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Introduction to the Special Issue

Transdisciplinary research around Latin American commons: exploring tools and methods

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Transdisciplinary research around Latin American commons: exploring tools and methods

Global socio-ecological transformations and the resurgence of the commons

Climate change, biodiversity loss, growing inequalities, and the expansion of extractive economies have exposed the limitations of conventional approaches to sustainability research (Rakowski et al., 2025). These interconnected crises require forms of knowledge production that move beyond disciplinary boundaries and foster collaboration among researchers, communities, policymakers, and civil society. In this context, transdisciplinary research has emerged as a key approach to co-producing knowledge capable of supporting societal transformations (Merçon, 2021; Streck, 2021).

At the same time, the commons have gained renewed attention within sustainability science and political ecology. Beyond the collective governance of natural resources, contemporary perspectives understand commons, or ‘commoning’, as relational systems sustained through practices of care, reciprocity, and collective stewardship (Nightingale, 2019; Partelow and Manlosa, 2023). Rivers, forests, archives, knowledge, and cultural heritage are increasingly recognized not only as shared resources but also as spaces where communities negotiate identities, responsibilities, and alternative socio-ecological futures.

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Latin America provides a particularly fertile context for these debates. Indigenous and Afro-descendant territorial governance, the recognition of the Rights of Nature, Buen Vivir, and diverse community-led conservation initiatives have positioned the region as a laboratory for rethinking human–nature relations and collective governance. These experiences also challenge how research is conducted, calling for methodologies that engage with communities as co-producers of knowledge rather than as research subjects.

This Special Issue argues that addressing contemporary socio-environmental challenges requires not only studying commons but also rethinking research itself. The contributions explore how transdisciplinary tools and methods—including participatory mapping, community monitoring, creative practices, environmental narratives, research fellowships, and collaborative archives—support new forms of knowledge co-production and commoning across Latin America. Together, they position the region as a source of methodological innovation for advancing more inclusive, relational, and transformative approaches to sustainability research.

From studying commons to researching with commons

Transdisciplinary research has become a central approach for addressing complex socio-environmental challenges by fostering collaboration between academic and non-academic actors in the co-production of knowledge (Hensler et al., 2024; Merçon, 2021; Trimble & Plummer, 2019). However, recent studies have shown that high levels of participation do not necessarily lead to more equitable or transformative outcomes (Hahn et al., 2023). Participatory approaches often remain constrained by externally defined research agendas, rigid funding structures, and academic evaluation systems that inadequately recognize the time, resources, and institutional changes required for genuine co-production. Comparative case studies help analyze challenges and opportunities in transdisciplinary research, and the convergence of diverse experiences becomes the seed for innovative methodological knowledge (Merçon et al., 2018).

In the Latin American context, transdisciplinary research is also linked to decolonial studies, acknowledging the region’s specific history, culture, and ethnic diversity (Streck, 2021; Merçon, 2021). For a decolonial turn, local actors must participate in decision-making about resources, research topics, and how knowledge is used (Zonta et al., 2023). Transdisciplinary approaches therefore seek to increase the relevance, credibility, and legitimacy of scientific research by ensuring the active participation of non-academic actors (Rébola, 2019). When successful, the co-production of knowledge can lead to policy and practice outcomes that take into account a diversity of values, perceptions, and worldviews, making them appear legitimate and credible to local populations (Hensler et al., 2024; Reed et al., 2023).

Research methodologies and tools in transdisciplinary research projects undoubtedly come from various disciplines and ways of knowing. Ideally, these are chosen through dialogue and coordinated action among collaborators. No methodological guides exist for this process beyond the goal of collaboratively combining the most suitable methods and tools for each particular case (Merçon et al., 2018). Therefore, it is a process that requires experience as well as mediation and facilitation skills. Since 2021, the Latin American Participatory Research Network ([Red IPAL](#)) has sought to create spaces for dialogue and interaction to develop participatory research, action, teaching, and learning processes and tools drawn from diverse forms of knowledge for the environmental sustainability of Latin American countries.

With this special issue, we first seek to open a space that accommodates diverse transdisciplinary research experiences in Latin America. Second, we hope this space will serve for critical analysis of both the research methods and processes used in transdisciplinary research (i.e. project planning and management, execution, evaluation, and implementation of co-created solutions), making visible both the diversity of approaches and the challenges encountered. Finally, this special issue seeks to enrich the literature on knowledge production from diverse perspectives and to showcase the richness and complexity that arise when different ways of seeing and understanding territories converge.

This Special Issue moves beyond the question of whether communities participate in research to examine how transdisciplinary research is organized, governed, and sustained through commons. Rather than treating commons solely as objects of study, the contributions explore how they become methodological frameworks that reshape the production and circulation of knowledge. In doing so, they argue that the transformative potential of transdisciplinary research depends not only on participation, but also on how resources, responsibilities, authorship, and decision-making are collectively negotiated and shared.

