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Can you have your cake and eat it too?

Managing societal and scientific impacts in transdisciplinary research

Ideal-typical transdisciplinary research (TDR) aims to generate impacts both in science and society. This results in challenges for everybody who is involved. This article sheds light on this ambivalent field of TDR and introduces a Special Section of two articles addressing the tensions that may emerge when aiming for impacts in both realms. With this opening article, we present institutional, individual, and project strategies that enable and support TDR, and we reveal ambivalences that arise from their interplay with the current academic system.

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Can you have your cake and eat it too? Managing societal and scientific impacts in transdisciplinary research | *GAIA* 35/1 (2026): 8–12
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Grand societal challenges require a globally coordinated approach with increasing urgency. The United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals* reflect this pressure to act and transform. In response to the urgent need for transformation knowledge, academia has responded with a wide spectrum of collaborative forms of knowledge production (Vienni-Baptista and Pohl 2024, Busse et al. 2023, Jahn et al. 2012) that aim to produce evidence-based knowledge while bridging the knowledge-action gap (Nagy et al. 2020). Inter- and transdisciplinary research turned out to be an ideal type of collaborative knowledge production that can effectively address complex problems in both science and society (Vienni-Baptista and Pohl 2024). The more urgent the societal challenges, the more urgently it is expected that collaborative forms of knowledge production, including transdisciplinarity, will successfully meet this dual orientation and become impactful both scientifically and socially.

In reality, many transdisciplinary research (TDR) projects struggle to achieve this twofold aim (Lüdtke 2018, Lux et al. 2024), as scientific and societal impacts must be actively prepared during the project duration (Lux et al. 2019). On-the-ground experiences in research practice often differ fundamentally from the concept of ideal-typical TDR (Jahn et al. 2022, Zscheischler et al. 2018). Activities aimed at fostering one type of impact often come at the expense of the other (Jahn et al. 2022, Newig et al. 2019). Strategies for addressing the tension between the normative goal of dual impact orientation and research reality have so far been scarcely described.

In this introduction to the Special Section *Frontiers in transdisciplinary and participatory research #1*, we present strategies on how transdisciplinary (TD) researchers are navigating towards the goal of generating impacts both in science and in society[1] on three levels: the project level, the individual level, and the organizational level. We draw on insights from literature, as well as our own findings from a related empirical study (Theiler et al. forthcoming, see box 1). However, these strategies entail ambivalences concerning their capacity to foster a nurturing environ-

In the tdAcademy Special Section *Frontiers in transdisciplinary and participatory research in GAIA* insights into key questions of transdisciplinary and participatory research are offered. Guest editors in collaboration with the German Society for Transdisciplinary and Participatory Research (GTPF) are *Daniel Lang, Alexandra Lux, Martina Schäfer,* and *Melanie Mbah,* representing the tdAcademy's supporting institutions. Responsible *GAIA* editor is *Ortwin Renn*.

Each Special Section explores a distinct thematic focus. Special Section #1 is dedicated to *Coping with dual impact orientation in transdisciplinarity.*

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1 While we focus on the strategies of research projects, researchers, and scientific organizations, it is important to note that practitioners also experience tensions between different expectations participating in a TDR project. However, these tensions arise from conflicts between project work and other professional activities or interests and are not discussed here.

ment in a predominantly disciplinary organized science system, which we discuss in the last part of this article.

With this Special Section, we hope to stimulate discussion and inspire further research. We invited a research team to publish their related research. Lisa Deutsch et al. (2026, in this issue) explore to what extent tensions between navigating scientific and societal relevance can be productive (i.e., constitute a potential for triggering reflection, advancing integration, and creating innovation within inter- and transdisciplinary initiatives).

