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The challenge of conflicting rationalities about urban development: experiences from Mistra Urban Futures' transdisciplinary urban research

Warren Smit, David Simon, Elma Durakovic, Mirek Dymitrow, Gareth Haysom, Kerstin Hemström and Jan Riise

This paper reflects on ten years of transdisciplinary urban research by Mistra Urban Futures, a global centre focusing on the co-production of knowledge for more just and sustainable cities across the Global South and Global North. The paper focuses on one of the key challenges that Mistra Urban Futures has faced in its work: in addition to the competing interests and agendas of participants in co-production processes, there are also often deeper underlying conflicting rationalities about many of the key concepts and substantive issues relating to making cities more just and sustainable, driven by ideological, educational, contextual and personal factors. These differences can be even more polarised between different cities and countries, including deep divisions regarding the fundamental nature of the problem, the ultimate goals and objectives of urban development interventions, and the key underlying concepts. This paper explores these challenges and reflects on the various approaches adopted by Mistra Urban Futures to facilitate the understanding of these differences and identify commonalities and overlaps of interest. Ultimately, understanding and engaging with the different rationalities of participants in co-production processes is essential for different actors to work together to co-produce and operationalise knowledge for cities that are more just and sustainable.

Die Herausforderung widersprüchlicher Rationalitäten in der Stadtentwicklung: Erfahrungen aus der transdisziplinären Stadtforschung von 'Mistra Urban Futures'

Der vorliegende Artikel reflektiert zehn Jahre transdisziplinäre Stadtforschung von Mistra Urban Futures, einem globalen Zentrum mit Schwerpunkt auf Koproduktion von Wissen für gerechtere und nachhaltigere Städte im globalen Norden und Süden. Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf eine der Kernherausforderungen, mit der sich Mistra Urban Futures in seiner Arbeit konfrontiert sah: Zusätzlich zu den konkurrierenden Interessen und Agenden der an Koproduktion Beteiligten liegen häufig gegensätzliche Denkweisen zugrunde. Schlüsselkonzepte und substanzielle Fragen in Bezug darauf, wie Städte gerechter und nachhaltiger gemacht werden können, unterscheiden sich je nach Einfluss von ideologischen, bildungs- und kontextbezogenen sowie persönlichen Faktoren mitunter deutlich. Diese Unterschiede können zwischen verschiedenen Städten und Ländern noch stärker hervortreten, bis hin zu einer tiefen Spaltung in Bezug auf die Natur des zugrundeliegenden Problems, die übergeordneten Ziele sowie den Zweck urbaner Entwicklungsmaßnahmen. Dieser Artikel untersucht die Herausforderungen und reflektiert über die verschiedenen Ansätze, die Mistra Urban Futures verfolgte, um das Verständnis dieser Unterschiede zu fördern und Gemeinsamkeiten und geteilte Interessen zu identifizieren. Letztlich erweist es sich für die verschiedenen an Koproduktion beteiligten Akteure als unerlässlich, die unterschiedlichen Denkweisen zu verstehen und sich auf sie einzustellen, um produktiv zusammenzuarbeiten und Wissen für gerechtere und nachhaltigere Städte zu operationalisieren.

Mistra Urban Futures operated from 2010–2019 as a global centre focusing on the co-production of knowledge for just and sustainable cities, with core partners across the Global North and Global South. Headquartered in Gothenburg, with core partners in Greater Manchester (later also in Sheffield), Kisumu (Kenya) and Cape Town (South Africa), it had multi-stakeholder partnerships based in Stockholm and in Skåne, the southern region of Sweden (including the city of Malmö), along with project-specific partners in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and Shimla (India). Each platform worked as a transdisciplinary university-local government partnership (Trencher et al. 2014) between one or more universities and local and regional authorities, civil society organisations, and private firms, undertaking research on urban sustainability through transdisciplinary co-production.

