

Conference explores sustainability tensions, opportunities in Africa

Seedbeds of Transformation: The Role of Science with Society and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Africa was held 9-11 May at the Boardwalk Hotel in Port Elizabeth, hosted by Future Earth, the South African Government Department of Science and Technology, the National Research Foundation of South Africa, and START.



Seedbeds of Transformation Conference. Photo: [Mark West/Future Earth/Flickr](#)

Over 300 researchers, practitioners, industry leaders, policymakers, and others recently participated in the highly interactive landmark conference at which discussions on tensions and opportunities towards sustainability in the context of Africa were held.

The main message from the conference “for a future earth we need” was to “claim Africa’s power, identities and knowledge as central to sustainability and social justice”. Twelve areas of action were identified collectively by all the participants in a bottom-up process. It involved a plenary that overarched day two and three and dived deep into an African perspective on ‘dancing’ with tensions, contradictions and opportunities in the implementation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Some of the areas of action were:

- Centring values and ethics: centring SDGs around the whole human, acknowledge norms that are oppressive in doing sustainability work.
- Valuing long-term processes and dialogue: instead of supporting goals, support value-supporting processes.
- Transforming cultures of research: change the way research questions are made, reimagine universities, and reinterpret SDGs from a user’s perspective.
- Re-framing taken-for-granted definitions: lack of focus on human well-being, should be focusing not on problems but on opportunities, do research that not only complies but also challenges how transformations in Africa are codified.

During the final plenary where these above action points were elaborated, the facilitators encouraged all participants to contribute by explaining specific ideas and examples per each action point.



Incorporation of art

The Seedbeds of Transformation conference was unique in its incorporation of art. Eight local street artists were present throughout the three days and pitched ideas on how to use their artwork to interpret transformations towards a sustainable society. An artist was selected by a panel of judges to receive a R10,000 grant to make their ideas a reality. Samkela Stamper from Grahamstown was the finalist and the grant will be used to empower local women to make art in a community centre.

Another feature of the conference was the presence of early-career researchers and changemakers. Thirty-five early career researchers were selected from around the continent and gathered to network, work together on a tangible publication from the conference, and even lead sessions.

Overall the conference was a huge success in bringing together a diverse range of participants together in a highly interactive, participatory, and innovative conference on how to bring about transformations in the African continent towards sustainable development.

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