



# Co-Exploration: An alternative initial phase of a transdisciplinary process

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

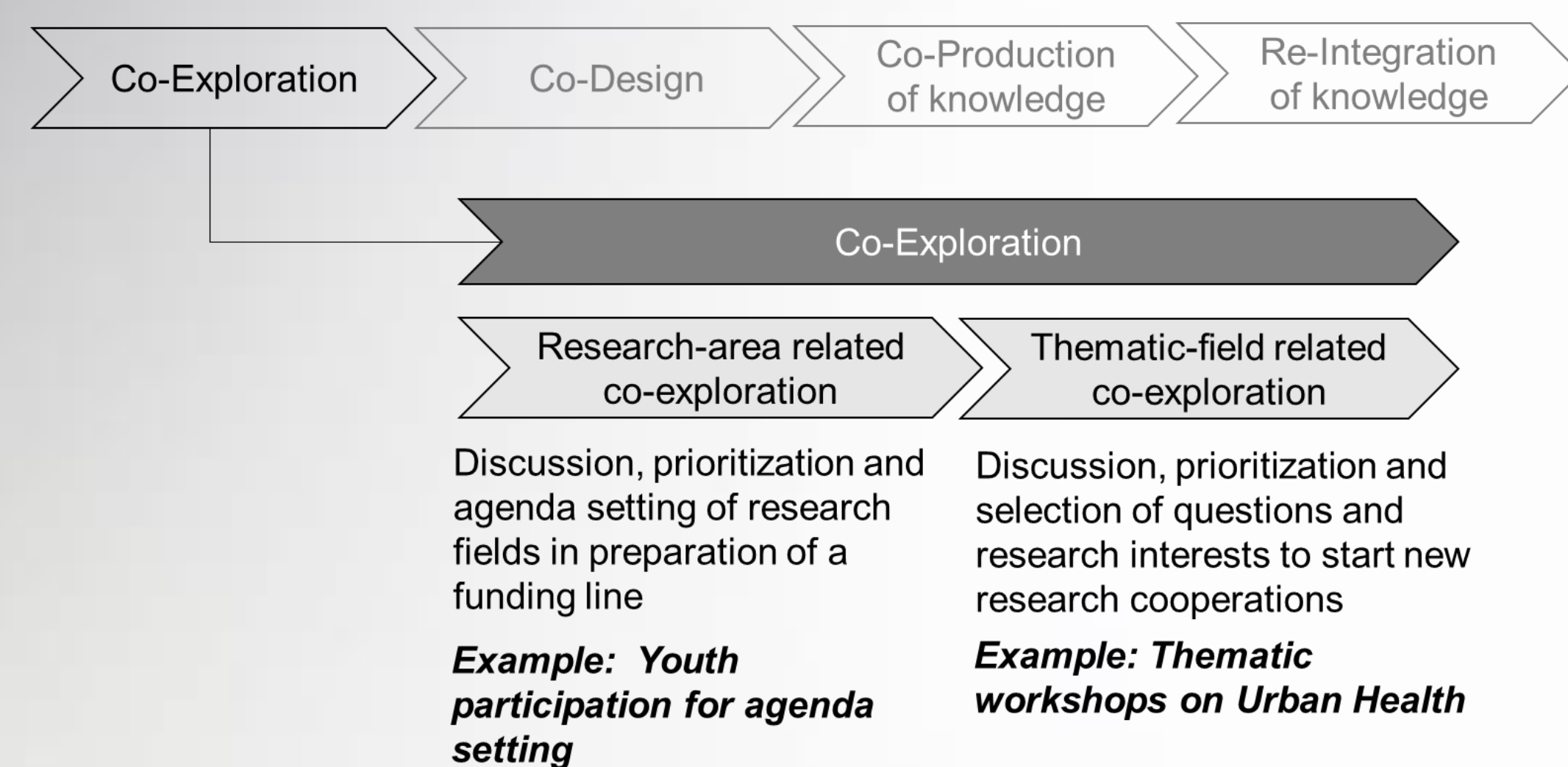
Transdisciplinary research is linked to the goal of developing knowledge for social transformation. Its process of co-design, co-production and re-integration (Jahn et al. 2012. *Transdisciplinary: Between mainstreaming and marginalization. Ecological Economics* 79, 1-10) is widely accepted. Even if there are various deviations in the exact designation and also the number of process phases (Lawrence et al. 2022. *Characteristics, potentials, and challenges of transdisciplinary research. One Earth* 5(1), 44-61). It is generally practiced that the impetus and also the setting of the topic for transdisciplinary research comes from the sciences, which raise or have already raised funds for it.

But do the sciences actually set the relevant topics to initiate social transformation? In two pilot processes, the TD-Lab has researched what a collaborative phase of topic mining before the start of a transdisciplinary project might look like, what challenges are faced in doing this and what impact we have achieved.

## 2. CO-EXPLORATION

We define co-exploration as a method-guided joint search for relevant research topics and joint agenda-setting by science and society before the actual project development and application process. We distinguish between two types of co-exploration, which were conducted in two pilot processes.

