

Interdisciplinary German-South African Symposium:

Socio-Ecological Novelty – Frontiers in Sustainability Research

18. – 20.03.2013 in Berlin, Germany

Topic & Chairs

The German-South African Year of Science 2012 was dedicated to "Project Earth: Our Future" to stimulate joint research in sustainable development. In the workshop "Socio-Ecological Novelty" young scientists from a diversity of backgrounds and linked to the Junge Akademie, the South African Young Academy of Science (SAYAS) and the Global Young Academy (GYA) tried to rethink the topic of sustainability in the frame of emerging research topics related to novel futures. Prof. Anke Jentsch (Alumna Junge Akademie), Prof. Dr. Bernard Slippers (SAYAS), Dr. Caradee Wright (SAYAS), Prof. Dr. Rees Kassen (GYA) and Dr. Silja Klepp (Junge Akademie) chaired the workshop. It was co-hosted by the senior academies German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), and received its funding by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the German Research Foundation.

Discussion

We proceeded from the view that sustainability which focuses on indefinite availability of resources to preserve historical societal needs (preserving the past) is often outdated. There is a growing realization that we are confronted with novel, unpredictable futures both ecologically and socially, and their respective interaction. The emergence of socio-ecological novelties challenges social structures and hierarchies and requires a different frame of reference/thinking to respond and identify novel topics in sustainability research. Through seven panels organized around different topics such as "Novel ecosystems, biological invasion, ecosystem engineers", "Agricultural food production vis à vis sustainability and distribution challenges", and "Socio-ecological resilience and sustainable adaptation to climate change", a vibrant, interdisciplinary discussion on novel socio-ecological challenges took place.

Outcomes

Major aspects of our debates were that we need a new perspective that overcomes the prevalent division of Nature and Society that affects our thinking, our research and our policies. The broad occurrence of socio-ecological novelties, as well as the increasingly rapid and unpredictable changes that it will bring, challenges social structures and requires a different frame of thinking to respond effectively as a society. This necessarily includes different layers of engagement, from global justice to local relevance, and the need and challenges of interdisciplinary research. A book on science-policy relevance from all sessions and a scientific manuscript on emerging research frontiers for an international peer-reviewed journal are in the making.

Panel discussion

In the evening of March 19, a well-received public panel discussion and reception took place in the Französische Friedrichstadtkirche: "Bridging Two Hemispheres: Policy Advice and Sustainability Research in Germany and South Africa" (see flyer). After presenting the outcomes of our workshop, the panel discussion took a closer look on science-society relationships and the responsibilities of science.

Workshop on Young Academies

On March 20 we closed our workshop with a wider reflection on the work and the success of young academies worldwide. We had a vibrant exchange of experiences, discussing how to include members in the work of young academies effectively, how to work together interdisciplinarily, and how to increase the outreach of young academies locally and globally. Beside the members of SAYAS, GYA and Junge Akademie, also Prof. Dr. Daya Reddy (President of ASSAf), Mrs. Dorothy Ngila (Liaison Officer of ASSAf), Prof. Dr. Jörg Hacker (President of Leopoldina), Prof. Dr. Jutta Schnitzer-Ungefug (Secretary General of Leopoldina) and Dr. Marina Koch-Krumrei (Head of the Department of International Relations at Leopoldina) attended and contributed valuable perspectives of the senior academies on the further development of young academies.

(Silja Klepp)