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# In defence of militant research : understanding and action in socio-hydrological territories

Jean-Philippe Venot

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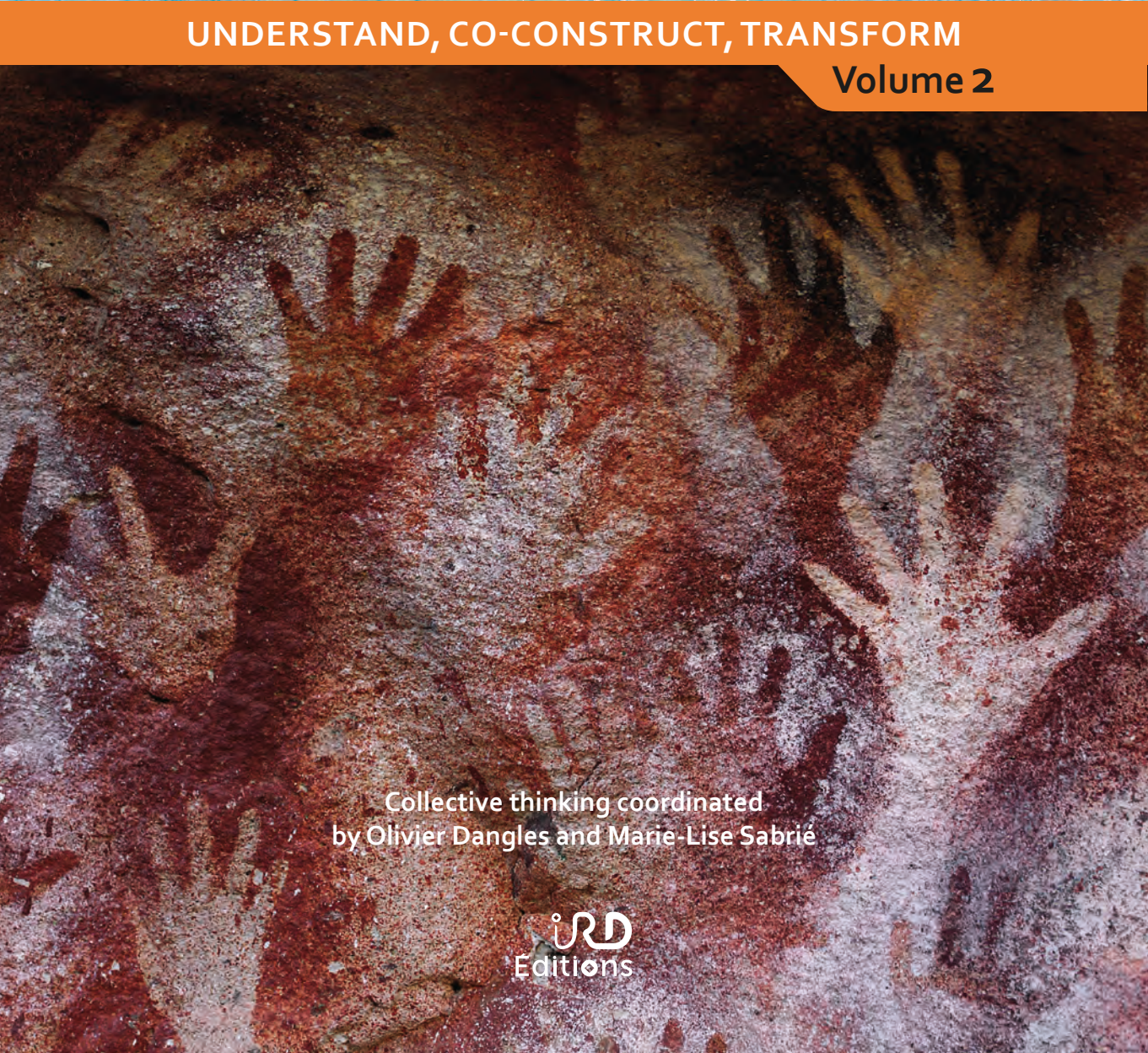


A network diagram with white nodes and lines on a blue and green textured background.

# SUSTAINABILITY SCIENCE

UNDERSTAND, CO-CONSTRUCT, TRANSFORM

Volume 2

A background of prehistoric handprints in various shades of red and brown on a textured rock surface.

Collective thinking coordinated  
by Olivier Dangles and Marie-Lise Sabrié

The logo for IRD Editions, featuring a stylized 'i' and 'D' intertwined.

IRD  
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# • In defence of militant research: understanding and action in socio-hydrological territories

Jean-Philippe Venot,  
IRD, UMR G-EAU, Montpellier, France

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## Background

Sustainability science is driven by a dual ambition: to understand and offer responses to global challenges. Approaches prioritising the co-production of knowledge and solutions occupy a central place in this movement, but it is now time to abandon the well-meaning fantasy of detached neutrality and recognise the importance of such approaches as political arenas. The analytical frameworks provided by the study of science and technology (Bonneuil & Joly, 2013) and development anthropology (Olivier de Sardan, 1995) may be useful in this respect. This article explores one potential approach to reconciling a suitably critical stance with a clear commitment to supporting the sustainable transformation of socio-hydrological territories, which can be defined as the sum total of relationships which exist between human populations and water resources, as well as the spatial contexts within which these relationships operate.

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### Contact

jean-philippe.venot@ird.fr

### Further reading

OLIVIER DE SARDAN J.-P., 1995 – *Anthropologie et développement. Essai en socio-anthropologie du changement social*. Paris, Karthala.

BONNEUIL C., JOLY P. B., 2013 – *Sciences, techniques et société*. Paris, La Découverte.

