



GLAMURS – Green Lifestyles, Alternative Models and Upscaling Regional Sustainability. Case Study Exchange

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Abstract. In the period of 17–20 June 2015, the West University of Timișoara hosted the GLAMURS – Green Lifestyles, Alternative Models and Upscaling Regional Sustainability – Case Study Exchange Conference. For four days, practitioners from a variety of social innovation and sustainability initiatives throughout Europe and researchers interested in the interdisciplinary value of the sustainability movement gathered to explore how the said initiatives can inform each other and how academic research can contribute to the development of the sustainability movement. As the conference began with a five-minute meditation, the event was in itself an exploration of the value of time and space in supporting green sustainable lifestyles in a variety of environments from home, through public squares, and to the university.

Keywords: GLAMURS, green lifestyles, sustainability

The Green Lifestyles, Alternative Models and Upscaling Regional Sustainability GLAMURS¹ – Case Study Exchange conference, which took place in Timișoara, Romania, between June 17 and 20, 2015, is one of the many steps made by individuals, communities, and institutions in Europe for the transition towards sustainable lifestyles and green economies. GLAMURS started as a project aiming to facilitate communication at the regional and European level for sustainable initiatives and economic models. As the event gathered civic initiatives, green development organizations and research institutes as part of the project at the West University of Timișoara, GLAMURS facilitated the convergence of social innovation initiatives with the scientific community in order to explore the

¹ For more details, please visit: <http://www.glamurs.eu/>.

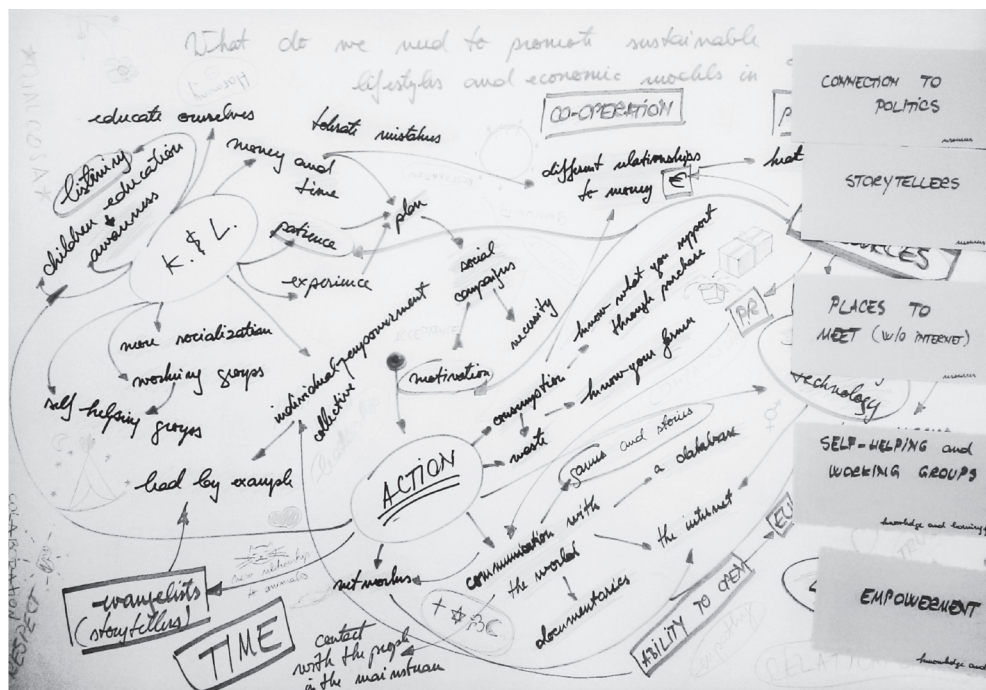
possibilities, opportunities, and challenges for transitions to occur. The main goals of the exchange were to explore the main directions in designing and developing sustainable future policies starting at local level, based on the current experience of the participants, which could be then elaborated into scientific models as possible solutions to the current global industrial capitalism paradigm. A secondary goal that emerged during the working sessions was to bridge the gap between the members of the civic society, working on social, environmental, and economic innovation, and the academic researchers interested in developing models of social change.

