

## **Workshop Resources, Infrastructures and the Anthropocene: Dialogues between the Global-North and the Global-South**

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### **Wrap Up of Workshop Contributions and Discussions**

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It is a very difficult task to wrap-up rich and diverse discussions and do justice to all contributions and the great number of good ideas, important arguments and many thoughtful considerations. My small summarizing account will necessarily be a subjective and personal summary and I will by far not be able to mention all contributors to our rich discussions. I suggest that four keywords, indeed for c-words all starting with the letter c, characterize the discussions and ambitions well: **connections**, **concepts**, **cases**, **collaboration** and **challenges**.

**Connections** was a key idea and thread to all discussions; **connections** of people from different continents and countries, different disciplines and cultural backgrounds, different **concepts** and methodologies, different literatures and discourses, etc. It was the very rationale of the workshop to invite a significant number of scholars from the Global South, seek “Dialogues between the Global-North and the Global-South”, as the workshop title announced, and help establish links between scholars of both hemispheres. I am very grateful that all of you took the effort to join this workshop and experiment, and I am especially grateful to all our guests from Africa, South America and Asia to join this endeavour and help us start to appreciate better our “northern” glasses, biases and restricted views. It was probably the first time in my life that I had personal conversations with colleagues from four different continents within the first hour of a workshop.

I would also like to thank all participants for the comments and ideas you sent ahead of the conference, which included many interesting and good ideas. Interestingly, an additional scope of the workshop emerged in these comments, as several participants emphasized the additional interest in a (so far largely lacking) South-South Dialogue. To a degree, we accomplished both, starting a North-South as well as a South-South Dialogue. The workshop with its strong focus on various small group discussions and plenary rounds was an experiment. It was also a first to me to engage in intensive work with a majority of participants (maybe 80 percent) as well as most of their fields of expertise unknown to me. Would this arrangement work and prove effective and useful? The dialogue we entered was, in fact, most enlightening and fruitful to me. The discussions were lively, productive and went extraordinarily well.

On the first day, the first paper by Erik van der Vleuten (Eindhoven, The Netherlands) and his group effectively set the stage by outlining the grand ambition: creating **connections** and discussing some of the

many **challenges** it entails for the case of their innovative and ambitious research project. The [GREASE](#) project pioneers in thinking domains together, which are usually conceived as separate: global resource flows and global sustainability. This project opened big questions and large spaces which we need attempt to bridge: How to **connect** different places and situated experiences? How to **connect** infrastructure and sustainability histories? How to **connect** sustainability measurement and historical research? How to **connect** research on resource flows and reflections on our own knowledge politics?

**Concepts** turned out another central issue that the discussions of the first day brought to the fore. Both Maria Paula Diogo (Lisbon, Portugal) and Nelson Arrelano-Escudero (Santiago, Chile) helped to break open some of the simplifying northern discourse hegemonies as represented for example in a powerful **concept** such as the *Anthropocene*. For all the global traction it inspired, we need to be aware that the **concept** *Anthropocene* is a western invention, coined by a western white man, atmospheric scientists and Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen. While it certainly has inspired a lot of important debate, it also contributes to colonizing our (and other) minds with western notions of environmental change, misguided development and global responsibility.

Maria Paula emphasized the emergence of the progress narrative and its relations to the naturalization of “western” technology and the commodification of nature. She argued that we need to **connect** the technological shaping of new landscapes to the ideological shaping of new mindscapes. Nelson similarly invited us to pay attention to the ideological frameworks constituted by western ideas, namely technological fantasies and technological fix. Both rightly questioned the levelling down and flatness of such a grand-scale **concept** as the *Anthropocene*, which has its value in raising attention to the human impacts on the environment and on geophysical systems, but which at the same time lacks historical depth, as Maria Paula argued, as well as cultural and geographical differentiation, as Nelson showed.

Similarly, we struggle with **concepts** such as *modernization*, *modernity* and *development*. All these **concepts** are of western origin. I would be curious to know what the languages of the South would be, coined by scholars from the South. One offer from South America was the term Sudaka. We should keep it in mind and explore – **connect** to – such **concepts** of the South.

The discussions of the first day revealed clearly the **conceptual** complications. What is the Global-North and the Global-South? Is there a clear-cut distinction between “exploiters” and the “exploited”? While we as scholars (think we) are experienced with reflecting such simplifying dualities and divides and used to the call of overcoming them, we still use them, and, I suspect, too often fall prey to its alluring simplifications. So, what do these terms or denotations mean? What biases and loads do they carry? And in what ways are these **concepts** understood differently by different people and raise different ideas and emotions? Susana Carmona Castillo from Colombia (now Bochum) told us that in the perception of the local people at the coal mine, she was investigating in her native country, she was seen as a representative of the Global North. I found Jonas van der Straeten’s (Darmstadt) suggestion useful to avoid pursuing our research with the idea or **concept** of or even focus on an *asymmetry* between (former) colonizers and (former) colonized as a general starting point, which often simply leads to the confirmation of the premise of an asymmetry and leads to a circular argument. Such approaches possibly exclude interesting new

perspectives and narratives. How do our colleagues from Africa, Asia and South America think about this suggestion?

The **concepts** we often use without many thoughts proved ambiguous in many ways. Joseph Mangarella (Leiden, The Netherlands) asked: What does the **concept *connectedness*** mean? He referred to the condition that many **connections** (unlike those pointed out by Erik) are not visible but rather hidden. How can we see and explore, or avoid missing, invisible links? Likewise, the question turned up what the **concept *sustainability*** means, if we investigate it through the lens of “situated experience”, as Erik suggested, or through the lens of “measureable indicators”, as Frank Veraart (Eindhoven, The Netherlands) explained.

