GROW Community Event 2025: Engaging with Your Context as a Researcher

Looking back on the GROW Community Event 2025, we can confidently say it was a memorable third edition! On 15 and 16 May, more than 75 PhD candidates, along with dozens of staff and researchers from 11 Dutch universities, gathered in Elspeet to explore research innovation, transdisciplinary collaboration, and global development, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. The central theme this year was: *Engaging with your context as a researcher*.

Our Steering Committee Chair, Professor Nick van de Giesen (TU Delft), opened the event with a warm welcome and a brief introduction to the GROW initiative. This was followed by an inspiring keynote from Professor Jacqueline Broerse of the Athena Institute at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, who introduced the concept of transdisciplinarity by addressing the complexity of wicked problems and the challenges of achieving transformative change.

Science-based innovation can be a powerful catalyst for change, but transdisciplinary collaboration is essential for creating real-world impact. “We need to approach these challenges with a different mindset, one of curiosity. However, this will not be easy: controversy is central to system transformation; conflict is part of dealing with wicked problems.” Professor Broerse emphasised that engagement and participation by all relevant stakeholders during the research phase is crucial to achieving meaningful impact. Tools such as stakeholder mapping can be invaluable in navigating the complex realities often encountered in international Sustainable Development Goal contexts.

In the workshops that followed, led by Dr Nora Engel and Dr Dirk Essink - both from the Athena Institute - participants were trained in transdisciplinary project design.

Just before dinner, the learnings from the workshops were discussed in a plenary session with a panel of non-academic representatives from research funding, government and industry. Martijn Wienia (Dutch Research Council – NWO), Amal Ali (Somaliland Ministry of Health), and Dr Monica Camarena (Weather Consult BV) shared their perspectives on the challenges of transdisciplinary collaboration.

“There is a disconnect between research and practice,” said Ali. “Both the academic researcher and the public official think they are the domain expert, but they don’t talk or listen to each other. Academics don’t want to get involved in politics. But governments will weigh political consequences when deciding whether or not to implement science-based findings or solutions. If you don’t have an understanding of finance and how much things cost, the research will end up in the garbage.”

The panel also addressed the importance of recognising power dynamics in research implementation. Those who fund research often hold the power to implement it.

Governments across African countries are at different stages of development, e.g. in Somaliland, the private sector is stronger than the public sector. Understanding these dynamics is essential. Researchers must learn to balance alignment with civic society priorities and the outcomes of their research. The panel agreed that ownership of research implementation must lie with civic society representatives, and that African countries must take greater leadership. Research funding agencies also have a role to play. “Proposals for funding are mainly developed for Europeans,” said Camarena. “They should be developed for African researchers as well. A proposal is also a cultural set-up.”

Professor Dr Thea Hilhorst (ISS – Erasmus University Rotterdam), lead of the new NWO-NWA-funded Climares project, closed the first day with an invigorating keynote on people-centred research in a world of conflict. She introduced the field of humanitarian studies as the study of societies in crisis and stressed the importance of focusing on the capabilities of affected communities, rather than solely on external actors such as aid organisations and NGOs. “Ultimately, people help people themselves, and we should understand these dynamics,” she said.

At the same time, she warned against romanticising resilience. “In crises, many people die, because not everyone copes. It’s not romantic. In the face of all current crises, we cannot expect communities to manage if we would just ‘unlock their resilience’.”

The Climares project focuses on how societies respond to climate change, with a strong emphasis on advocacy. Professor Hilhorst called for a renewed appreciation of negotiation between societies and especially between the Global North and Global South. “Negotiation includes co-creation and looking for win-wins, whereas we seem to be moving towards a global community based on transactional bargaining. As an international community of co-creating, SDG-oriented researchers, we must keep our co-creation dreams alive.”

As a former peace activist, she also reflected critically on today’s global priorities: “Nowadays it is all about military and steel. But shouldn’t the focus stay on peace? Investing in peace is still worthwhile and in fact, much cheaper than investing in war. What my generation has forgotten… we didn’t teach new generations about human rights, and now they are taken for granted, as something from the past. It is taught in high school, minimally, and only in history classes. We have forgotten to pass on our values, including international humanitarian law.”

After Professor Hilhorst’s uplifting words and her thought-provoking framing of how we as a research community can contribute to a better world, participants enjoyed an informal buffet dinner and lively conversations. There was also time for some light-hearted fun such

as playing table tennis or foosball, or tracking down missing names on the “Participants Bingo Card”.

Day Two: From Methodologies to Meaningful Dialogue

Friday’s programme began with inspiring examples of existing transdisciplinary projects from Eindhoven University of Technology and the University of Groningen. Later we also learned received presentations from five of the new GROW PhD candidates, who introduced the project scopes they are currently developing.

The rest of the morning was dedicated to interactive workshops, where participants explored methodologies that connect research with real-world challenges and learned how to engage people meaningfully within research projects. Professor Ajay Bailey, Dr Seama Mowri, and Dr Divya Patil (all from Utrecht University) led a session on the role of Evidence and Gap Mapping (EGM) in assessing progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Dr Harissan Awy (Utrecht University) facilitated a workshop on civic engagement, while Guus Wiersma, MSc (African Water Corridor), and Dr Monica Camarena (Weather Consult BV) shared insights on student engagement in research. Dr Maurits Ertsen and Dr Valeria Martinez Rodriguez (TU Delft, Water Management) introduced the Q-sort methodology, using interdisciplinary research as a test case.

Participants highly appreciated the concrete and practical nature of the workshops, which offered tools and approaches they could directly apply in their own work.

In the afternoon, a panel discussion on “The Effects of Current Aid Cutbacks in Africa” brought together esteemed speakers: Victorya Manya (PhD candidate at Leiden University), Carola Baller (Deputy Director of International Affairs at VNO-NCW and MKB Nederland), and Jorrit Oppewal (Council Adviser, International Development Committee at AIV). The discussion centred on the consequences of these cutbacks, framed by the provocative question: *Are they a curse or a blessing in disguise for African countries?*

The conversation sparked strong engagement from the audience. Much emphasis was placed on the accountability of governments and civic society in strengthening their own systems. While the cutbacks may cause immediate harm to the most vulnerable, the panelists argued that African countries possess the talent and resources to shape their own futures—without being overly influenced by external funders and their agendas. External (financial) support can still play a role, but national policies should take the lead. In this context, North–South and South–South collaborations in e.g. research, trade, and security could become more equitable and mutually beneficial.

This discussion resonated deeply with one of the core values of the GROW programme: we aim to create more than research outcomes. We strive to build lasting, equitable

relationships throughout the research process. We treat one another with dignity and reciprocity. True understanding is essential if we are to work together in a transdisciplinary manner and address the world's most complex and urgent challenges.