During the first two days of the workshop, pioneers of sustainability from six European regions – Galicia in Spain, Banat in Romania, Rotterdam-Delft-The Hague in Netherlands, Lazio in Italy, Danube Bohemian Forest in Austria, and Central Germany – together with researchers from the Sustainable Research Institute in Vienna, Universidade da Coruna in Spain, and West University in Timișoara worked towards the development of conceptual maps of changes required in a future society oriented towards sustainable development in several areas of the social fabric: research and education, resources and consumption, economic and financial models. These maps were developed drawing, on the one hand, on the practical experience of the participating sustainability initiatives and, on the other hand, on concepts such as the value of time as a qualitative dimension of society, the economy of the commons, the participatory culture of co-operation, sharing, and community. The sessions were held on the premises of the West University of Timișoara and were quite innovative in their formats. The academic environment of the university proved flexible and dynamic enough in order to accommodate the non-formal method of World Café.² This method is a simple, yet effective format that hosts dialogues in large groups. Active listening, the search for patterns and insights, diversity of perspectives, the exploration of questions that matter to the participants are some of the principles that World Cafés are based on. It was an excellent experience to witness the efficiency of such a non-formal method put at good use and good work in the formal academic environment.

The 45 participants worked in small groups of 5, on different conceptual maps. Each of these explored the question ‘What do we need to promote sustainable lifestyles and economic models in Europe?’ In the first round, the working groups explored the value and the potential of Knowledge and Learning to guide the search for the answer. For the second round, the groups shifted to a different conceptual map and explored possible answers considering the value and the potential of Resources that are currently available in Europe and those that might be further necessary. As *Figure 1* shows, the harvest of the results was creative and demonstrated the high productivity of the World Café. The groups were asked to draw the concept maps on flipchart papers, having complete freedom on

2 For detailed information, please visit: <http://www.theworldcafe.com/>.

how they understood the drawing. We are, indeed, looking forward to seeing how the research team of GLAMURS uses this valuable and rich data.



Graph 1. Concept map on ‘What do we need to promote sustainable lifestyles and green economies in Europe?’

© GLAMURS. Picture taken by Adela Fofiu

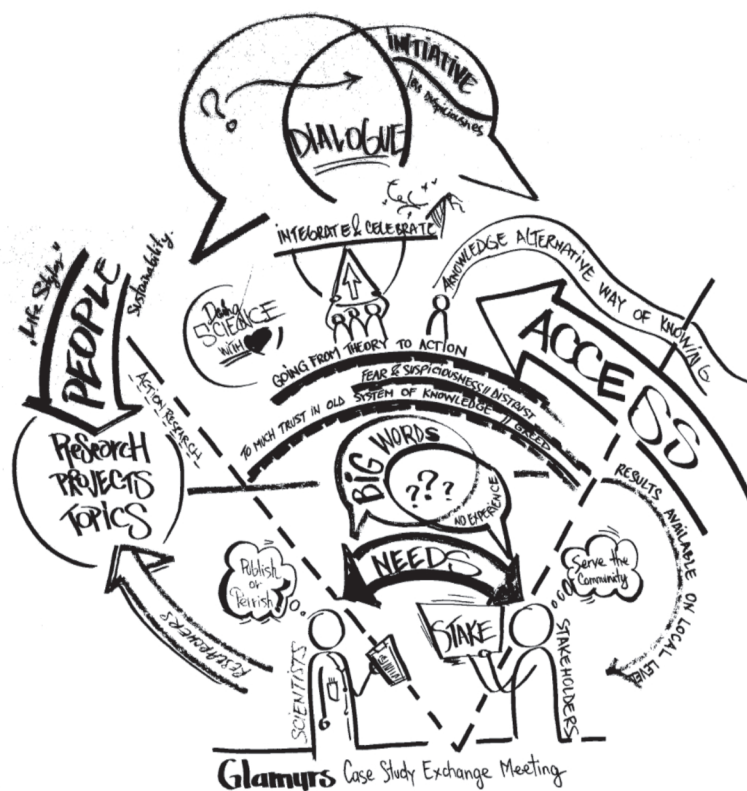
Still, the second World Café was the key point of the gathering: the meaningful question that this session started from was ‘In what way scientists and researchers, on the one hand, and practitioners and stakeholders, on the other, can inform and support each other in promoting sustainable lifestyles and economic models in Europe?’. In the first round of the Café, the participating researchers worked separately from the rest of the participants. In the second round, each researcher joined a table with practitioners. The discussions were intense and very welcome. The format of the Café was safe and friendly enough to allow emotions and interpersonal dynamics to emerge. In this sense, the participants had the capacity and the context to explore deep, meaningful aspects of their work for sustainable futures, discussing not only productivity and efficiency, but also comfort, motivation, and hope. This session brought to light rich opinions that the academia is working isolated from the larger society and it is also compelled, lately, to follow efficiency models that rather stem from business models than from