Exploring transdisciplinary tools and methods across Latin American commons

The contributions to this Special Issue examine how diverse transdisciplinary tools and methods support processes of commoning across Latin America. Rather than presenting methodological techniques in isolation, they show how different tools, methods, and methodologies employed in collaborative research practices, enable effective communication and fruitful interactions with the potential to strengthen collective action, territorial governance, and the co-production of knowledge in response to socio-environmental challenges.

Although the contributions included in this Special Issue address diverse territories, communities, and socio-ecological challenges across Latin America, they collectively advance three interconnected debates on the future of transdisciplinary research: 1)

research production as a common, 2) territorial methodologies of commoning, and 3) evaluating transformative research beyond academic outputs. Together, these contributions move beyond viewing transdisciplinarity as a set of participatory methods and instead examine how collaborative research can transform the production, circulation, and application of knowledge in support of the commons.

Research production as a common

A first debate concerns the governance of research itself. While transdisciplinary approaches increasingly emphasize participation and co-production, several contributions argue that genuine collaboration depends on addressing the material conditions through which knowledge is produced and circulated. Rather than asking whether communities participate in research, these articles examine who defines research agendas, who controls funding, authorship, mobility, translation, publication, and ultimately whose knowledge becomes visible and legitimate. They demonstrate that research can itself become a form of commoning when academic resources are redistributed to support collective rather than individual knowledge production.

Drawing on research conducted in Afro-Brazilian community archives and Black Atlantic knowledge networks in Salvador, Bahia, Miles' article (see in this issue) reconceptualizes knowledge, archives, and research production as commons. It examines who governs the material and institutional conditions that make participation meaningful, including access to funding, mobility, authorship, translation, and publication.

This perspective challenges conventional understandings of participation by emphasizing that collaborative research is fundamentally shaped by institutional arrangements. Fellowships, grants, research networks, and community archives are presented not simply as academic infrastructures but as political spaces where access to resources, recognition, and decision-making is continuously negotiated. The contribution therefore argues that the transformative potential of transdisciplinary research depends not only on including diverse actors but also on creating more equitable mechanisms for governing knowledge production and circulation.

Drawing on the LINKAGES project in the Amazon, De Castro et al. article (see in this issue) examines the challenges of co-production in transdisciplinary research within bioeconomy and international cooperation initiatives. It argues that meaningful collaboration requires moving beyond participatory approaches that merely implement externally defined agendas toward the joint formulation of research questions and solutions with Indigenous Peoples and local communities. While highlighting the potential of co-production to advance epistemic justice and

transformative research, the article also underscores the persistent institutional barriers—including rigid funding mechanisms, academic evaluation systems, and limited recognition of the time and resources required for collaboration—that continue to constrain transdisciplinary practice.

By reflecting on two contrasting case-study trajectories within the LINKAGES Project, the authors show how co-production unfolds through uncertainty, negotiation, and changing relationships rather than through a linear methodological sequence. Their analysis highlights the practical work required from researchers to translate academic and funding requirements into accessible formats, bridge linguistic and epistemic differences, sustain communication with local partners, and adapt research plans to shifting organizational priorities. Rather than presenting co-production as a guaranteed path to transformation, the article shows it as a demanding and contingent practice that requires researchers to remain reflexive about their own power, institutional constraints, and role in shaping the conditions for meaningful collaboration.

A growing body of research highlights the need to transform the institutional conditions under which transdisciplinary research is conducted. Drawing on the experience of El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR) in Mexico, Hensler et al. (see in this issue) demonstrate that embedding transdisciplinarity requires more than individual projects: it depends on fostering communities of practice, shared leadership, collaborative learning, and institutional reforms capable of overcoming disciplinary silos and rigid academic structures. Their work also emphasizes the importance of developing situated transdisciplinarity rooted in the Global South contexts, where collaborative research is grounded in epistemic justice, local knowledge systems, and long-term relationships with territories and communities. Rather than treating transdisciplinarity solely as a research methodology, the authors frame it as an institutional and political process of transforming how knowledge is produced, valued, and governed within higher education institutions.

Territorial methodologies of commoning

A second debate focuses on the methodological innovations emerging from collaborative engagement with territories and socio-ecological commons in regions experiencing ongoing conflicts and environmental transformations that threaten local economies and cultural survival. Across the contributions, participatory mapping, community-based monitoring, environmental narratives, research-by-drawing, citizen science, creative practices, and river co-learning are not presented as isolated research techniques, but as relational processes through which communities collectively construct knowledge while strengthening their relationships with rivers, forests, archives, and landscapes.