Initially, each city partnership experimented with its own forms of transdisciplinary co-production suited to the particular context and blend of academic and practitioner partners and their respective priorities. Experiences and key lessons have been well-documented (see Palmer and Walasek 2016: 24-31; Perry et al. 2018; Palmer et al. 2020). The partnerships have contributed to the breaking down of old barriers and forging trust, to the development of new research approaches, and to the identification of 'champions' at both political and professional levels. During the period 2016-19, further emphasis was put on transdisciplinary co-production and a dimension of international comparisons was added to the local projects undertaken at each platform (Simon et al. 2018, 2020). Details and case studies of the many specific methods used are being published in a manual (Hemström et al. 2021).

This paper focuses on one specific key challenge facing the centre and other transdisciplinary initiatives: in addition to the competing interests and agendas of participant institutions in co-production processes (Simon et al. 2020), there are also often deeper underlying conflicting (or diverging) rationalities about urban development. Many key concepts and substantive issues relating to making cities more just and sustainable are highly contested. Within cities, people and organisations from different sectors and different disciplines often have very different understandings

of the problems and solutions, driven by ideological, educational, contextual and personal factors. These differences can be even more polarised between different cities, countries, regions, and sociocultural and geopolitical contexts. For example, there can be deep divisions about the fundamental nature of the underlying problem (e.g., poverty, inequity, lack of economic growth) and the ultimate goals and objectives of urban development interventions (such as equity or economic growth). Concepts such as 'sustainability' can also mean different things to different people and in different places.

Drawing on our experiences over the ten-year period, we examine the challenges of conflicting rationalities regarding how these challenges can be addressed through co-production processes. First we survey the different ways to conceptualise rationalities, divergent views on the problems that conflicting rationalities can cause, and the ways in which they can be overcome. We then provide a brief overview of Mistra Urban Futures' approach to transdisciplinary co-production and comparative research, and the different contexts in which we work around the world. After this, we present several case studies showing the challenges of conflicting rationalities in our work, and how these challenges have been addressed. Finally, we discuss key lessons about bridging conflicting rationalities through co-production. Ultimately, understanding and engaging with the different rationalities of participants in co-production processes is essential for different actors to work together effectively to co-produce and operationalise knowledge for more just and sustainable cities.

Conceptual framework

Rationality is the quality or state of being rational, that is, being based on or agreeable to reason. What is 'reasonable', of course, can vary considerably among individuals, from place to place, and over time. Max Weber distinguished between four different types of rationality: purposive/instrumental rationality, related to the expectations about the behaviour of other human beings or objects in the environment; value/belief-oriented rationality, where actions are undertaken for reasons intrinsic to the actor (e.g., ethical or religious beliefs) regardless of whether it will lead to success; affectual rationality, determined by an actor's specific affect, feeling, or emotion; and traditional/conventional rationality, determined by ingrained habits and traditions (Kalberg 1980). Although influential, Weber's approach to rationalities has been criticised for being devoid of social context and for not taking issues of power sufficiently into account (e.g., Habermas 1984).

Subsequently, philosophical perspectives shifted substantially towards seeing knowledge and social action as socially constructed, drawing particularly on Michel Foucault's writings on discourse and governmentality (Foucault 1976/1998; Foucault 1980/1997). Following on from Foucault's pioneering exposition of a distinctive governmental rationality (Rose 1999), much of the literature on conflicting rationalities distinguishes between the rationality of the state and that of grassroots communities (e.g., Watson 2003), thus focusing on the conflict and mutual incomprehensibility when 'expert and bureaucratic power/knowledge encounter less visible, but no less assertive, circuits of knowledge and power of groupings of the poor grounded in the particularities of space and place' (de Satgé and Watson 2018). Some scholars have attempted to go beyond a focus on the divide between state and community rationalities to examine different rationalities within the state, communities, or other sectors (e.g., Ziervogel et al. 2016).

