



Wyss Academy Symposium 2022 – our harvest

Introduction

For its first Symposium, the Wyss Academy (WA) convened a diverse group of 220 people at the Kursaal Conference Center in Bern, Switzerland. The event was an experiment with the aim of bringing together experts from science, policy, and practice in order to benefit from the diversity of their perspectives. Their task would be to engage, discuss, and learn how to develop pathways toward just and sustainable futures - for both nature and people - in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

The first Wyss Academy Symposium gave us many insights that will be valuable to our organization's work. The event was an important step in realizing our ambition of bringing together different people to break silos and build bridges, especially between academics and practitioners. However, to harness insights and lessons from this experiment and be transparent and honest about our experiences, we also need to acknowledge the challenges we were confronted with, including on the organizational level.

With this document, we want to reflect on our ambitious goal and share the insights gained and lessons learned from conducting - and harvesting from - such an event. We believe that only through open, transparent communication and collective learning, will we be able to find solutions to the pressing challenges of our time.

First, we will briefly summarize the morning sessions, before diving into harvesting the results from the afternoon sessions, the "Ideathon". We will close the document with a general reflection on the content, the process, our learnings and how we will integrate all those points into our work, going forward.



The Parallel Sessions (morning)

During the morning, three parallel sessions aimed to enhance our systems understanding around areas that are relevant for our work. They are key topics that must be addressed when working on systems and investing in systems transformation: 1) Embracing Complexity towards transformative change, 2) Identifying and amplifying co-benefits between nature stewardship and human wellbeing, and 3) Living labs as catalysts for pathways to transformative change.

We want to briefly reflect on the knowledge that was presented, how it matched the aim of the session and what we wanted to achieve, and if there was a potential to stimulate a wider debate on the topic.

1. Embracing complexity towards transformative change

This session aimed at bringing together different approaches and experiences on how complexity can be addressed in practice and used for knowledge diplomacy and decision making. Using this as inspiration, our aim was to work towards creating a toolbox and principles for its use that would allow us to balance the need of capturing key features of complexity with the necessity of simplifying and sharing knowledge for stakeholder negotiations and decision-making.

Through a variety of inputs, ranging from co-creation and visualization of scenarios to exploratory modelling of complex system dynamics, we aimed to address two main questions:

- How can we understand a complex world?
- Acknowledging that knowledge is necessary but inherently incomplete, how can we produce, share, and use knowledge about an increasingly complex world?

Common themes that emerged during the session were the necessity to integrate all people who are involved or affected by a certain challenge into the process of addressing the challenge. The diversity of the topic was also mirrored in the different angles on approaching complexity, reflecting the need for inclusivity in our processes, and understanding that there are different

worldviews. Real-world examples can help us with understanding how to build such a model from the bottom up, through an iterative process of constant experimentation and learning. However, top-down models can also help us in making informed, strategic choices. In this regard, the session could have benefitted from an input on quantitative system modeling.

2. Identifying and amplifying co-benefits between nature stewardship and human wellbeing

The trade-offs and dilemmas between economic and ecological stakes are well understood. There is overwhelming evidence that human development has been associated with environmental degradation. But how can human wellbeing be decoupled from negative environmental impacts?

This session aimed to investigate what evidence supports our search for pathways that could reconcile environmental stewardship with the promotion of human wellbeing. Building upon the insights gained from concrete examples, we need to go beyond those to explore possible dilemmas that could arise when attempting to scale up solutions. Equally, we must explore positive tipping points that could speed up the deployment of sustainable practices and nature stewardship approaches at larger scales. We observed that a key to truly sustainable development lies in the combination of finding lasting approaches through which nature can be nurtured and even restored, while at the same time, improving human wellbeing where it is most needed. To live up to this goal, it was stated that we need to make science more inclusive, and to make it matter to the people who are affected: Science would need to be carried out in a way that it is linked more closely to the people it is trying to serve.