Strategies on the project level for achieving scientific and societal impacts

Strategic project focus

In an empirical study, Jahn et al. (2022) analyzed 59 sustainability-related research projects ranging from almost purely practice-oriented projects over approximately ideal-typical TDR to strictly academic research. They found that academic outputs and impacts clearly decline with increasing practice orientation and practitioner involvement. In an analysis of twelve TDR projects, Maasen (2010) found that the added value on the one hand comes at the expense of the other: either the practice actors are instrumentalized to generate scientific knowledge, or the scientific research is placed in the service of social problem orientation. Our empirical data indicate that, due to the limited resources in TDR practice, one project strategy consists in deliberately neglecting the twofold impact orientation and focusing their activities on one of the two sides – even if this moves away from the ideal dual claim of TDR.

Specialization within a project: Phases, roles, and tasks

Newig et al. (2019) found that projects with a purposeful planning of distinct disciplinary, inter- and transdisciplinary research phases succeeded in generating scientific and societal impacts. In one project, for example, academics took turns in organizing events with practitioners so that they had periods of interaction and periods of focusing exclusively on their academic work. However, phases with different focal points require researchers to take on a variety of roles (Wittmayer and Schäpke 2014). In this regard, Bulten et al. (2021) point out that the combination of action-oriented and knowledge-oriented roles is particularly challenging. Clarifying and distributing roles and tasks might reduce individual workload if the associated requirements and expectations are communicated transparently. However, empirical studies suggest that role allocations in TDR projects often occur implicitly and can vary depending on researchers' career stages. Hofmann and co-authors (2025) found that senior researchers tend to act more strongly as change agents in society, whereas early-career researchers see themselves more often as self-reflexive scientists. However, these roles are not fixed and may shift depending on individual trajectories and project contexts. Complementing this, Deutsch et al. (2026, in this issue) highlight the key role of early-career researchers in translating abstract scientific insights into practice- and policy-relevant outputs, with senior researchers focusing more on scientific novelty.

A frequently used and recommended strategy is to install specialized integration experts, who "lead, administer, manage, monitor, assess, accompany, and/or advise others on integration within inter- and transdisciplinary (ITD) projects or programs" (Hoffmann et al. 2022, p. 1). Key tasks include building impactful connections and supporting TD knowledge integration to ensure high-quality outcomes and impact for science and practice (ibid).

Strategies on the individual level for achieving scientific and societal impacts

Competence development

An individual strategy is to consciously acquire the necessary competences and skills. D'Este et al. (2018) confirm that specific skills for TDR enable individual researchers to deal with scientific and societal demands simultaneously. This also includes social competences and attitudes, such as openness and calmness facing growing complexity (as mentioned by our interviewees), which are not part of formal trainings but built up by experience. Jaeger-Erben et al. (2018) also argue for capacity building of early-career researchers that provides coaching and mentoring, as well as arenas for mutual social learning. Experienced researchers in TDR from our sample called for the further professionalization, formalization, and systematization of TD education and methods, so that competency development does not primarily rely on learning by doing or the initiative of individuals. >

BOX 1: Study on societal and scientific effects of transdisciplinary research from an actor-centred perspective

The empirical study cited in this article was based on a combination of secondary and primary qualitative data analysis. The secondary data comprised:

1. 22 semi-structured interviews with postdoctoral researchers or professors from the disciplines environmental sociology, sustainable chemistry, and participatory health research; and
2. the field notes from seven four-hour impact workshops with four TDR projects, involving 15 experienced researchers (no PhD students) and 12 practitioners from different fields that address the societal impacts of their TDR projects.

To complement and refine these data with primary sources, we conducted three focus groups with a total of ten researchers (including two PhD students) and five practitioners, along with one additional interview with a practitioner. All interviewees were based in Germany or had a good understanding of the German academic system. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Through an iterative process, we developed a coding framework that was subsequently applied to all data.

