



CALL TO ACTION

Knowledge co-creation for transforming education for sustainable futures

JULY 2023





THE CHALLENGE

*"...I feel agony and upset how our land is dramatically changing and seems an uninhabitable place ... I asked myself, 'what I can do?' Then I switched angles through my heart and brain to write a proposal..." **

There is an urgent need to transform education in line with the needs and interests of groups that have been historically disadvantaged through processes of unsustainable development.

Transforming education for more sustainable futures is a complex problem that needs to be approached from the perspectives, interests and lived experience of those directly experiencing and facing those challenges. It requires drawing not only on knowledge from the academic disciplines but from Indigenous and local knowledge held in communities as well as professional knowledge and practical know-how held by practitioners, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders. Bringing together these different forms of expertise requires transgressing traditional top-down, university-led approaches to research, which often involve knowledge hierarchies that overlook and undervalue Indigenous, local, professional and practical knowledge.

*(*Jama Adam, PI, Somalia)*



THE WAY FORWARD

Knowledge co-creation is increasingly recognised as a methodological approach has the potential to generate understanding of and relevant solutions to the challenges posed by climate change, social inequalities and unsustainable development.

It can do so in ways that speak to policy and practice but are rooted in local realities and lived experiences, critically drawing on interdisciplinary knowledge as well as Indigenous and local knowledge systems.

A knowledge co-creative approach is new in many contexts, and even where it is familiar, it is not to be undertaken lightly.

Movement towards knowledge co-creation and democratisation of research processes requires practical support and resources as well as breaking down traditional boundaries and hierarchies.



WHAT NEEDS TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

... evidence informed
recommendations for
transformative research

Actively seek diversity and make intentional efforts to redress historical inequities:

Research that is able to draw on perspectives from different disciplines and interests, including those of researchers, policy makers, practitioners and community-based organisations is best placed to tackle the complexity of the problems being faced. Education and research about education can exclude and reinforce inequalities so it is necessary to include and foreground forgotten or neglected perspectives, including those of children and young people, and to work with non-traditional partners.

For example: * In India , South Africa and Rwanda working with diverse transdisciplinary teams and stakeholders helped broaden perspectives and strengthen relevance and sustainability of projects. Researching with deaf and deafblind people in Somalia and Rwanda foregrounded voices that had been neglected and opened up pathways for solutions based on their experience of barriers and opportunities. For some projects' objectives it was important to work with the marginalised, and question ideas of 'marginalisation' whilst in others working with the privileged to examine and understand their privilege and learn how to take steps towards equity produced powerful results.

* Selected examples are included here. Forthcoming report will contain more comprehensive synthesis with illustrative examples



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Further efforts are needed to decolonise research:

This is done by challenging dominant framings of research and reconceptualising the 'problem' to be addressed in terms of the lived experiences and epistemological standpoints of the participants and embracing and validating alternative ways of learning, knowing and doing research.

For example: Projects in **Rwanda** and **India** brought new knowledge and expertise on sustainable practices into conversation with formal policies and curricula to address disconnect and dissonance. Several South African projects **challenged the status quo** and the **privileging of scientific knowledge production** and found alternative pathways to tackle sustainability challenges. Researching with children was also seen as a decolonising practice as elevating their voices **challenged dominant adult voices** and **made room for them in decision-making** about issues that directly concerned them and their futures.



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Critical, participatory, action-oriented research designs are needed:

There is a need both for research that seeks to understand issues from new perspectives and challenges dominant conceptualisations, and for action- and activism-oriented research which directly benefits participants and co-researchers. Based on objectives, time and resources, this can be across studies and interventions or within one project.

For example: To counter deficit perspectives a team in India mapped the cognitive and cultural resources that lie with Adivsai communities, and a study in Somaliland sought to understand the meaning of 'Sustainable Development' for graduates. Action-oriented projects were in the majority, including teacher education on gender sensitisation and Eco-schools in India; the development of basic literacy and numeracy courses for skilled minority workers and informal traders in Somalia/Somaliland; developing modules and training for community members to cope with Urban Growth Challenges in Rwanda; and, with a focus on food, a participatory course on transitioning to sustainable diets and developing school food gardens to achieve community-wide sustainable livelihoods. These projects aimed to have direct benefits for participants and their communities, as the Water mapping project highlighted: "We are not mapping the water for Bristol but for the poor and elderly people of Cape Town."



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Grounding research in the lived experience of those facing the challenges of inequalities and unsustainable development and adopting research methods that elevate and bring this experience to life:

Claims to quality and credibility of research depend upon it being based on the voices, beliefs and perspectives of those who have lived experience of these complex realities. This also supports efforts towards epistemic and social justice. Qualitative and arts-based approaches lend themselves to knowledge co-creation as they give participants a range of different ways and tools to express themselves and the complexities of their lives, can generate intense detail and nuance, and offer ways to ease the power disparities between researcher and participants.

For example: In some project teams the Principal Investigators and research teams had direct lived experience of the challenges being investigated and had roles as **teacher-researchers, activist-researchers or Nomadic pastoralist - turned - researcher** and this had driven the project from the start. **Theatre, photography, songs, poetry and drawing** were just some of the arts-based methods used by teams to explore, access and express inner stories.