Co-production is widely seen by scholars and practitioners as a way to bring together stakeholders with different rationalities in order to integrate different types of knowledge. Such initiatives are increasingly

Figure 1: Cars, truck, tuk-tuk and bicycle in Oginga Odinga Road, Kisumu, Kenya. Source: Warren Smit

common in engaging local authorities and their communities to ensure more appropriate and legitimate service delivery (e.g., Durose and Richardson 2016), but our focus here is on research and knowledge production. Transdisciplinary co-production research strives for new cultures and practices of research collaboration. Typically, this is problem-oriented and based on real-world problems, and addresses their complexity by involving a variety of researchers and other societal actors and by accounting for the diversity of their perspectives, while aiming to generate normative and solution-oriented results relevant to both research and practice (Polk 2015).

A key purpose and challenge of transdisciplinary co-production research is forming a transdisciplinary team of both academic researchers and other societal actors who can work and engage effectively in mutual learning to integrate the best available knowledge (Lang et al. 2012; Pohl and Hirsch Hadorn 2008). In the process of conducting such research, however, underlying conflicts and tensions may emerge, shaping and influencing their incentives and commitment to the project (Norris et al. 2016; Thompson et al. 2017), as discussed in the examples that follow.

As part of the increasing emphasis on comparative co-production from 2015-16, a framework for collaboration was negotiated that was acceptable to all city partnerships, so that it could be localised and operationalised appropriately. The process was time-consuming and at times contested, not least because of different interpretations within and between platform teams over core concepts, as outlined here, but was essential to provide a coherent and universally legitimate umbrella – framed as 'Realising Just Cities' (see below) to highlight the equitability and moral as well as material dimensions – as the basis for developing the comparative research agenda (Simon et al. 2018, 2020).

Examples of conflicting rationalities in Mistra urban futures' work

Below we exemplify the conflicting rationalities encountered in Mistra Urban Futures' work, and how these were addressed. In turn, we discuss:

- the challenge of conflicting rationalities in the CityLab programme in Cape Town;
- two food-related cases, one dealing with different conceptualisations of 'urban' and 'rural' in the Urban Rural Gothenburg project, and the other with how the centre's comparative food project dealt with and mapped the various perspectives on urban food systems; and
- how the centre's transport comparative project addressed different views and perspectives from several contexts.

In all cases, acknowledging and working with different rationalities was a key part of the transdisciplinary knowledge co-production process, and helped create new insights and innovative solutions.

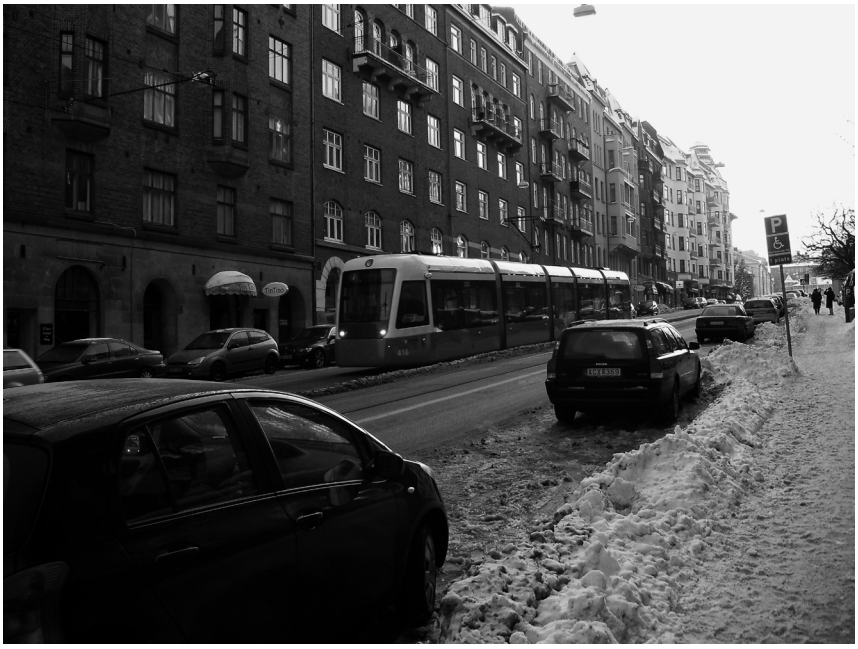

Figure 2: Tram and cars in Aschebergsgatan, Gothenburg, Sweden. Source: Warren Smit

