

Transdisciplinary Methods for Researching and Supporting Ecological Entrepreneurship: Researcher-Merchant Partnerships in Cambodia

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This paper focuses primarily on methodological considerations for the rapid development of supportive boundary settings—in this case, researcher-merchant partnerships—that facilitate transdisciplinary research in social or ecological enterprise. The enthusiastic promotion of social and ecological entrepreneurship through development assistance, popularized through practices such as micro-credit, often results in autonomous and diverse initiatives that are challenging to monitor and research. These characteristics, however, are commensurate with transdisciplinary research methods, which aim to flatten hierarchical relationships between researchers and the researched, and encourage integration of different types of knowledge. In the methodology I outline in this paper, three additional aspects of transdisciplinarity are fulfilled: engaging in action research, using research resources for social good, and recursive mutual learning. Researcher-merchant partnerships allow local entrepreneurs and development researchers to collaborate in a mutually beneficial manner that serves to create data for the researcher while, at the same time, supporting the advancement of an ecological enterprise.

Such smaller-scale enterprises in developing countries—particularly socially or ecologically sustainable initiatives—often lack two important resources that researchers can potentially provide: market analysis and credit. Researchers, in turn, typically lack two resources that entrepreneurs can provide: market data and access to entrepreneurial activities. In this article, I detail two transdisciplinary fieldwork experiences involving small-scale enterprises for organic rice and traditional medicine in Cambodia. The “data” (or knowledge) production from the partnership generally falls into three categories: (1) collected data (from shared gathering), (2) data about the process of forming, maintaining and evolving the partnership, and (3) data obtained through critical reflection after recursive self-learning and conscientization by all parties (Novy et al. 2008). Through this process, some of the early analysis is completed together in the field, while the long-term relationships allow for subsequent follow-up, discussion, and revision. More broadly, I also explore the advantages, disadvantages, and limitations of this kind of research



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