References to these data in this paper are identified as follows,
Interviews with Scientists:
IntS(No./Person_No./Paragraph)
Focus group with scientists/practitioners:
FGS1-2 /FGP_No./Person_No./Paragraph

Building up resilience

Our interview partners emphasized the importance of individual perseverance for TDR: "[...] that is the right approach to research, then you just must do it. [...] And despite all the resistance, stick to it with charm, enthusiasm and joy" (IntS9_51). D'Este et al. (2018) also emphasize that motivation and a positive attitude toward working together on social problems empower those involved to meet the challenges posed by a dual impact orientation. Zscheischler et al. (2018, p. 1069) found that "even scientists, who were supposed to emphasize scientific success criteria based on their professional background, rated criteria of practical relevance higher". The authors explain this by pointing out that the respondents were strongly committed to societal impact out of idealistic motives.

Resilience also means recognizing and communicating overload, personal limits, or feelings of being overwhelmed: "[...] where you also say, stop, this far and no further [...] otherwise you quickly end up in a classic overwork situation" (FGP_1_70). One interviewee described the careful consideration whether he/she can meet the requirements of a TDR project: "[...] do I now have the time and the possibilities to do something like this? You want to do it well and do it seriously" (IntS20_11). Taken together, these findings suggest that a strong motivation for societal impact, combined with the ability to recognize the limits of what is achievable, can strengthen the resilience of TD researchers to be able to handle the various challenges of this research mode.

Dancing with the reputation system

Jaeger-Erben et al. (2018) point out that the established scientific career paths are difficult to achieve within the framework of TDR projects with their dual aims. Pohl (2022, p. 22) describes the decision of young researchers to pursue an interdisciplinary or TD career path as risky, as these research modes still have "the stigma of generality and shallowness". For some researchers among our respondents who were pursuing or had pursued their degrees in a TDR project, it was only possible to obtain their PhD through informal agreements. These agreements undermined the logic of the discipline-based German academic system. Other respondents have been investing considerable resources in maintaining their presence in their disciplinary communities alongside their TDR activities. Some actively sought out niches that support TDR to build their academic future there. Others used TD projects strategically to improve their chances of a career outside academia.

Strategies on the organizational level for achieving scientific and societal effects

Building up a transdisciplinary research profile

In Germany, several academic organizations have strategically built up a TDR profile in recent years. Even within the framework of traditional, (inter)disciplinary programs promoting scientific excellence, some universities focusing on TDR managed to obtain generous funding (e.g., Berlin University Alliance, RWTH Aachen University, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology). Universities have also set up centres with a TDR focus (e.g., Centre for Technology and Society, ZTG, at Technische Universität Berlin) or established new professorships featuring TDR topics in collaboration with non-university research institutions

Third-party funding is dependent on changing political priorities and economic cycles, therefore shifts in policy priorities can slow down institutionalization efforts. Team members experienced in transdisciplinary research are critical for the success of such projects.

that already have a TDR profile (e.g., Goethe-Universität Frankfurt in partnership with the Institute for Social-Ecological research, ISOE). Another strategy for academic institutes is to concentrate on certain topics and strive for funding project chains, which strengthen the potential for achieving long-term societal impact. A frequent strategy is to build up stable networks with local practitioners to regularly apply for and carry out projects on regionally relevant topics.

Enabling structures

Institutions increasingly recognize their pivotal role in shaping the conditions for creating scientific and societal impact (Pärli 2023). D'Este et al. (2018, p. 756) mention, for example, a "supportive infrastructure regarding physical and human resources to help identify suitable non-academic research partners," which facilitates the impactful, yet time-intensive, interaction with non-academic partners. Another example is the position of TD interface managers, who are often located within university administrations and support both the needs of scientists and practitioners (Brundiers et al. 2013). A widespread strategy is to provide access to training that enables researchers to develop skills needed to tackle various challenges. University research centres often provide expertise and training in TD methods (e.g., ZTG). Other universities introduce teaching modules with a TD focus in academic education (e.g., Leuphana University). Universities are also joining forces in TDR networks (the Global Alliance for Inter- and Transdisciplinarity – ITD Alliance) or professional associations (the Society for Transdisciplinary and Participatory Research – GTPF in Germany) to improve research conditions for TDR and to learn from each other. As institutional members,

they provide financial support to these networks and contribute to various functions themselves.