These methodologies share an emphasis on embodied learning, situated knowledge, and the recognition of emotional, cultural, and ecological dimensions that are often overlooked by conventional scientific approaches. Mapping, for example, becomes more than a technical exercise for representing space; it serves as a process through which communities visualize memories, territorial identities, and alternative socio-environmental futures. Likewise, community monitoring and environmental storytelling generate not only ecological information but also shared understandings of responsibility, care, and stewardship. Across the cases, transdisciplinary methods contribute to rebuilding socio-ecological relationships that have been fragmented by extractivism, environmental degradation, and institutional exclusion, thereby supporting collective action and territorial defense.

Drawing on the middle Yanuncay River basin in the southern Ecuadorian Andes, Rey-Hernández et al. article (see in this issue) explores “mapping otherwise” as a transdisciplinary methodology for supporting territorial defense against mining and hydroelectric projects. Combining participatory workshops, ethnographic engagement, and research-by-drawing, it demonstrates how collaborative mapping can visualize the emotional, cultural, and ecological relationships that communities maintain with their territories. By moving beyond conventional counter-mapping, the study reframes maps as commons that articulate alternative territorial imaginaries, strengthen collective identities, and support community resistance through the recognition of rivers and landscapes as interconnected hydrosocial systems.

Wilson et al. (see in this issue) further expand this discussion by examining Indigenous-led land recovery initiatives developed through Nation-to-Nation collaboration between Blackfoot communities in Canada and Kaqchikel Maya communities in Guatemala. Through land-based workshops, intercultural storytelling, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge exchange, the authors argue that transdisciplinary research can create ethical spaces where Indigenous knowledge systems guide research design rather than merely complement Western science. Their analysis highlights the importance of co-design, land-based pedagogies, and research sovereignty, demonstrating that socio-ecological restoration depends not only on ecological interventions but also on restoring relationships among people, territories, and more-than-human beings. By positioning Indigenous governance and reciprocal knowledge exchange at the center of research practice, the article offers a powerful example of transdisciplinary commoning grounded in decolonial collaboration and relational approaches to climate action.

Drawing on the RÍO BOGOTÁ project in Colombia, Giraldo-Martínez et al. article (see in this issue) examines how the impacts of transdisciplinary research can be assessed beyond conventional academic outputs. Through river co-learning arenas that combine creative practices, citizen science, critical cartography, river expeditions, storytelling, and research-creation, it proposes a methodology to evaluate how

collaborative initiatives foster river commoning at the personal, relational, collective, and social scales. By analyzing two co-creation experiences in the Bogotá River watershed, the study demonstrates how participatory and arts-based approaches can revitalize human–river relationships, strengthen fluvial networks of care and resistance, and generate transformative social and territorial change.

Drawing on the Save the Caoní initiative in Ecuador's Chocó Andino Biosphere Reserve, Dupuits and Puerta's article (see in this issue) examines how transdisciplinary research can rebuild collective river identities as a foundation for conservation and river justice in contexts of socio-ecological fragmentation. Through the integration of environmental narratives, community-based river monitoring, and participatory mapping, it shows how embodied and collaborative research processes strengthen local capacities, foster dialogue among communities, municipalities, and researchers, and support the co-design of community-based conservation mechanisms. While highlighting the transformative potential of these methods to reconnect people with rivers as living commons, the article also underscores the persistent challenges of power asymmetries, institutional rigidity, and the need to align international cooperation with local priorities, arguing that river governance ultimately depends on long-term processes of trust, collective learning, and shared responsibility.

Evaluating transformative research beyond academic outputs

The third debate addresses how the impacts of transdisciplinary research should be understood and evaluated. Conventional academic assessment continues to privilege publications, disciplinary outputs, and short-term project indicators, often overlooking the relational and institutional transformations generated through long-term collaborative processes. Several contributions therefore propose alternative ways of understanding research impact by examining how transdisciplinary initiatives foster trust, strengthen local capacities, build collective identities, support institutional innovation, and enable sustained environmental stewardship.

Rather than viewing transformation as a predefined outcome, the articles present it as an iterative process of co-learning, negotiation, and adaptation in which researchers and community partners continuously reshape both research practices and governance arrangements. This perspective also highlights that transdisciplinary research is rarely free of tensions. Conflicts over legitimacy, unequal power relations, competing territorial visions, and institutional constraints remain inherent to collaborative research processes. Recognizing these tensions is therefore essential for understanding both the possibilities and the limits of transdisciplinary approaches.