Conflicting rationalities in the CityLab programme in Cape Town

The CityLab programme was initiated by the African Centre for Cities (ACC) in 2008 as an interdisciplinary applied research programme on sustainable urban development intended to deal with real issues in a way that overcame disciplinary divides and the policy-practice divide (Anderson et al. 2013; Smit et al. 2015). When the ACC became the anchor of the Mistra Urban Futures in Cape Town in 2010, the CityLab programme became one of its main components. The CityLabs were essentially about bringing together relevant stakeholders to co-produce policy-relevant knowledge on the key urban challenges facing Cape Town. Dealing with the conflicting rationalities of the participants in the CityLabs was a major challenge, but also an opportunity to integrate different perspectives and types of knowledge.

As an example of the nine CityLabs, the Urban Flooding CityLab brought together stakeholders to undertake collaborative research on the problem of the flooding of informal settlements in Cape Town. The focus was on identifying the different rationalities of key local government departments with regards to flooding in order to identify possibilities for collaboration. The officials of each department had very different understandings of the nature of the problem and the solutions, closely aligned to their respective disciplinary backgrounds (Ziervogel et al. 2016). For example, the officials of the Disaster Risk Management Centre, who came from a disaster-risk science background, largely viewed the city in terms of hazards and risks posed to residents and, in practice, their focus was on disaster-risk relief. Roads and Stormwater officials had a civil engineering background, and saw the problem of flooding as essentially too much water being in certain places, requiring stormwater drainage solutions. Informal Settlements Management officials, who were mostly housing practitioners, saw flooding of informal settlements in Cape Town as mainly a problem of people occupying low-lying, poorly drained

areas that are not (in their present state) suitable for residential use, and thus saw the solution as relocation or upgrading. Residents of informal settlements, in turn, had different perspectives about flooding, mainly focusing on its immediate impacts on livelihoods and health, and ways of mitigating its negative impacts at the household and neighbourhood scales. Different rationalities and horizons of concern such as these can potentially be an obstacle to collaboration, but through mapping these divergent perspectives and through bringing together various stakeholders to integrate the different perspectives into a more holistic understanding of the flooding of informal settlements, it was possible to identify synergies and opportunities for collaboration and co-ordination.

The conceptualisation of 'urban' and 'rural' in the Gothenburg urban rural project

The Urban Rural Gothenburg (URG) project reflected conflicting rationalities with regards to the terms 'urban' and 'rural'. The URG project was a three-year (2017-19), EU-sponsored project for sustainable development with the overarching aim to create improved conditions for green innovation and green business development between the city and the countryside. Operating via five test beds in four local hubs in north-eastern Gothenburg, the project sought to develop and implement new low-carbon approaches to local development, with particular linkages to food, logistics, tourism, and ecological business models, and was intended to serve as an accelerator for circular economies and green business development with a strong local anchoring.

Urban development is predicated on understanding the concept of the 'urban'. But 'urban' is not a given, and it is not neutral. 'Urban' is a spatial abstraction with multiple meanings and significations. It also comes with the burden of implications. In other words, ways in which we classify space will have an immense impact on the different paths of development a geographic area will be subjected to (Dymitrow and Brauer 2017; Dymitrow et al. 2019). At the core of analysis lies the important notion that the problem of spatialising development projects carries the embedded risk of *concept-induced harm*, i.e., indirect harm caused not by actions, but by conceptual presuppositions triggering those actions (Dymitrow 2018).

