

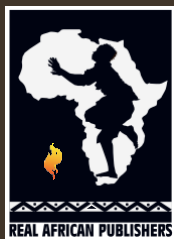
The Concept and Application of
TRANSDISCIPLINARITY
 in Intellectual Discourse and Research

Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (MISTRA) was publicly launched as a think tank in March 2011 and took up the task of following a transdisciplinary approach to the research generated within the organisation. The projects initiated by MISTRA integrate various streams of knowledge and expertise when examining complex issues such as nation formation, economic growth, social equity, adaptable science and technology, and other strategic topics related to South Africa's development as a democracy. Serving in part as an intellectual movement and in part as a research institution, activities are structured around diverse topics that require the opening up of intellectual space for strategic research and reflection specific, but not exclusive, to the African continent.

A project was launched: *The concept and application of transdisciplinarity in intellectual discourse and research*. The intent of the study was two-fold: in the first place the need for better theoretical understanding of a transdisciplinarity approach was identified as a necessity; and in the second place MISTRA intended to apply transdisciplinarity towards the opening up of an African approach – guided in part by the Afrikology principles of the late Professor Dani Nabudere.

By orientation Transdisciplinarity is an approach that recognises a united and borderless intellectual terrain. It is an attempt to formulate an integrative process of knowledge production and distribution in reaction to the twentieth century narrow discipline focus and hyper-specialisation.

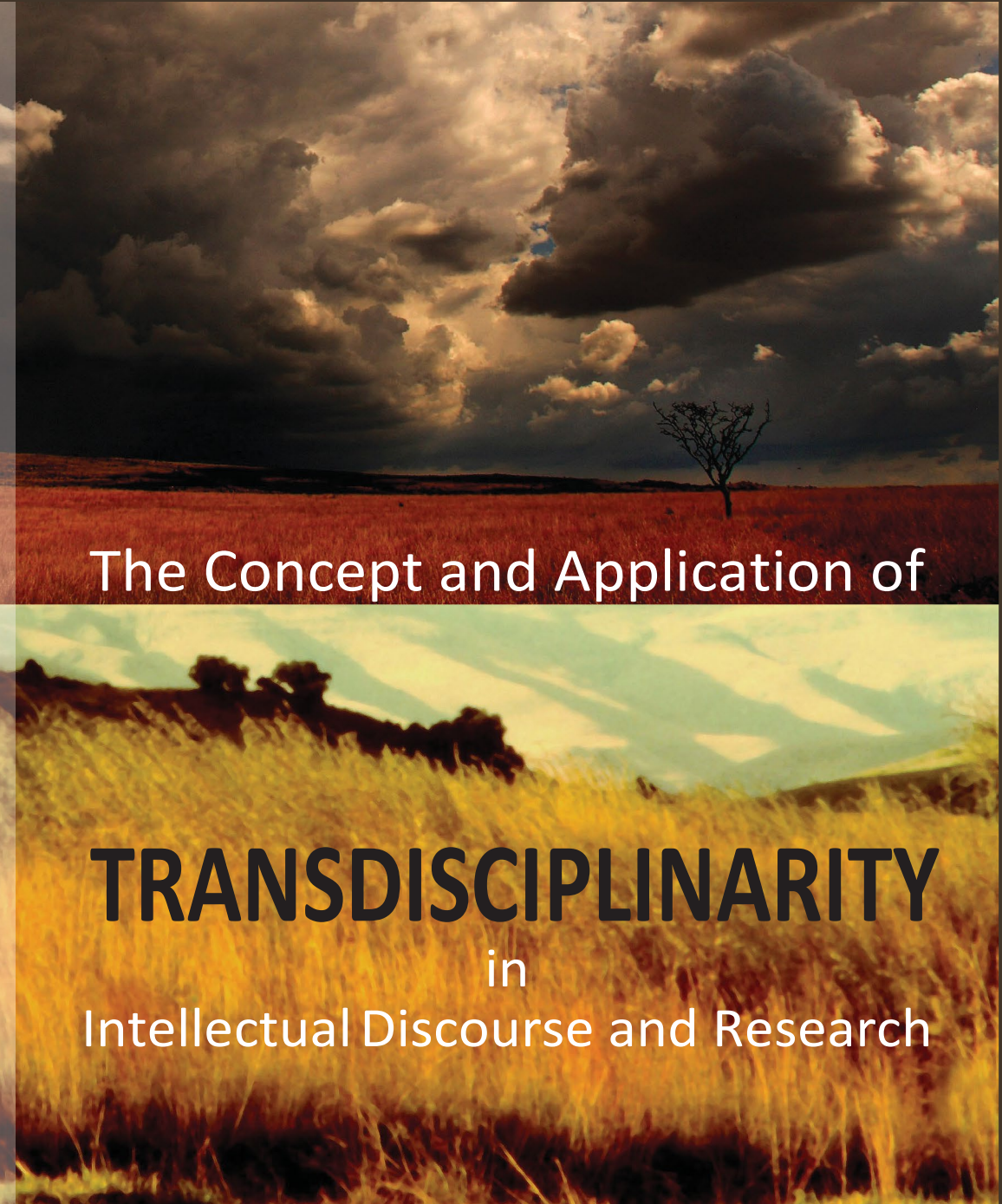
It responds to the multi-layered challenges of diffused disciplines, interlinked socio-economic problems, the impact of globalisation, the de-territorialised nation state, technological advancements, environmental concerns, agriculture and food security and health. And it recognises that, in history, some of the most revolutionary breakthroughs in science and technology in fact happened on the margins of narrow disciplines.