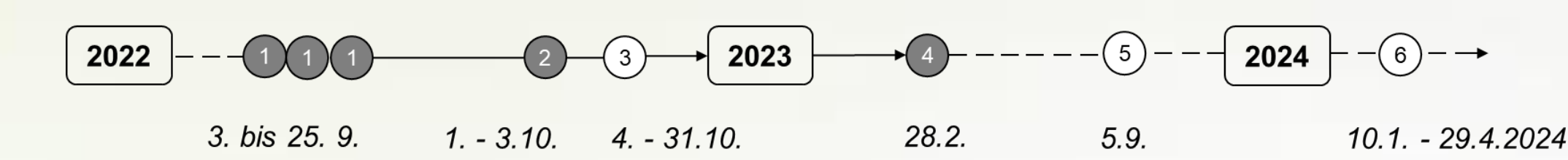
### Co-Exploration in a transdisciplinary process



## 3. CASE A: YOUTH PARTICIPATION FOR AGENDA-SETTING

The Berlin University Alliance has set itself the goal of promoting excellent research regarding grand societal challenges and contributing to solutions. Young people were involved in defining the research area of the third funding line. They in particular will be affected by these challenges.

### Research-area related co-exploration: Youth participation for agenda setting

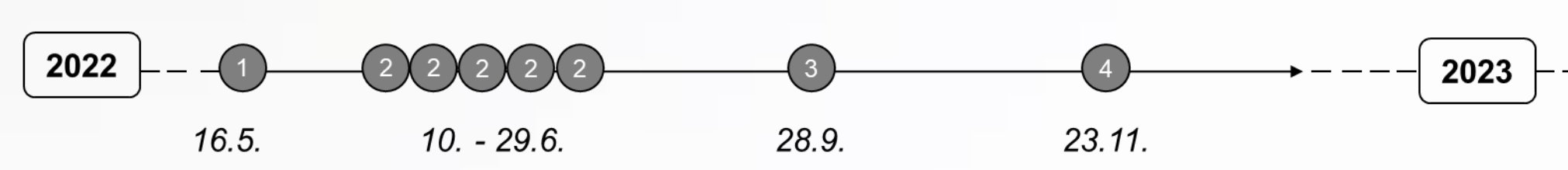


- 1. Preparing workshops** with young people to improve scientific literacy
- 2. Idea camp** 3-day workshop with young people for developing research areas, consultation of researchers of the Alliance
- 3. Call for ideas** Researchers of the Alliance submitted ideas for research areas
- 4. Next Grand Challenge Forum** Conference for young people, researchers and practitioners to develop integrated ideas for research areas
- 5. Decision of the Board of Directors** from 5 integrated ideas for research areas
- 6. Call for proposals** for researchers of the Alliance with the thematic focus of "Responsible Innovation in Times of Transformation"

## 4. CASE B: THEMATIC WORKSHOPS ON URBAN HEALTH

Urban health is a major thematic focus of the Berlin University Alliance. In order to develop common topics and questions for new research projects a series of workshops was held. The workshops brought scientists together with practitioners from the arts and culture, politics and administration, business and civil society.

### Thematic-field related co-exploration: Thematic Workshops on Urban Health



- 1. Kick-off Core Group** Key actors of all societal groups started in a collaborative workshop.
  - 2. Thematic sprints** In 5 five-hour-workshops participants from the different societal areas and science discuss separately the most important challenges from their perspective.
  - 3. Market of themes** Participants from all societal areas discuss and integrate their topics to new merged research ideas.
  - 4. Market of partnerships** Participants from all societal areas create new partnerships and concretize their research idea.
- After the Thematic Workshops on Urban Health, TD-Lab supported the consortiums in co-writing research proposals for third-party funding.

## 5. LESSONS LEARNED

We learned various lessons during the implementation of the two pilot processes:

- The implementation of agenda setting processes in institutions requires **support from upper management levels**. The open-ended nature of such co-exploration processes is particularly challenging for them. We have countered this with a series of measures: detailed process preparation, professional implementation with target group-experienced integration experts and most important: regular information and consultation.
- Due to the different values, linguistic worlds and levels of abstraction of scientists and practitioners, we implemented measures to eliminate potential hierarchies and communication problems: Different groups (young people, political experts, business experts, scientists, etc.) **work in separate workshops** before integrating the results obtained there with those of the other groups in joint workshops.
- A concrete funding perspective would improve **participant ownership** for a further transdisciplinary process. But even without this, participants are interested in contributing their own perspective and expertise, or to network.

## 6. IMPACT

With the implementation of the two pilot processes for co-exploration, we as TD-Lab of the Berlin University Alliance have generated impact at various levels.

- A **shift in discourse** was achieved through the cooperative search for research areas and themes, which was partly accompanied by media attention and the integration of the management boards of the Alliance. Knowledge exchange between science and society has become better known and accepted in the Alliance's partner institutions.
- New topics** have been developed that are not necessarily disruptive. Rather, their innovative content lies in the degree of integration of different perspectives and details as well as their application orientation.
- The collaboration between science and practice has created a number of **new network contacts and collaborations** based on trusting cooperation in co-exploration. A good basis for further collaboration for transformation-oriented research and in applying for funding for transdisciplinary research.