The project's name, Urban Rural Gothenburg, consists only of spatial designators, with no indicators of intent, interest or action. Dymitrow, Kotze and Ingelhag (2019) found at least three trains of thought undercutting the spatialisation of the URG project. Firstly, it is argued that the city of Gothenburg encompasses different landscapes: 'urban' (built-up areas) and 'rural' (green areas). Secondly, it is argued that by introducing 'rural economies' (such as agriculture) into 'urban areas', we are creating new synergies. Thirdly, taking into account the demographic composition of north-east Gothenburg, comprising mostly lowly educated people from 'developing' countries, it is argued that new employment opportunities for them can be created through engagement in familiar primary economic activities.

While well-intentioned, this reasoning conflates *spatial delimitation* with *activity delimitation* (Dymitrow and Brauer 2016, 2017). 'Rural activities' were thus identified from a preconceived traditionalist understanding of rurality (e.g., farming, hunting, mining, etc.), whereby any area exhibiting those traits becomes rural by extension, effectively normalising the definition of rurality by the actions of a few. This focus on what was traditionally seen as 'rural' led to the project focusing on agricultural activities, which resulted in some criticism in the media. For example, one journalist referred to the project as 'some kind of exotic circus with immigrants, animals and cultivation plots' (Verdicchio 2017), and one of the participants in the project remarked that, 'Had I wanted to work with animals or farms, I would return to Namibia' (Jörnmark 2018: 67).

Identifying boundary positions for collaboration – the urban food systems collaborative project

In a predominantly urban world, urban food systems present a useful lens to engage a wide variety of 'wicked' urban (and global) challenges (Rittel and Webber 1973; Lazarus 2009). The primary aim of the three-year comparative urban food-systems project was to use existing city-scale projects to seek out wider urban food-system solutions. It comprised four research teams, from Gothenburg, Sheffield/Greater Manchester, Kisumu and Cape Town. Each city faces different urban sustainability and divergent food-system challenges. From the outset, the project expected difference, but it was expected that broader urban food-system approaches would align. Collaboration proved to be extremely challenging.

Initially, it was assumed that the challenges were aligned to the nature of the respective urban food systems. However, it soon became evident that a deeper challenge needed to be addressed. The values held by researchers and their disciplinary 'enclaves' presented significant boundaries (Hansson 2001; Longino 1990), which influenced how issues were understood and addressed. This had serious implications for the evolution of this project, which arrived at an impasse where three options were evident: to disband the project; to seek out some form of co-opted, weak or diluted agreement; or to embrace and use difference to ground the project. The project team chose the last-mentioned, undertaking a process of mapping the boundary positions of food researchers and food projects within Mistra Urban Futures. Four food-system positionalities were constructed: a resource perspective (with a focus on agriculture and food production); a green perspective (with a focus on promoting foods that are more environmentally sustainable); a food-justice perspective (with a focus on the rights and responsibilities of actors in the food value chain); and a scalar perspective (with a focus on the embedding of food systems within their broader contexts, such as politically and culturally, at different scales). As part of the collaboration process, these binaries or food-system positionalities were constructed as a tool to expose positions that are often assumed to be universal (Haysom et al. 2019). Researchers self-identified

where they, and their respective food projects, were located on each of these positions. This simple clarification of positions resolved the deadlock. Instead of trying to force particular positions, researchers were better able to understand the position (and values) of others while remaining comfortable with their own.

Detailing these different value positions had three uses: first, it assisted in identifying the key positions held by different researchers, which allowed for a second, namely recognition of certain non-negotiable areas or issues that participants were not willing to surrender, or where context drove such a need. Finally and perhaps most importantly, when read as a collection of responses, all focusing on the same objective of food-system transformation, it showed how all actors, despite their different ideological positions, were in fact working towards a common goal. This recognition was useful because highlighting ideological positions had the potential to start discussions about where the middle ground and opportunities for compromise were.

