



The Meaning of Engaged Scholarship and Transdisciplinary Research:

MALMON Lessons

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Good morning! Thanks to all who are together with us today. Many thanks to António and Patrick for your speech and to Sónia for all her support in the Workshop organization.

I would like to express our gratitude to the European Union for funding such a non-mainstream project; indeed, the 1st DeSIRA program allowed us to do an ongoing adaptation of goals and approaches and even of the budget. Many thanks go to Pablo Leunda and Pascal Dabord who recognized the specificities of Malmon and helped us through the process of self-monitoring and evaluation.

Very special thanks go to Paul Richards who has been an inspiration throughout my career and to Malmon students and farmer-researchers who made this project possible and transformed it into an exciting journey.

Special thanks extend to the formal or informal supervisors and scientific advisors who visited the rice fields and got muddied to their bones: Paul Struik, Paco Peinadas, Jeroen Vos, Pablo Leunda and Bela Teeken. I would like to remember the late Professor Sjoerd van der Tzee who was a great supporter of the project and who helped us even when he was very ill.

To all the volunteers who collaborated, namely to As One and Vasco Araújo, many thanks from our heart.

To Marie-Yvonne, Raul, Dominic, António, Albert thanks a lot for having accepted to come and take part in the workshop. Unfortunately, the usual difficulties for African scholars to come to Europe applied this time too, and Raul did not get his visa on time to join us.

My talk addresses the way in which we gave meaning to the concepts “engaged scholarship” and “transdisciplinary” R4D.

Mangrove swamp rice cultivation is practised along the Upper Guinea Coast, but at present only in Guinea-Bissau are farmers still investing and innovating in this high labour-, time- and knowledge-intensive, but also risk-prone production system.

Rice fields are created after the slashing of mangroves and the building of earthen dikes, and the soils are susceptible to salinization and acidification; therefore, rice production is extremely vulnerable to the increasingly irregular precipitation and mounting temperatures. Sea level rise and stronger waves and tides due to climate change also contribute to frequent dike ruptures, the invasion of brackish water, which could ultimately result to crop failure.

MSR farming is so rooted in endogenous knowledge that very few externally introduced innovations have had a positive impact. The only exception has been the provision of PVC tubes to act as dischargers, but even academic hydraulic knowledge did not prove to be superior to endogenous knowledge in most development interventions (e.g., Temudo and Abrantes, 2013). Farmers frequently complain that their knowledge has not been heard.

Around twenty years ago, I started noticing a major social change among the Balanta of Guinea-Bissau – the main mangrove swamp rice farmers in terms of demography and cereal production (Temudo and Abrantes, 2015).

Contrary to the previous generations who believed that formal education would “deskill” – as Glover and Sumberg (2025) would put it – the agricultural labour force, the new cohort of household heads wanted their children to go to school.

This paradigm shift was illustrated through the way fathers advertised to their neighbours the birth of a male child. Traditionally, this was done with the outdoor hanging of a plough and a rope used to steal cattle (**Figure 1**). Instead, a sheet of paper written with letters and numbers or a plough and a pen with or without a paper became the new symbols of an imagined future (**Figure 2**).



Figure 1. The plough and the rope to steal cattle.



Figure 2. The plough and the pen.

But this came to be a curse! There were few rural schools, and most children had to study far away from their home villages becoming “deskilled” in relation to both agricultural work practices and ethics, leaving their parents more vulnerable to climate change and rising labour costs. The expected remittances never materialized due to the absence of job opportunities in the urban areas.

Paradoxically, those who returned home and adopted a diversified livelihood, having farming as one among multiple income sources, did not use the “pen” to better plan their activities and

achieve an improved agricultural performance, although they kept on innovating through the introduction of new varieties and new cultivation and water management techniques.

The Malmon project initial design was rooted in a long-term ethnographic study of mangrove swamp rice farmers', farming and livelihoods' transformations, having a team constituted by 30 young farmers-researchers, 10 senior farmers, and a group of engaged researchers. Its aim was not to develop and transfer technologies allegedly fitted for farmers; instead, it intended to help them reflect upon their problems, identify knowledge gaps and maladjusted practices in the face of abrupt climate and social changes, and to co-develop with them possible solutions. Thus, the title "*Science with*" of this workshop.

However, considering that solutions might be transitory when unforeseen changes are taking place, the ultimate goal of the Malmon project was to build on local knowledge, skills and creativity and train young farmers to be full scientists and extensionists on their own, able to promote collective mobilization and to contest maladjusted and unwanted external interventions. Malmon provided new tools – among which tablets (**Figure 3**), solar panels and internet access – and a monthly subsidy to allow them to dedicate some time to research.



Figure 3. The plough and the tablet.

When abrupt changes become a process of constantly unexpected events, farmers self-awareness of the need to transform their practices and the social organization of production might be incomplete; hence their need for a transdisciplinary approach (e.g., Max-Neef, 2005;

Lang et al, 2012) involving engaged researchers, to stimulate joint reflexion, learning and experimentation to find solutions.

