

# The many “co”s of co-creation.



## Unlocking the many dimensions of co-creation: What it can, may, and should do

*“Co-creation” in transdisciplinary research is marked by ambiguity, revealing tensions between collaboration, conflict, and creativity. We argue that co-creative processes must embrace dissent, emotion, and context-specific dialogue to avoid reproducing power imbalances. True co-creation requires competence, transparency, and the capacity and commitment to shared learning in order to transform conflicts constructively.*

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GAIA 34/4 (2025): 290–291 | **Keywords:** co-creation, collaboration, conflict, transdisciplinarity, transformation

### “Co” as in co-operation: Ambiguities and contradictions

The term “co-creation” describes both an ideal type of transdisciplinary research as well as diverse practices applied in social life. In general, co-creation combines collaborative, creative endeavours in terms of defining shared goals, designing processes and achieving outcomes. A deeper dive, however, reveals nuances, questions and dilemmas that highlight the need for strategic preparations and honest reflection on co-creative processes. Even the com-

ponents of the term – “co” and “creation” – point to tensions. In some cases, co-creation involves generating knowledge collectively through group interaction, while in others, creativity may require individual reflection before common ground can be established.

Researchers who work co-creatively embark on an adventure. Despite the growing prevalence of co-creative formats, there is no universal recipe for success; the best processes are dynamic, context-specific and carefully tailored.

Here we share our observations from our work at the Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS) at GFZ Helmholtz Centre for Geosciences, reflecting on co-creation and the conflicts, competences, and design of shared learning spaces.

### “Co” as in conflict: Constructive understandings of conflict and the courage to dissent

Conflicts are a central element of socio-ecological transformation processes and yet they are often avoided in transdisciplinary formats and tend to be presented as “disruptive” and as problems “in need of resolution”. Instead of harnessing the potential of dissent, contradictions and dilemmas as catalysts for the transformation of conflicts, co-creative formats risk

perpetuating existing power relations by pursuing conflict avoidance strategies. For instance, they may pursue hasty consensus or impose compromises. This can be seen when facilitators “shut down” dissenting opinions by calling a vote, which often leaves minority participants feeling frustrated and deprives the process of its potential to create something new. This disregard also reflects social and political discrimination, misses the opportunity to facilitate experiences of democratic agency and thus harbours the danger of reproducing deconstructive, polarising forms of addressing dissent and conflict that already dominate public discourse.

Co-creative processes also raise the question of inclusion: who will be included – and whose views will be left out? Protest can serve as a form of self-initiated participation – an expression of not being heard. How these tensions are managed ultimately determines whether co-creative processes actually incorporate new perspectives or merely reproduce existing ones.

In light of the many transformation processes unfolding at once – and the often-cited risk of overburdening society – transdisciplinary research, particularly due to its co-creative nature, is frequently championed as a way of integrating dif-

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<https://doi.org/10.14512/gaia.34.4.101>

ferent forms of knowledge and thus laying a solid foundation for transformation processes rife with conflict. Although such formats are viewed as highly promising for bolstering inclusive and participatory processes, they usually rest on the assumption that their representativeness will legitimise transformation measures.

This narrow view and functionalisation fails to recognise the possibilities that co-creative processes hold, but what does it take to unlock this potential?

#### **“Co” as in confrontation: Revealing emotions and needs**

Constructive conflict transformation hinges on making participants’ emotions and needs visible and articulable. Co-creative spaces are well suited to bring these under-currents to the surface in a respectful, appreciative manner. Rather than treating confrontations as mere disruptions, they

recognise that different and irreconcilable ideas and goals are inherent in every process. Conflict management also means: prioritising, ensuring transparency, and coping with tensions.

#### **“Co” as in co-benefits: On shared added value and disclosing losses**

Decisions and measures often generate unintended side effects that create additional value for the stakeholder groups involved and reinforce a sense of ownership. When these co-created outcomes are recognised, the jointly made decisions are more likely to receive broad support. At the same time, genuine transparency – honestly acknowledging all parties’ interests and openly disclosing any losses – is essential for giving space to fear and frustration. Co-benefits have long been presented – especially in research – as win-win solutions. This rhetoric has some-

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can be foregrounded and addressed explicitly, as advised by the principles of Theme-Centred Interaction (TCI). Although such interventions may temporarily pause the flow of a process, they ultimately redirect participants’ focus on the substantive issue at hand. For example, moments in which participants cry and reveal their fear of the climate crisis can lead to deeper understanding and new impetus. At the same time, confrontation can cause participants to suppress their emotions – for example, out of fear that the discussion will escalate or that opposing views will dominate. There remains a dilemma that can only be resolved depending on the context: how much confrontation can a process withstand – and at what cost?

**“Co” as in costs: The art of prioritisation**  
“Choose your battles” – even in co-creative processes, decisions must be made about which conflicts, whether visible or invisible, are to be endured, addressed or deliberately left open. It is helpful here to

times come across as patronising and may have fuelled resentment towards sustainability discourses among those forced to grapple with real conflicts of interest.

#### **“Co” as in competence: Handling uncertainty and ambiguity**

Co-creative expertise is manifested as a mindset, skillset, and toolset.

- **“Co” as in contingency:** co-creation requires openness to results and the ability to tolerate uncertainty. A creative mindset means being curious about other perspectives, believing in the power of collaboration, and embracing the potential of conflict as a catalyst.
- **“Co” as in context:** Co-creation requires the ability to tailor processes to their context, to deal with diversity and to maintain equitable relationships.
- **“Co” as in communication:** Transparent, participatory communication is indispensable to building and maintaining a level playing field and trust in co-creative processes. Facilitators must pos-

sess the ability to address tensions, break down hierarchies and hold space as appropriate to a given context, using methods such as non-violent communication, dynamic facilitation or the art of hosting.

- **“Co” as in continuity:** maintaining relationships takes time – a source of tension when funding is organised around short-term, project-based cycles. Co-creation thrives on the development of institutional memory: successes and failures must be made shareable, and learning spaces must be organised and sustained.

#### **“Co” as in covalence: The impact of sharing and creating shared learning spaces**

Just as covalent bonds in chemistry are compounds in which two atoms share a pair of electrons, thereby creating stable structures and acquiring new properties, we would like to share our experiences at RIFS in this article and create spaces for community-supported scientific exchange and mutual learning in which experiences are communalised and made accessible – not by offering conclusive answers, but by posing open questions:

- Which “co”s are missing? Which diverse perceptions of conflicts and approaches to dealing with it have not yet been considered here?
- Which methods of dealing with conflicts in co-creative contexts are more effective than others – and why?
- How can co-creative processes transform emotions and conflicts constructively – without homogenizing differences or reproducing injustice and inequality?
- How can we design co-creative processes that are sensitive to conflict, foster strong, collaborative bonds, and generate spaces where participants can learn together and build lasting relationships?

**Acknowledgements:** We thank our colleagues at RIFS and beyond for the discussions and joint research projects, without which it would not have been possible to summarise the co-creative research processes and reflections presented here. In particular, we thank Rosalma Zubizarreta-Ada, Dani\*el\*a Pastoors, Melanie Hussak, and Dirk von Schneidmesser.