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Build in openness to adaptation and fluidity from the start:

When research programmes are planned, there is a tendency to pre-determine the methods and approaches. Knowledge co-creation involves participants as co-researchers, who shape and re-shape projects in responsive, reflexive approaches. The relationship and trust building required for this takes time and resources.

For example: Involving participants from inception stages can help ensure course and project content is relevant, for example identifying **specific aspects of literacy and numeracy** that are needed. Early engagement with participants and a flexible 'response-able' approach can facilitate shifts to methods that resonate more culturally, such as **from individual interviews to collective, creative methods**. Ongoing participation and engagement helps establishment collective ownership by **agreeing norms for workshops, drawing on local expertise to reframe interview questions,** or adding in new activities such as **reading circles** or **gender as a spectrum workshops**. Fluidity also includes **'daring to fail' and recognising when major changes in direction** are required. Several projects highlighted the additional time demands of working in these ways.



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Ethical considerations and practices in knowledge co-creation extend far beyond procedural ethics and institutional protocols:

Everyday, contextually meaningful, relational ethics in practice encompassing the values and beliefs by which individuals and communities operate are fundamental. The sensitive and unsettling issues being explored also require particular 'ethics of care' and 'critical empathy'. Create safe spaces and ensure safe language to meet these ethical requirements. Researchers need support in these approaches, and institutions need to be open to negotiating rigid protocols that are often designed for a different purpose.

For example: Several projects highlighted issues with institutional requirements for individual informed consent, especially written consent in contexts where collective or hierarchical decision-making is the norm, or where it harms the trust and relationships being established. The concept of **'critical empathy'** emerged as a way of moving from confronting difficult issues and emotions to potentially transformative knowledge and practices.

Projects showed the importance of creating safe spaces for **sharing difficult stories**, **for meaningful engagement** and **dealing with unsettling feelings of shame and guilt**. Several South African projects highlighted the importance of 'safe' inclusive language, e.g. avoiding exclusionary jargon which was seen as a form of violence.



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Build in scaffolding, support and capacity mobilisation:

Knowledge co-creation approaches are demanding, in terms of time, resource, energy and emotions. Working responsively and across boundaries, of disciplines, communities, partners, cultures, languages or generations, requires distinct knowledge, attitudes and skills which are often not part of formal training. Support this by wider ethical, equitable partnership models (see Partnerships Call to Action).

For example: Projects highlighted the importance of support for participants joining as co-researchers which took the form of **training workshops on participatory action research and art-based approaches** and **skills-building workshops to develop their basic community-based research knowledge**. Many Indian projects focused on Early Career Researchers and scaffolding was provided through Hub support, as well as being built into individual project designs, such as in **supportive peer groups and guided sessions on qualitative inquiry, engagement with research and policy and supported reflective writing**. Several projects emphasised the **'on the job'** nature of learning and capacity mobilisation in knowledge co-creation, where **challenges are wrapped up with opportunities for learning**, requiring continuous support within a flexible framework.



CALL TO ACTION

What we ALL need to do TOGETHER ...

EVERYONE has a role to play in transforming education for sustainable futures for ALL living on our planet ...

What role are **you** playing?

Base efforts towards transforming education for sustainable futures on knowledge and evidence that recognise and tackle the complexities and make space for alternative approaches that generate new and alternate knowledges.

Powerful ways to do this are through democratising knowledge production and through co-creation approaches.

- **For Researchers:** Seek opportunities and non-traditional partners to undertake co-creative research that challenges existing framing of dominant education and sustainability discourses and is oriented towards action that directly benefits those affected by inequalities and sustainability challenges. Be prepared to embrace transdisciplinary and transgressive research in university research.
- **For Research leaders and funders:** Take a pluralistic approach, recognising multiple knowledges and ways of framing ideas and give co-engaged research the time and resource it needs.
- **For Educators and Teachers:** Be prepared to get involved in knowledge co-creation as practitioners and as teacher-researchers as part of continuing professional development. Seek out opportunities to develop and share your expertise across boundaries and with new and diverse stakeholders in the community.
- **For Policy Actors:** Critically reflect on the evidence base informing policies. Give more attention and support to knowledge and learning generated or co-created with those facing the challenges the policies aim to tackle.
- **For engaged activists:** Explore ways of extending the social learning in your community and activism to co-develop the arguments needed for public advocacy and activism.

THANK YOU!!

Visit our website:
www.tesf.network



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Transforming Education
for Sustainable Futures



This CALL TO ACTION, compiled by Rhona Brown, Leon Tikly and Rafael Mitchell is based on the findings of 67 co-engaged research projects implemented across four countries in the Transforming Education for Futures Project involving four Network hubs in South Africa, India, Somalia / Somaliland, Rwanda. Overall co-ordination was provided by, and supported by the University of Bristol and partners, with UKRI with GCRF funding. The Network was also supported and complemented by substantive in-kind support and collegial relations that contributed significantly to the Network's outcomes and success through intellectual, social, economic, ethical and other contributions.

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