Transport and sustainable urban development

The centre's Transport and Sustainable Urban Development comparative project was a collaboration between the cities of Gothenburg, Kisumu and Cape Town focusing on *Comparative Analysis of Pursuing Transport Justice and Its Role in Realising Just Cities*. It explored how the role of transport has changed and evolved in the different contexts and geographical scales, how the justice discourse has evolved, and what social issues are being addressed in each city. This project emerged out of Mistra Urban Futures' overall international collaborative framework, entitled 'Realising Just Cities'.[1] It is now widely accepted that sustainability comprises many facets and that it will be unattainable at any scale if poverty and inequality persist. This inspired Mistra Urban Futures' approach that realising just cities encompasses the development of urban areas that are fair, green and accessible as the core characteristics of sustainability – as fully elucidated in *Rethinking Sustainable Cities* (Simon 2016). The process of developing the *Realising Just Cities* framework highlighted conflicting rationalities about the understanding of 'just cities' in different contexts and what the key dimensions of urban justice are (for example, see Sitas 2020; Sitas and Smit 2016; Valencia et al. 2019, 2020).

The transport comparative project addressed one of the key dimensions of just cities, namely accessibility, and focused on transport and urban justice in Gothenburg, Kisumu and Cape Town. The comparative project involved people from very different contexts in Europe and Africa, and the three cities vary both in what challenges they face and what possibilities exist for tackling them. In addition, different disciplines and sectors were engaged in the project – transport planners, urban planners, professors in urban planning, and PhD students, thus involving people from academia as well as the public sector. Their different contextualised rationalities created a challenge in defining and developing common challenges, objectives and grounds for the comparative work.

One initial challenge was the issue of power and knowledge between the different geopolitical contexts, and the lack of understanding of the differences across the respective cities. People had different perceptions of what objectives to prioritise. There was a hierarchical aspect of Northerners presuming to know what needed to be done and the South being the subject of that knowledge. For example, in Cape Town, conventional methods of co-creative planning were not transformable to the city government, owing to the disparity and power issues within the City of Cape Town that made it difficult to plan with conventional participatory planning methods, thus running the risk of using co-creation-based planning to rubber-stamp existing municipal plans. It is crucial to be aware of the complexities surrounding different contexts that are often taken for granted when trying to apply methods that are developed in the Global North, in the Global South and, by extension, in any very different context (Watson 2014). A key lesson from this specific case is the importance in the initial phase of setting aside time to learn about the different contexts and partners.

Conclusion

The experience of Mistra Urban Futures highlights that the existence of different rationalities in transdisciplinary co-production processes is both a challenge and an opportunity. The identification of novel approaches to wicked problems is contingent on difference being highlighted. The identification of difference can make common positions evident and create spaces for the realisation of new perspectives, possibilities and axioms. Importantly, this creates space for difference to be celebrated rather than censored or muted. We argue that doing this at the outset assists in avoiding lengthy and often conflictual processes later on. Without such processes, 'agreement' is often curated, generally representing a false consensus.

In all the diverse project contexts reported here, it was crucial to bring people together interactively to understand their different views and to agree on the overall objective and detailed research questions and research methods. This is particularly important when conducting cross-city comparative research where contexts, world views, and positionalities differ sharply. It is important initially to create a space for mutual understanding of the different perspectives and an understanding of what structural power dynamics exist between the different contexts and within the research team. The initial idea phase can be time-consuming and complex, but it is essential for real co-production. During this period, there is a need for learning and reflection about the different local contexts and to see what possibilities for collaboration exist.

Ultimately, understanding and engaging with the different and highly contextualised rationalities of participants in transdisciplinary co-production processes is essential for different actors to work together effectively to co-produce and operationalise knowledge for more just and sustainable cities.

1
https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/sites/mistraurbanfutures.org/files/international-collaborative-framework.pdf

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