Further, it became clear that ideally, we would need to improve the tools that we currently have at our disposal to identify co-benefits between nature stewardship and human wellbeing. However, given the urgency for transformation, it was agreed that the current reality requires some unavoidable uncertainties to be accepted and the limitations of existing tools understood and accepted (e.g., a model cannot predict when or why a diet change will happen, but it can show that it matters). And, while established indicators for things like climate exist and are understood and used across disciplines, we need to think about how we understand and measure human wellbeing across disciplines (GDP, happiness, HDI, etc.).

When it comes to enhancing and upscaling co-benefits, positive tipping points will be key. While there is empirical evidence that they exist, we need more evidence on how to amplify and accelerate them.

3. Living labs as catalysts for pathways to transformative change

To tackle the complex, systemic, and contested sustainability challenges of our time, we need entirely new forms of solutions and new approaches to developing these. Transdisciplinary approaches such as living labs offer a way to co-develop a systemic understanding of socio-ecological challenges, to co-produce innovations and test them in real-world situations, and to co-evaluate the outcomes for learning and to apply them to the areas of science, policy, and practice.

This session aimed to bring together practitioners and scientists who would share their insights on these approaches, their applicability, and their strengths and shortcomings. We wanted to reflect on learnings from processes that connected actors from different backgrounds and cultures, holding various levels of power and world views, to jointly develop a vision of a desirable, sustainable, and just future. Key messages from that session were the importance of creating safe spaces for dialogue, and aiming for an inclusive process that embraces diversity, to tackle power issues and imbalances between different actors. Furthermore, when aiming for real transformation it is important to find the courage to ask uncomfortable questions that nobody else wants to ask, and to create ambitious goals and visions for transformation. We need to acknowledge that nothing in a complex system is perfect, and therefore, we need to test, check, learn, and adopt.

At this point, more insight into how to create those safe spaces is needed. Several questions remain open, such as: How do we get the most out of such dialogues in the future? How do we make sure that a structured dialogue is followed by action? What are the minimum requirements for living labs to become catalysts for transformation? And finally, how do we truly empower people to act?

Key learnings from the Parallel Sessions

When reflecting upon those three parts that we consider as key to working on systems and investing in systems transformation, a couple of common themes, challenges, open questions, and possibilities to build on the findings, emerged.

Commonalities

Echoing across all sessions was the necessity to include a wide diversity of actors in the co-creation of solutions. We need to incorporate the principles of inclusivity and justice in the way we collect data and conduct research. The Wyss Academy for Nature must uphold the same principles when it conducts projects in its Regional Hubs. To build the relevant processes and live up to the Wyss Academy's goal of breaking the silos between different disciplines, backgrounds, and perspectives, represents a chance for our organization to do things differently. Practicing inclusivity represents an opportunity to build new, inspiring examples, rather than repeating the same patterns all over again. But it also presents its own challenges, as it can add additional layers of complexity.

Challenges

The questions at hand, as well as the format were challenging in themselves. We realised that the sessions could have benefited from leaving more time for discussion and interaction between the different presenters in the sessions, in order to answer the guiding questions more thoroughly and holistically.

Furthermore, we found that providing more time to synthesize the knowledge from the three parallel sessions, to bring together different aspects necessary for systems transformation should be considered in the future. One way to go about this challenge might be to reduce the diversity of actors and focus on one point, while considering various perspectives. This could help us to provide the session with a clear thematic thread and thus – again - be more focused on answering the guiding questions.

Bringing together various knowledge communities and synthesizing their different insights is an ambitious challenge. It means to bring together people that speak different languages, not only with regards to their nationality, but also to their backgrounds and disciplines. Too much diversity can bring tension

to a debate, while too little can lack new insights and be boring. The speakers in our sessions mostly had an academic background. Within academia, a wider selection of disciplines could have led to more insights. At the same time, practitioners will be needed in the future to talk about their experiences and to show how solutions can look like in practice.

