encounter a high degree of repurification work i.e. efforts to disentangle knowledge relations, the understanding of the problem at stake as well as the respective expertise by the involved actors – scientists, science policy makers and participants alike. When, how and why this happens will be at the core of this paper. This is meant to contribute to a better understanding of the potential and limits of these kinds of knowledge regimes.

The paper builds on a number of qualitative interviews with those having implemented the programme, with scientific and extra-scientific research partners in the projects as well as field notes from various project meetings and policy document analysis.