

Foreword

In October 2015, a diverse group of scholars of different disciplinary (humanities, social and natural sciences) and geographical origins and at different academic career stages met for a conference on “Participatory and Integrative Approaches in Researching African Environments: Opportunities, Challenges, Actualities in Natural and Social Sciences”. All of them came with an open multidisciplinary perspective and portrayed in fascinatingly transparent ways their approaches and searches for a more inclusive and better understanding of knowledge about African environments. Some presenters focused on their methodological attempts to structure problem framings and knowledge production processes in transdisciplinary ways, including not only scientists but also stakeholders from local contexts of environmental resource use, administration and policy. Some gave insights into critical reflections on global policy frameworks, categorizations and interpretations and their (mis)fits with local realities, highlighting the diversity of knowledge and techniques for dealing with environmental and social change.

Four points emerged from the conference regarding the process of what we called shared research.

- Unintended and unanticipated chances and challenges emerge in collaborative (participatory and integrative) research on African environments. Being open to and respectful of local level actors enhances learning and joint contributions to facilitate a common understanding of key aspects in researching African environments.
- Reflecting critically on research processes and multiple expectations by formulating (in writing or speech) deeper insights and discomfort affects the dimensions of learning. A change of perspective on the research process can shift paradigms and epistemological traditions.
- Doing participatory and integrative research on African environments means being explicit about research ethics and the role of those who get

in and out of a local context. For more inclusive learning, mutual respect and trust are key.

- Transdisciplinary research needs careful planning of participation and an openness towards emerging participation while the research progresses.

All in all, it was rich learning experience with conference participants who dared to talk about their struggles with language and interpretation and science as contribution, which is often not possible in disciplinary conferences. Participants facilitated a better understanding of complex socio-political and environmental systems. The conference participants enjoyed the contributions and discussions to the extent that the idea of further elaborating on some of the topics emerged. In the form of an edited volume, which provides ample room for each contribution to go into detail, the authors present their contributions in explicit and nuanced ways.

Finally, the volume is put together as a collection of four articles dealing with similar challenges, opportunities and actualities. The authors were given a lot of room for exploration during the writing process, from which four heterogeneous papers emerged. In the introductory and concluding articles, the editors highlight and provide a discursive framework in which the articles can be positioned. They discuss key issues for an audience interested in reflections and twists in relation to participatory and integrative research in intercultural, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary interfaces in selected African environmental contexts.

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