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THE CONCEPT AND APPLICATION OF TRANSDISCIPLINARITY DUPLESSIS • SEHUME • MARTIN



HESTER DU PLESSIS • JEFFREY SEHUME • LEONARD MARTIN

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F OREWORD

In the past four decades, transdisciplinarity has gained conceptual and practical traction for its transformative value in accounting for the complex challenges besetting humankind, including social relations and natural eco-systems.

It is in recognition of the utility of transdisciplinarity that the Mapungubwe Institute (MISTRA) has adopted the approach as the basis for all its research work. However, in order fully to embed it within the Institute, and to ensure its systematic interrogation by the broader academic and research community, MISTRA decided to include transdisciplinarity as one of the themes of the eight research projects initiated when the Institute was launched. Thus was spawned a research journey on The concept and application of transdisciplinarity in intellectual discourse and research, the outcome of which is contained in this publication.

MISTRA is guided in this regard by the realisation that humanity requires an approach that transcends narrow disciplines in engaging complex and interlinked problems such as the logics and ethics of natural sciences, climate change, poverty, systemic unemployment and related weighty ills of anomie. In undertaking this work, MISTRA facilitated interactions among a broad spectrum of experts and practitioners to examine the issue in a manner arguably not attempted before in South Africa. Besides trawling through global literature on the subject, the project participants undertook field research by examining three case studies where application of the transdisciplinary approach has started to find living expression. The models

selected were: the Universities of Fort Hare (Centre for Transdisciplinary Studies), Pretoria (Centre for Human Rights) and Johannesburg (SeTAR Centre).

The attempts by these institutions to forge new approaches alert and responsive to the complex demands of our nascent democracy and of humanity at large, are to be commended. Along with any other such initiatives, these Centres will hopefully thrive as crucibles from which will sprout an intellectual movement that spreads across the academic and research communities; and helps to refashion how South Africans approach the enterprise of knowledge production, knowledge management and knowledge dissemination.

The need to develop frameworks for joint problem-solving involving diverse stakeholders is unquestionable. Besides generating inclusivity which embraces academia, civil society and policy-makers in the public and private sectors, transdisciplinarity allows for the appreciation of phenomena from a multiplicity of angles, and affords societies creative ways of seeking solutions to challenges that may appear intractable. Critically, because of the heterogeneity of sources, including community knowledge systems, transdisciplinarity is better able to unearth the richness of humanity's knowledge without a constraining and condescending rigidity.

The project was carried out in an open-minded way, perhaps even tentatively, with diverse stakeholders engaging in polylogues that, we hope, will encourage broader intellectual discourse. To serve any purpose, such engagement will need to be undertaken without regard to physiological age, geographic location, economic status, political affiliation, area of specialisation, gender, spiritual orientation and any other such narrow considerations.

This report is dedicated to the memory of the late sage of African indigenous knowledge systems, Professor Dani Wadada Nabudere. Without his counsel, his living works and his life example, this undertaking would have been the poorer.

Contained in this publication are reflections that merely skim the surface of this complex subject. If anything, we do hope that this work will encourage further research and deeper analysis, so South Africa can, steadily but surely, become a full part of the nascent global initiatives on transdisciplinarity.

We extend our profound appreciation to the researchers, partner-institutions, collegial and peer reviewers and members of the public who participated in this journey. We are also indebted to those who have generously contributed the resources without which MISTRA would not be able to carry out its mandate.

Joel Netshitenzhe
Executive Director