Research funding
Research funding institutions are influential actors with leverage for structural change. Our interview partners mention strategies that strongly support generating scientific and societal impact, such as financing practice partners or preliminary phases in which the partners jointly define the problem and design the research processes. Some funding agencies strengthen knowledge exchange and learning between projects within a funding program or accompanying research, others offer capacity-building to address the challenges of dual impact orientation.

Ambivalences and open questions

The examples described above show that researchers and academic organizations use a variety of strategies to meet the dual impact requirement. Among the broader contextual conditions relevant to TDR, the academic system plays a crucial role—including existing scientific quality criteria and a formal and symbolic reputation system. This system still primarily follows the logic of disciplinary research. The above-mentioned strategies help TD researchers to deal with the framework conditions that make them less likely to score as high on traditional quantitative metrics of academic productiveness as their disciplinary counterparts (Hofmann et al. 2025) and that questions the epistemic quality of their research (Jahn et al. 2012).

Despite the variety of strategies, a fundamental transformation of the (German) science system is not yet apparent. Some of the strategies employed may even have ambivalent effects—both challenging and reinforcing existing structures at the same time. We identify the following ambivalences:

Ambivalence 1: Against the backdrop of limited resources, the twofold impact orientation of TDR often results in one being pursued at the expense of the other (Jahn et al. 2022, Newig et al. 2019). Prioritizing one type of impact can be a deliberate project strategy; however, this contradicts the ideal nature of TDR. An internal division of labour, in which team members or work packages focus on either societal or academic impact, requires integration efforts at high resource intensity to meet TD quality standards. *This ambivalence raises the question of whether the ideal of TDR can be realized given the resources typically available for such research.*

Ambivalence 2: The idealistic motivation of researchers to tackle urgent societal challenges can lead them to take on informal responsibilities for societal impacts beyond their formal obligations as scientists (Lüdtke 2018, Maasen 2010). Even if an internal division of labour can be a relief, managing the diverse expectations, perspectives, and bodies of knowledge still carries the risk of overload, as well as physical and emotional exhaustion. Some TD researchers are even willing to continuously improve their professional performance despite lacking long-term career prospects (Dedeurwaerdere 2023, Hoffmann et al. 2022). TD researchers balance these high demands with individual resilience. *This ambivalence raises the question of how far the societal responsibility of science should be placed on the individual scientist.*

Ambivalence 3: The willingness of institutions to specialize in TDR is associated with risks. Although funding sources for TDR have increased in recent years, unlike basic disciplinary research, TDR continues to rely almost exclusively on third-party funding for time-limited projects (Ahrend and Podann 2021). However, third-party funding is dependent on changing political priorities and economic cycles, therefore shifts in policy priorities can slow down institutionalization efforts. Team members experienced in TDR are critical for the success of such projects (Vienni-Baptista and Pohl 2024). At the same time, at German universities, involvement in a TDR project can have negative effects on one's academic career (Wissenschaftsrat 2015), and it is still easier to obtain permanent positions in disciplinary fields than with a transdisciplinary profile (Ahrend and Podann 2021, Sellberg et al. 2021). This makes it difficult for universities to build up and maintain long-term TDR expertise (Maasen 2010). Overall, it is therefore difficult and risky to establish long-term structures geared towards TDR. *This ambivalence raises the question of how the political expectations of TDR as societally impactful research can be reconciled with the lack of long-term institutional funding.*

These ambivalences necessitate a thorough discussion of feasible impact orientations and possible impact mixes. The discrepancy between idealistic goals and real conditions raises critical questions concerning the attainable impacts of TD projects, while preserving the transformative ambitions of this research mode. We look forward to further critical reflections that contribute to and deepen this important debate.

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