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Meeting report: "Knowledge transfer in and through Living Labs". International Conference and Training School, 2024, Aachen (hybrid), DE

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"How about combining a conference and a training school on the topic 'Knowledge transfer in and through Living Labs?'", we thought – and were rewarded with a week full of inspiring presentations, intensive exchanges, and fruitful collaborations that sparked new ideas and lasting connections. The TRANSFER project of the Living Labs Incubator at RWTH Aachen thereby created a combined format that provided training school attendees with the opportunity to delve deeper into topics that tickled their interest during the conference and enabled all participants in both events to attain an overview of living lab (LL) research in various countries and contexts. We were even lucky enough to gain a spontaneous extra participant for the training school who had taken a liking in the topics and conversations – and perhaps also the summer in the beautiful city of Aachen.

Conference

The international conference on "Knowledge transfer in and through Living Labs" took place in Aachen from June 24 to 26, 2024 and featured a blend of traditional presentations and interactive formats including workshops, a world-café-setting, a panel discussion as well as more experimental approaches like a walking tour, and an arts-based lecture performance.

Over the course of the three conference days, thirty presenters coming from Asia, Australia and Europe shared their insights and discussed topics such as advantages and challenges of collaborative and co-creative approaches in LLs as well as potential limits of knowledge sharing and transfer. In eleven thematic sessions, conference participants discussed the following topics: sustainability, institutional support, urban living labs, adapting and integrating methodologies, knowledge transfer within living labs as well as education and collaboration. The majority of LLs cases presented had experimented with new forms of collaboration and observed that knowledge transfer requires special effort, time and attention to coordination if it is intended to be reciprocal.

As part of the conference program, the LLs funded by RWTH Aachen University's Exploratory Research Space (ERS) seized the opportunity to showcase their work. Four diverse projects on urban transformation, energy efficient buildings, river sedimentation and circular bioplastics reflected on their inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration with different stakeholder groups and the qualities of knowledge and insights gained. The audience was especially interested in discussing how various higher education and research institutions train and support their staff and students towards the transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge. Comparing the various approaches, we found significant diversity in how LLs are realized, also for educational purposes; however, common characteristics emerged that merit further analysis, for example the opportunity to push disciplinary and quotidian boundaries.

A question that arose with regard to knowledge integration was how implicit knowledge can be made explicit and in what way living labs can support this process. Thanks to their transdisciplinary nature, LLs do not only engage a broader range of stakeholders but also facilitate integration of other types of knowledge, thereby enriching and deepening our understanding of socio-technical systems and leverage points for change. To see some transformations in-the-making, participants were invited to a walking tour during which our guide, Georg Helmes, took the group to see several urban LLs and other participative city planning projects. As a long-time citizen and very invested participant himself, he shared many interesting, funny and frustrating stories about current attempts to create pleasant and climate-proof urban spaces in Aachen's city center.

Picking up on the impressions participants gained during the city tour, the conference started with a lecture performance by Inge Zeppenfeld of the MörgensLab by municipal theatre, entitled "Urban Soundscapes". Attendees listened to sounds of the city and of nature collected in Aachen's city parks combined with images and were invited to consider which sounds we perceive, which ones we really attend to and are affected by, and which sounds we willfully ignore.

During the many interactive conference sessions, groups – amongst other – collectively reflected on gamification approaches or storytelling methods to foster co-creation and knowledge integration in LLs. A hybrid panel discussion with four LLs at British universities showed that, after ten years of LLs research on their campuses, outcomes included both institutional

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as well as behavioral changes. Focused reflections on the ongoing question of knowledge generation and on the extent to which LLs are transdisciplinary, participants identified limitations of LL practice and possible innovations to methods, processes and approaches. Proposals included the inclusion of interest groups as well as new formats for participation and (knowledge) integration as current formats often fall short of involving people genuinely.

The conference was framed by three keynote lectures which provided inspiring impulses for the discussions during the sessions and breaks. In his opening talk, René von Schomberg questioned how LLs can create a suitable environment for responsible research and innovation in engineering practices. Further, he explored a potential "ideal living lab" composed of features or aspects of different types of transdisciplinary labs.

Barbara van Mierlo gave insights into her work on reflexive monitoring. She recounted the challenges that occur in collaborative initiatives and how the method of reflexive monitoring can improve joint learning processes with various actors. Monitoring then does not only mean providing tools but also achieving meaningful mutual understanding.

Karoline Augenstein discussed key aspects of real-world lab research and current research gaps. She focused on transformations for sustainability, agency in and potential impacts of real-world labs. Further, she explored other fields of research, methods, and interdisciplinary work and how they could inspire and be made useful for work and research in real-world labs. To highlight the value and opportunities for international networking and collaboration, the conference program also included an information event by the European Network of Living Labs (ENoLL).

Training school

Starting with a pre-workshop on the morning of the first conference day, the selected group of training school participants, including professors, post docs, practitioners, PhD candidates and master's students, got acquainted. Subsequently, the international participants formed five working groups that collaborated on several tasks during the week. Nearly all of them already had experience with LLs or were conducting research related to the topic. The group comprised a balanced mix of engineers, social scientists, and individuals with technical, humanistic, or biological backgrounds, enabling a multidisciplinary discussion of the topics from diverse perspectives.

The five groups were tasked with selecting and analyzing one of the LL cases presented at the conference with the final goal to develop indicators of knowledge transfer within the chosen LL and across other contexts. Starting with a short lecture by Viola Schiaffonati and Riccardo Chesta (co-organizers from Politecnico di Milano), the participants were invited to discuss moral decision-making in the context of human interaction with technological artifacts, particularly focusing on how AI-driven technologies may influence human behavior and ethical reasoning. Other presented topics and methods included the SynSICRIS tool, a planning and monitoring tool with a focus on impact pathways, a workshop on the creation of indicators by the TRANSFER team and a workshop on co-creation by ENoLL based on the UNaLAB Toolkit.

Reflection

The local organizing team aimed to reach a variety of actors which use LLs to initiate new ways of collaboration and democratization of decision-making processes related to socio-technical transformation. Funding from the German Ministry of Education and Research enabled us to offer free attendance, making both events also accessible for young academics and non-profit actors. The exchanges between academics and practitioners with different levels of experiences led to fruitful discussions as 'old' knowledge was questioned and 'new' knowledge consolidated. In the end, the group agreed that LLs research and practice requires starting from comprehensive reviews of publications reflecting on past experiences while also staying open and adaptable to new actor coalitions, social settings, methods and approaches. Particular emphasis should be placed on recognizing the social value of LLs while not neglecting their political role. Throughout the week, power relations and political aspects were addressed after Aachen's vice mayor Margrethe Schmeer provocatively asked in her greeting words: "Do living labs sometimes lead to the postponement of political decisions?"

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From an epistemic point of view, it was eye-opening to see how LLs influence traditional research, how transformative change is formed and forged in LLs and how the combination and integration of different types of knowledge can yield unexpected findings.

Further information

Conference website: https://www.humtec.rwth-aachen.de/cms/HUMTEC/Das-Projekthaus/Veranstaltungen/~beybdh/Save-the-Date-Internationale-Konferenz/

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