

Making Hope Possible

On scaling up engaged scholarship for socio-ecological transformation

3rd International Transdisciplinary Biennial on Environmental Justice

August, 25-29, 2024; Lassalle Institute, Switzerland.

The International Transdisciplinary Biennial on Environmental Justice at Lassalle-Institute (Switzerland) offers an inter- and transdisciplinary platform facilitating research exchange, validation of results, networking, and methodological innovations between engaged scientists and reflective practitioners engaged in socio-ecological transformation.

From August 25 to 29, the third international biennial on the topic of “Environmental Justice” was organized at the Lassalle-Haus, Zug, Switzerland. More than fifty academic leaders, researchers, students, activists and decision makers from over twenty countries attended the conference that was entitled “Making hope possible”. The aim was to make hope tangible by expanding transdisciplinary cooperation in the field of socio-ecological transformation.

The event's coordinator, Fr. Tobias Karcher, kicked off the proceedings by thanking the participants and reminded them that the event was a platform for exchange between committed scientists and reflective practitioners. The three days were planned with Keynote speeches and panel discussions before lunch and individual paper presentations post lunch in two parallel tracks.

This year's keynote speakers were Bianca Vienni Baptista from the Department of Environmental Systems Science at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich (=ETH). She explained the nuances of Transdisciplinary research methodology, differentiating them from inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches. Chinwe Ifejika Speranza, Head of the Land Systems and Sustainable Resource Use Unit at the University of Bern discussed how the forest ecosystems were being regenerated in Africa. Fr. Roberto Jaramillo, Director of the Secretariat for Social Justice and Ecology of the General Curia in Rome presented a case study of a village where the local economy was being rejuvenated. Prof. Amar KJR Nayak from the Xavier Institute of Management in India specialized in the promotion of regenerative ecosystems.

The conference also focused on how indigenous communities address ecological protection through case studies and direct participation from representatives of such communities from Philippines and Guatemala. The distinct differences in the approach of indigenous communities were highlighted, which focused on resilience, human relationships and connection to nature. They view nature as sacred and value the sovereignty and dignity of life. In contrast, corporations focus on risk minimization,

financial resources and formal collaboration, focusing on reduction of harmful emissions while jostling with human rights violations. These contrasts between these two types of human organizations were explored further, followed by a meditative walk and a cultural exchange.

I got the opportunity to present a case study that explored the power of faith and how we might leverage religious faith to create citizen engagement in sustainability projects. This was a lived experience and had interesting transdisciplinary conflicts, highlighting issues related to program governance. The abstract is given below.

The paper presents a case study of a small group of young professionals and their successful efforts in driving environmental sustainability, promoting tree plantation, by distributing saplings through religious institutions and places of worship. This interesting social experiment transcended religious boundaries and generated interest to participate among people from multiple faiths, without any resistance. This proves that faith can be a unifying power of humanity, in the journey towards a sustainable future. The hypothesis was that if a sustainable practice were integrated into faith and communicated through religious institutions and leaders, people would easily adopt it. If such practice does not contradict any specific belief, every community will be willing to adopt the same. The study also highlights how conventional approaches of impact evaluation contradict the concept of faith-based implementation. The role of the narrative and communication becomes a critical success factor. The opportunity for the sustainability champions is to find out such practices and push them through the channel of faith, to turn them into citizen movements.

There were a few more papers that confirmed this hypothesis and that made all of us quite excited. One paper was qualitative research exploring various community managed forests and sacred forests in Africa. The other was from USA where a sample of the catholic citizen population were surveyed. The respondents endorsed their belief in sustainability and associated it with the communications from the church. Further discussions with these presenters have also helped me to find a possible solution for the identified problem of governance in faith driven projects.

The conference opened a new window of transdisciplinary research for me, helping me enhance my knowledge gained from a certification course completed from Swiss institute of Arts and Sciences. This methodology is gaining momentum and focuses on solving real world problems.

Finally, I would like to thank Lassalle Institute for sponsoring my trip expenses. I wish to thank Prof. Amar Nayak and the authorities of XIM University for their support in making my trip possible.