But engaged how and what is the true meaning of transdisciplinarity in the context of co-production of agronomic knowledge and innovations?

“Political Agronomy” (Sumberg, Thompson and Woodhouse, 2019) taught us that knowledge and technologies are not neutral, and agricultural research is embedded in power relations that shape and are shaped by politics. Thus, one might believe to be engaged in putting an end to poverty in Africa through a New Green Revolution. Or, on the contrary, one might be aware of the social and environmental negative consequences of the first Green Revolution and of the corporate food regime (e.g., McMichael, 2005) created by capitalism and advocate that poverty eradication and climate change mitigation can only be achieved by supporting smallholder agriculture and Food Sovereignty (e.g., Grey and Patel, 2015) and, thus, by adopting Agroecology as a practice, a science and a political movement (e.g., Wezel et al., 2009).

Accordingly, the first challenge the foreign research team had to face was to achieve at least a partial, initial consensus about the meaning of sustainable technological change in smallholder agriculture. Researchers had then to accept to “disconnect” themselves from their prior technical training that made them believe their knowledge to be superior and could solve farmers problems; at the same time, they had to reskill themselves in social sciences research methods – namely ethnography (Jansen and Vellema, 2011) – to be able to understand and esteem farmers’ knowledge, practices, rationality, priorities, needs and values.

Today’s presentations will show that this “disconnection” and reskilling process also entailed a “role reversal” (Chambers, 1996) in which external researchers had to accept that farmers’ knowledge and practices might be superior to their own in their contexts and that they had to learn from them before being able to make research proposals to be jointly discussed and eventually tested. But to be able to conceive research proposals, they had to surgically retrieve bits and pieces of their academic knowledge potentially useful in knowledge hybridization to be tested in solving given farmers’ problems.

However, students faced not only knowledge interfaces but also clashes of lifeworlds and cosmologies. Farmers’ witchcraft beliefs and accusations were a major cultural challenge, but what drove them frequently to despair was the need to deal with different notions of time, and a ritual calendar and unexpected ceremonies that conflicted with previously co-planned activities.

Another challenge had to do with the meaning of participation in the framework of a “Farmer First and Last” paradigm (Chambers and Ghildyal, 1984). We tend to believe that power imbalances in the context of knowledge interfaces only occur between foreign actors (either researchers or extensionists) and farmers.

But when they occur among farmers of different ethnolinguistic groups during Participatory Action Research exercises, how should external researchers act? What should be our role when a group of farmers state that their knowledge, practices and even work ethics are superior to farmers belonging to another group and this leads to high tensions preventing the possibility of knowledge co-production? An ethical dilemma arises: Should we step back and let them solve their differences or should we try to understand both perspectives and act as facilitators? We chose the latter and sometimes we had to “retrieve” / “reconnect with” our academic knowledge to be able to provide explanations to their conflicting views. You can find many examples of these in our publications and in some of this workshop’s presentations and videos.

The presentations will also illustrate that reflexivity (e.g., Palaganas et al., 2017) and a flexible process approach were used to create a holistic, bottom-up, and imaginative methodology for participatory action research. Transdisciplinary collaboration requires constantly analysing the way in which we shape the research process and results and how we have been changed by it; it requires valuing the diverse and dynamic farmers’ knowledge while empowering them as scientific contributors and agents. For us, collaboration opened arenas of friction, tension and dialogue but, more importantly, it created spaces for mutual learning on different levels (Temudo, Sandoval, Leunda et al, 2024).

Our engagement was manifested in transdisciplinary research for co-producing new knowledge directed at identifying transformative solutions, in the writing of articles in support of social struggles aimed at creating social and environmental justice (Temudo and Cabral, 2021), in giving a platform for local Balanta and Felupe/Baiote hydraulic specialists to display their knowledge and make critiques to maladjusted external interventions, and in fundraising campaigns to rebuild primary schools and nurseries, pay for poor children schools’ fees and supplies, provide football equipment and even in the rebuilding a major dike in a village abandoned to climate extremes by the state and civil society organizations.

Malmon core team was constituted by young and senior farmers and researchers, who had both shared and their own private agenda, their own “lifeworlds” (Long and Long, 1992), their own dreams but even so we all worked together as peers to recreate ourselves as better professionals and better human beings and to make the world a fairer place. For us “engaged scholarship”

meant prolonged field stays and creating friendship and trust relations with the farmers whose knowledge, practices, needs, goals and values we studied with the aim of co-producing with them new solutions to their problems, while being aware of and continuously reflecting about power imbalances and social differences. While concerned with academic advancement, this engagement meant that our outputs did not only advance scientific knowledge, but above all could be used to improve the daily lives of farmers with whom we shared our lives.

Some seeds of change have been sown among farmers and junior researchers. But for these seeds to sprout and flourish, 'science with' requires more than the effort of engaged individuals — it demands structural change. It needs financial systems and intellectual spaces that genuinely support this way of thinking and doing. Donors, institutions, and R4D agendas must move beyond buzzwords and commit to ethical practice, skilled craft, and mutual reciprocity.

Thank you!

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