Ideathon (afternoon)

In the afternoon, we came together in different, smaller groups to work on concrete ideas on how to tackle three distinct challenges from the Wyss Academy for Nature's Regional Hubs, in Bern, Peru, and Kenya. This ideation exercise aimed to build a "knowledge bank" for our Regional Hubs, but also to inspire out-of-the-box innovations and point to new collaborations. The ideas were collected on "idea napkins", aiming to touch upon different points, such as a brief description of the idea, or why it is innovative.

In the following sections, we want to briefly summarize the challenges, reflect on the outputs from the Ideathon, and look at how we can potentially use the outputs to tackle the respective challenges.

Challenge 1 – Food systems

How might we re-establish a connection between food producers, consumers and nature?

Traditionally, food was produced and consumed by mostly, the same people at the same location. With an increasing specialization of society, today, producers and consumers of food are not only separated geographically, but also have almost no interface or any form of contact anymore. Thus, as a rule, we are largely unaware of our food and its life history. Yet, many food products are the result of complex and non-transparent international value chains. These value chains often include unsustainable farming practices, critical working conditions and nutritionally detrimental processing methods, and can therefore be considered environmentally, socially and economically unsustainable. How might we re-establish a connection between food producers, consumers and nature?

Reflection of outcomes

- Education: Include hands-on farming experiences in education at schools, in order that children can already make an emotional connection to the production and the origin of their food at a young age. Here we have a strong link to the current Changemaker Program of the Wyss Academy.
- True cost of food: Creation of financial incentives for sustainable and healthy food. These ideas will be of great value for the current focus project of the Wyss Academy's Bern Hub, which is a community-based approach to sustainable farming on organic soils in the Bernese "Seeland" landscape.
- Social Media could be a high-value communication tool.

Challenge 2 – Semi-arid landscapes

How can we support the sustainable use of semi-arid landscapes with limited natural resources that benefit both wildlife and an increasing human population?

People, wildlife and livestock have coexisted in the semi-arid landscapes of northern Kenya for centuries, sharing resources such as pasture, water and space that they all rely on to survive. For wildlife, and pastoralists, movement across these ecosystems to secure pasture, water and food, forms a critical component of their survival. Ecological connectivity and thus movement, healthy ecosystems and opportunities for livelihood adaptations are vital if pastoralists are to maintain their ways of life, and if wildlife and people are to continue having access to the resources required for their very survival. However, climate change, growing human populations, diminishing indigenous knowledge, and complex political and economic factors are straining the land – depleting its natural resources and reducing its resilience, as well as that of the wildlife and people that inhabit it. At the same time, new barriers to ecological connectivity, due to large-scale linear infrastructure and small-scale developments and land degradation emerge, which are both limiting movement and pushing wildlife out of areas it once roamed. This fragmentation of land is leading to increasing competition for critical resources within the individual fragments, and conflict between people and wildlife is growing. How might we maintain the health, and continued connectedness, of these ecosystems, despite the increasing diversity of competing claims on them?

Reflection of outcomes

- An innovative idea was the “productive circular islands”. It proposes, among others, practicing “Terra Preta” – a soil management strategy whereby charcoal is used to improve soil fertility – Biochar. The other component behind this proposal is the circularity – including biogas (from manure) for local small-scale energy use and better water management. This concept looks promising for further development within the Wyss Academy’s Solutionscape approach and will potentially be embedded in our work.
- Other innovative ideas dealt with solar energy, which will be further pursued by the Wyss Academy as well.

Challenge 3 – Preventing deforestation

How can we enhance the value attributed to the standing forest to maintain it and ensure communities living in and from these forests have sufficient income opportunities?