WYBORN C. et al., 2019 – Co-producing sustainability: reordering the governance of science, policy, and practice. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 44 : 319-346.

## In defence of political co-production?

Sustainability science has emerged as a possible response to a dual expectation, or tension, between society at large and the academic sphere: the need to find solutions to complex problems stemming from the interface between nature and human society, while also recognising and respecting the plurality of knowledge. Interdisciplinarity and co-production are combined under the banner of “transdisciplinary” processes, wherein research plays a role which Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen defines as “informed agitation,” a term which encapsulates both the researcher’s duty to produce knowledge and the moral obligation to

take a political stance against structural inequalities and power imbalances which benefit a minority at the expense of the majority. Social sciences have an essential role to play here, particularly when it comes to unpicking the risk that co-production approaches might actually serve to reinforce dominant interests, or, on the contrary, the opportunity they provide to foreground marginalised viewpoints. But sustainability science also requires researchers in the social sciences to move beyond their traditional analytical stance (which some would call condescending, or at the very least comfortably detached) and become actively involved, bringing their analytical capacities to bear upon the aforementioned approaches, understood as political arenas.



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Serious game designed to illustrate the twin challenges of water resource management and agricultural development, and to identify fair and sustainable improvements.

## Militant research: striking the right balance

Long before the notion of co-production came to prominence, the concept of participation (by stakeholders, in all their diversity) in research activities and development projects was a subject of considerable debate. Discussions on this topic tended to be somewhat dichotomous in nature. On the one side were the champions of participatory approaches, heralding their idealistic dimension and the underlying potential to further the emancipation of the most marginalised populations and social groups. On the other side, staunch opponents denounced what they saw as a new form of tyranny (Cook B., Kothari U., 2001 – *Participation: The New Tyranny?* London, Zed Books), a well-meaning discourse which in fact served to perpetuate, or even exacerbate, pre-existing structural inequalities. Diametrically opposed though they may seem, these two perspectives actually share a certain “globalising” dimension, i.e. the desire to impose an analytical framework which is generic and applicable in all situations, and which does not actually allow for any real understanding of the construction and implementation of participatory approaches, specific forms of co-production rooted in specific realities. Naturally, participatory approaches introduce (or are founded upon) certain constraints, but in no way do these constraints compromise their transformative capacities. The real challenge is to define precisely what these constraints are, by whom they are introduced and to what ends, and of course what consequences they engender for a research approach which is both militant, which is to say committed to a fairer and more sustainable future, and more reflexive.

## The contribution of critical social sciences

To this end, the analytical frameworks offered by sociological studies of science and technology and development anthropology represent particularly interesting perspectives for an institute whose guiding purpose, as its name suggests, is to conduct research into matters of development (sustainable development, of course!), utilising various partnership-based research structures. What unites these two fields of research is their focus on the day-to-day discourse and practice of research partners, as well as development more broadly. Both fields utilise the terms “involvement” and “brokerage” to describe the strategies of alliance deployed by different actors in order to defend their viewpoints and interests. These notions are of direct relevance to co-production and, more broadly, the interface between science and decision-making. These notions also serve to highlight the fact that researchers are (also) faced with stakes of their own, just like any other actor: methods of co-production thus begin to resemble political arenas, shining new light on research activities and results, as well as some of their emerging and non-independent (and thus partial and contingent) properties.

## Reflection and action in socio- hydrological territories: plurality and exploration

Research into water management is particularly conducive to such approaches, confronted as it is with debates over the need to more effectively account for the interactions between

water and society, within the framework provided by interdisciplinary approaches such as socio-hydrology, designed to offer solutions to the challenges of sustainable water management. Nonetheless, a dual process of de-centring is required here. Firstly, it implies a shift towards a more reflexive attitude, recognising the plurality of ways of “thinking about water” and acknowledging that scientific manners of framing water issues are not neutral, and that they inevitably influence results and proposed solutions. This is not so much a matter of integration, but rather of more effectively combining and reconciling different conceptions and perceptions of socio-hydrological territories (i.e. the relationships between water and society, and the spaces in which these relationships unfold). The second shift must be a push for greater engagement, putting research at the heart of participatory approaches rooted in

specific socio-hydrological territories and conceived as exploratory rather than prescriptive arenas. Among the potential approaches at our disposal, serious games (see illustration), when combined with a clear understanding of the socio-political stakes of water resource usage, can open up interesting perspectives. Examples can be found in existing initiatives co-created by researchers and non-researchers, which have succeeded in changing old ways of thinking about the construction of water retainment infrastructure in the flood plains of Cambodia, without going so far as to challenge their long-term pertinence – rooted in a political will for agricultural intensification. The reflexive, exploratory nature of co-production is essential to the emergence of an approach to development research which is ethical and humble as to the change it can help to bring about.

## KEY POINTS

**Sustainability science prompts us to rethink the role of the researcher within society. As one actor among many, each with their own knowledge and understanding of what is at stake, the researcher may be viewed as a sort of informed agitator. Nevertheless, the scientific framing of questions necessarily involves certain choices, and thus incorporates a political dimension which may be more or less explicit. It is therefore essential to adopt a reflexive perspective on sustainability science in action. The study of science and technology and development anthropology provide analytical frameworks which can help us to understand what is at play in the arenas of co-production where knowledge and solutions are forged. Moving beyond the realm of discourse and injunctions, paying more attention to day-today practices can help us to anchor sustainability science, and thus to maintain a certain sense of humility with regard to the role and position that research and researchers might occupy in the socio- environmental transformations at work in the developing world.**