the scientific interest in examining the objective reality. As a result, the actual research on current models of socio-economic innovation, albeit important for a future sustainable society, is insufficiently rewarded by the academic standards of evaluation. Even more so, as the practitioners and stakeholders stated, the spiritual aspects of livelihoods, the emotional implications of lifestyles guided by the neoliberal values of profit, success, competition, and various alternative ways of knowing the world and living in the world (alternative to the mainstream individualist capitalist model) are insufficiently explored as such a pursuit would be both inefficient and indeterminable. The discussion revealed the necessity of incorporating more psychosocial variables, such as spirituality and the dynamics of emotions in research, as research topics and even as elements of better research designs. Moreover, the practitioners expressed their interest in the reorientation of research, especially social, anthropological, economic, and psychological research, from the predominant quantitative approach towards qualitative methodologies, as these were perceived as more human and less technical, more in depth and less descriptive, more complex and diverse in searching solutions to the current crisis in quite relevant social models for the change towards sustainability.

The next day, the group visited a local sustainability initiative in Stanciova, near Timișoara, where the first part of the day was dedicated to learning about the eco-village and the community experiences of one of the oldest intentional communities in Romania. In the second part of the day, the group used another non-formal method: the Open Space Technology.³ This technology allows to the participants that subjects of great significance, which were not touched upon during the organized sessions, to be brought to the attention of the larger group. The subjects discussed were varied and challenging: from the value of time in a fast society to the preservation of the virgin forest ecosystems still standing in Europe, particularly in Eastern Europe. The process was a success as more than 10 workshops were offered on 2 sessions, each with harvests that were gathered for the later use of the GLAMURS researchers.

On June 20, the exchange continued with a general presentation of the harvest for the whole process, with the help of a very talented graphical reporter, continued by a sharing circle aimed at projecting future events and new gathering opportunities for the members of the group, acting now as a small trans-local community.

3 For detailed information, please visit: <http://www.openspaceworld.org>.



Graph 2. What researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders need from each other to promote sustainability in Europe. © GLAMURS. Author Adrian Popa, graphic recorder.

As a general review of the event, we were quite impressed with the efficiency and level of individual motivation and involvement of the non-formal methods and techniques, creatively used in academic and non-academic settings in order to bring together 45 people from different cultures, languages, and initiatives. The horizontality of the group, the empowerment of the participants to lead, develop, or propose alternative subjects for the discussions and debates, the sense of open safe spaces, and the opportunities to express emotions, not only thoughts, favoured the coagulation of the group as a small sample of a future sustainable, green, and ecological society. The combination of all these methods for the actual researching of how people and groups envision and work for sustainable futures shed a different light on how science, especially in the humanities and social sciences, can work for the greater good. This is why, in terms of social change and social design, the incorporation of practical experiences in the scientific research was determined to be one of the leading strategies towards producing viable

systemic models for sustainability. The inclusion of different ways of knowing, such as traditional wisdom, intuitive learning, and inner search, should become more frequent in the scientifically accepted research methodologies, together with a greater value offered to qualitative research. Also, the evaluation of the efficiency in the research process should be rethought, giving more resources to exploring the marginal, the liminal, and the alternative.

Such conversations regarding the value of scientific research and the openness of the western academic community are not new. They might be new in the Romanian academic context, but the ivory tower has been an important topic for decades, if not more, each time that academia, politics, economy, and the civil society intersect. How can each of these actors and processes better inform and support mutually? The conversations that the GLAMURS case study exchange facilitated were very similar in scope and nuance with what Professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls epistemologies of the South. De Sousa Santos asserts that the developments of social and political theory in the western academic environment are entirely European, highly determined culturally, being thus irrelevant for the Global South. The presuppositions of western social theory are not universally valid. In this sense, the knowledge developed by the western way of doing science is criticized as less objective, definitely not universally true, and a rather subjective experience of the world (Sousa Santos 2012). In this sense, the western scientific practices need to open up to exploring alternative epistemologies, to exploring other ways of knowing the world. The epistemologies of the South invite us all to regard the hegemonic knowledges of the Global North with different eyes and to develop a new ethical and epistemological framework of doing science, which would allow for the emergence of a larger, more nuanced, and more intercultural sociological imagination. The team of GLAMURS has created a temporary utopia on the premises of the West University of Timișoara, where researchers and practitioners have been able to bridge their worlds and to transfer meaningful knowledge from their direct experiences – a timely experience that we wish to see happening more often for the promotion of sustainability and futures of hope. What is the purpose of doing science if not serving the greater good?

References

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