The Amazon Nut (also known as Brazil Nut) is a sustainable good produced in protected areas in Madre de Dios. The nuts are harvested once a year by local communities. After the harvest, these areas remain unused and protected until the following season. This process can contribute to safeguarding the forest from being converted to other uses such as cattle pasture, agriculture or gold mining. However, local harvesters only receive about 1 USD per kilogram of Amazon Nut. This means they are relying on other income opportunities, which mainly are – due to lack of alternatives – gold mining and logging. These activities are destroying the forest and leading to deforestation. The main underlying issue is that the price for Amazon products – such as the Amazon Nut – does not include the total value of the resource but only the unprocessed good itself. Environmental and social services that the tree and the entire forest provide are not paid for. These include services on a global scale, such as climate and water regulation, sequestering and storing carbon, and local values, such as identity, food and other important resources for the people living in these forests. Deforestation will not stop until we find ways (new or adapted) to transform the value of the standing forest. We need to include all the environmental, social and economic services a unique forest provides for humanity. How can we enhance the value attributed to the standing forest, to maintain it and ensure communities living in and from these forests have sufficient income opportunities?

Reflection of outcomes

- One idea to tackle this challenge and that also resonates with the work done by the Wyss Academy is the value chain approach. Especially in terms of gold mining, we found that we need a comprehensive mapping of the various regulations, actors and platforms from South America to Switzerland.
- Other proposals included the idea of citizen science: Thus, enhancing participation in the knowledge generation and decision making in the landscape. The Wyss Academy wants to include citizen science as a way for different audiences to generate information for their own decision-making.

Reflection and closing remarks

In the following section, we will reflect on our key challenges and resulting learnings with regards to the content as well as the process and organization of such an event. We will close by elaborating on how we will integrate the learnings and generated ideas into our work and provide an outlook on what will happen at the Wyss Academy in the future.

Key challenges and learnings

Although the Parallel Working Sessions and the Ideathon covered a diverse set of topics across different contexts, some common themes emerged. The topic of inclusion can be considered as one of the threads that run through all the sessions: Complexity, for example needs to be addressed in ensuring inclusivity in the processes, and understanding that there are different worldviews; scientific evidence on positive tipping points that reconcile nature stewardship and human wellbeing came up again and again. However, science must become more inclusive, i.e. link itself with the people it is trying to serve in order to enhance an uptake of the evidence produced; and approaches that promise to co-design a systemic understanding, co-produce innovations and test them in real-world situations need to be inclusive and embrace diversity, to be able to tackle power issues and imbalances between different actors.

- In order to create a better understanding of these complex challenges, a greater involvement of people from the local context could be promising. This would offer the opportunity of knowledge transfer with audiences outside these landscapes.
- Although some interesting ideas were introduced, there was a certain lack of depth and innovation. This can be explained by the missing contextual local knowledge. An adaptation for a next event would therefore be to involve, in particular, people with a regional understanding, and then move towards a global dialogue.
- Safe spaces: How to create them, and how to balance the ‘safety’, which might require “Chatham House rules” or even more strict secrecy – especially when power differentials among participants are big, or when highly contested topics are discussed– with transparency and openness.
- Find balance between complexity of issues and complexity in approaching the challenges, and the urgency to act fast.

Building on our learnings

Given the high ambition of the overall goal and program for the symposium, bringing experts from different fields and regions into one event, we triggered a powerful energy while, however, lacking the time and space to build mutual understanding and dive deeper on certain topics and ideas. Still, the insights gained, as well as some concrete ideas will be carried into the programmes we have planned for 2023 and beyond.

If we want to move from knowledge to impact, we need to move away from investing too much time in explaining why there is a problem and rather focus on finding solutions. But how should we go about those formats? How do we translate this knowledge that was brought to us into tangible, actionable streams? Those are some of the main questions that remain for us to be answered when following our strategy.

The Wyss Academy will continue working on a variety of projects which aim at further breaking the silos between disciplines, in bringing together stakeholders with different perspectives and backgrounds. We believe that it is in this intersection where tensions become visible and, if tackled respectfully, can be overcome, in order to provide the ground for new solutions to arise.

Outlook

Creating safe spaces for dialogues and stakeholder engagement is at the core of what we do at the Wyss Academy for Nature. In 2023, we will hold the second Wyss Academy Dialogue with Purpose on the true value of forests. In conducting this event, we will integrate the valuable learnings and experiences from the Symposium. We will start with dialogues in our regions, to identify and pay tribute to regional circumstances and conditions. In 2024, we will converge and bring the dialogue to a global level.