Whereas the SI outlines the transformative potential of transdisciplinary methods, Schroeter et al. (see in this issue) remind us that practicing transdisciplinarity is messy, labor-intensive, and institutionally constrained. Across the contributions,

transdisciplinary research emerges not as a linear or conflict-free process, but as an adaptive practice requiring researchers to assume multiple roles as facilitators, knowledge brokers, project managers, and mediators between diverse actors. Beyond methodological innovation, the contribution highlights the practical challenges of co-production, including the significant time commitment, limited institutional support and funding, and the need to navigate epistemological differences, communication barriers, and competing agendas. It examines researcher roles in the context of Latin America, a region characterized not only by its rich cultural and racial diversity, but by its structural inequality, long history of extractivism, polarized and weak policy spaces, and struggles for justice. By contrast, this article challenges the assumption that role typologies developed primarily in the Global North can be transferred without considering epistemic background, or historical and political dynamics. Together, they argue that realizing the transformative potential of transdisciplinary research requires not only collaborative methods but also structural changes in academic and funding systems that better recognize and support the relational work of knowledge co-production.

Using the collection of research tools found in the Red IPAL repository, Galindo et al. (see this issue) present a comparative analysis of how different tools support transdisciplinary projects by creating conditions for effective communication, knowledge co-production, and long-term impacts; three core principles of transdisciplinary research. They argue that tools vary substantially in the extent to which they enable participant engagement, shared interpretation, collective problem framing, and the production of actionable outputs. They found that low-tech, visual, oral, and narrative-based tools appear particularly valuable because they tend to reduce barriers to participation and allow non-academic actors to contribute through familiar forms of expression, and, that meaningful knowledge co-production calls for tools that allow for collective problem framing, ensure context-sensitive implementation, and bring attention to power asymmetries. The study suggests that many tools have the potential to foster trust, collective learning, advocacy, planning, and local capacity-building; though it highlights the limited evidence available on long-term impacts, calling for greater emphasis on iterative feedback, local ownership, and mechanisms to assess post-project transformations. The article highlights that in the Latin American context, where transdisciplinary work takes place amid inequality, epistemic colonialism, and environmental injustice, selecting and implementing research tools requires paying careful attention to whose knowledge is made visible, who controls interpretation, who benefits from the outputs, and whether the research process transforms or reproduces existing power relations.

Taken together, these three debates demonstrate that transdisciplinary research around the commons is not merely concerned with generating knowledge about

socio-environmental problems. It also involves transforming the institutional, methodological, and political conditions under which knowledge is produced, shared, and mobilized for collective action. By foregrounding experiences from Latin America, the contributions illustrate how collaborative research can move beyond participation toward more relational, equitable, and transformative forms of commoning, offering methodological insights that resonate well beyond the region.

Towards a politics of transdisciplinary commoning

The contributions to this Special Issue collectively argue that transdisciplinary research is not simply a methodological choice but a political and ethical practice that shapes how knowledge, resources, and responsibilities are shared. Moving beyond participation as an end in itself, the articles demonstrate that the transformative potential of collaborative research depends on the governance of research processes, the redistribution of academic resources, and the recognition of diverse knowledge systems. Across the different cases, commoning emerges not only as an object of study but also as a way of organizing research itself.

The experiences presented here also reveal that transdisciplinary research is inherently relational and contested. Building trust, negotiating power asymmetries, and sustaining long-term collaborations require institutional flexibility and continuous dialogue among researchers, communities, practitioners, and policymakers. Rather than offering universal methodological recipes, the contributions highlight the importance of context-specific approaches grounded in territorial realities, reciprocity, and mutual learning.

By foregrounding experiences from Latin America, this Special Issue positions the region as a source of methodological innovation for sustainability science and commons research. Across the region, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, peasant, and urban communities have developed diverse practices of territorial governance, environmental stewardship, and collective action that challenge conventional distinctions between scientific and local knowledge. These experiences are embedded in broader debates on the Rights of Nature, Buen Vivir, environmental justice, and territorial autonomy, offering alternative ways of understanding the relationships between society, knowledge, and the commons.

Rather than presenting universal methodological models, the articles illustrate how transdisciplinary research must remain responsive to local histories, power relations, and socio-ecological realities. The methods explored throughout this Special Issue—from collaborative archives and co-produced research agendas to participatory mapping, community-based monitoring, environmental narratives, and creative practices—demonstrate that methodological innovation emerges through long-term processes of dialogue, reciprocity, and mutual learning. In doing so, they position Latin America as an important contributor to global debates on sustainability science

by showing how transdisciplinary research can strengthen the governance of commons while advancing more equitable and transformative forms of knowledge production. It invites scholars to move beyond studying commons toward practicing transdisciplinary commoning—a collaborative approach in which knowledge production itself becomes a shared endeavor that contributes to more just, democratic, and sustainable socio-ecological futures.

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