Furthermore, to emphasize the complexity of the **conceptual challenge**, the question came up how we can account for and make explicit our own politics of knowledge, the construction of perceptions and meanings and the deliberate or undeliberate support of (hidden?) interests and agendas. The heated discussion of Per Högselius’ (Stockholm, Sweden) excellent exposition of the **concept *resource transnationalism*** during the last day clearly illustrated that point and, in addition, reflected the ambiguities and sensitivities **conceptual** work involves. Per meant to suggest exploring a new, much neglected perspective to add to the standard narratives of exploitative, competitive global resource extraction, namely the transnational **collaborative** element that is often involved and enhances **connection**, mutual understanding and maybe even peaceful relations. This approach, on the other hand, quickly raised suspicions of a revisionist agenda in the interpretation of global resource exploitation that, even if not intended, could invite misuse and misinterpretation.

**Cases** was a keyword for the keynotes and discussions of the second day. Aarthi Sridhar (Bangalore, India, and Amsterdam, The Netherlands), in her keynote on fishery science in India, provided a concise formulation for the focus of much discussion of this day. She emphasized “crisis as an important historical site for investigation”. Crises – economic, environmental, social – can serve as a magnifying glass for exploring the **connections** of political intricacies and conspirations, environmental conditions and risks and local **challenges** and burdens deriving from it. Inês Macamo Raimundo (Maputo, Mozambique), in her keynote about the impacts of climate change on the Lower Limpopo Valley, provided a very interesting and useful local example that helped to focus discussion. Local **cases**, the discussion showed, allow developing a sufficiently fine-grained picture to deepen our understanding of the issues at stake. Aarthi’s **case**, on the other hand, gave a rich insight into science-state relations (another crucial **connection**) and the “*osmosis* between **concepts**, practices and institutions” in shaping and dealing with environmental interests and **challenges**, as she pointed out.

**Collaboration** was one out of several notable methodological points, these **cases** brought up. Inês’ **case** appeared a fantastic potential example for **collaborative** research. Her account, portraying recent impacts of climatic pressures, raised strong interest by historians, anthropologists and sociologists in investigating its historical roots and the social groups and actors as well as types of knowledge and expertise involved. Second, zooming in to specific local **cases**, proceeding from bird’s eye view, top-down approaches to bottom up investigations of local perspectives on the ground, from “studying up” instead of “studying

down”, as Evelien de Hoop (Eindhoven, The Netherlands) put it from an anthropological perspective in her brilliant summary of the second day, offers potentially rich information. At the same time, it raises the **challenge** of finding appropriate (historical) sources. Abeer R. Y. Abazeed from Egypt (now Leiden, The Netherlands), for example, who has studied the colonial roots of water conflicts at the Nile river, reported her struggles and frustrations with the lack of local sources that could complement collections in colonial archives. Third, another **conceptual** peculiarity in many research approaches turned up: the excessive importance of **concepts** derived from biology. What does it do to our studies, if we refer to *sustainability*, *vulnerability*, *resilience*, *adaptation*, *evolution*, *osmosis* and others, when (reductionist) biologists and (historical) humanities’ understandings do not match?

**Collaboration** was also the focus of discussion on the last day. While scholars from the Global North need **collaboration** with scholars of the Global South, to overcome northern hemisphere bias and restricted views, the latter miserably lack funding to engage in substantial research and explore **collaborative** venues. Some projects such as those as planned in Eindhoven (**Connecting** global resource and sustainability history) and pursued in Darmstadt (Global History of Technology) offer limited ways out by including funding for scholars of the Global South, although with a caveat, as clearly came out. Funding by institutions of the Global North shapes questions and perspectives and potentially renews “colonial” relations, as Indian Colleague Prakash Kumar (Philadelphia, USA) thoughtfully noted. **Collaborative** research across the North-South divide, we may conclude, could thus be conceived a new “extractive industry”. While Prakash received that comment as being made “jokingly”, I could still sense its seriousness behind.

While other constraints of **collaboration** received attention, the overall spirit of the workshop strongly endorsed it. Certainly, it is time consuming, although needed, to bridge different regional and disciplinary cultures and epistemologies. Likewise, it is **challenging** especially for younger scholars to reconcile **collaborative** ambitions with different national academic styles (such as the US system prioritizing individual research and production) and the enormous pressures to survive under increasingly competitive circumstances in academia. Still, the message was strong: **collaboration** is important, **collaboration** is worthwhile and **collaboration** is possible, as not to the least this rich and productive workshop revealed. Evelien’s thoughtful conclusions, which elevated our discussions to a **conceptual** meta-level may be recommended warmly as a treasure trove of ideas for preserving the momentum of this workshop, pushing **collaborative** work forward, overcoming its **challenges**, tackling **conceptual** problems and complexities and develop new productive venues of **connecting** our research.

I would like to end, first, with a sentence we owe to Prakash and that impressed me deeply: “dignity is more important than development.” Development is important, for sure, but it is only development, if it respects and preserves dignity. Whatever **collaborations** across the North-South divide we may succeed in pursuing, this sentence should also for us be a reminder never to be forgotten. Lastly, it remains to thank all participants for fantastic contributions and discussions and impressive work accomplished in the past few days. A particularly big thank you to Luísa Souza (Lisbon) and Frank Veraart (Eindhoven) for taking the biggest load of organizing and facilitating very effective work group discussions. And an extraordinary

big thank you to Luisa, Maria Paula and their local team for the outstanding organization and for hosting us as kindly and perfectly as we wish.