

## Key Concepts in Processes of Sustainability Transformation

# TRUST

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### DEFINITION

Within the notion of an organizing principle when people work together towards a goal, trust can be defined as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (Rousseau et al. 1998). In collaborations, trust is crucial for working together and allows to rely on each other’s commitment and contribution (Ostrom 2003; Luederitz et al. 2017). It refers to the mutual willingness to work together “on equal footing, reconcile divergent worldviews, as well as acknowledge different interests” (Luederitz et al. 2017). Trust is highly influenced by reputation, repetition and reciprocity (Ostrom 2003).

### CONTEXT

Trust is a widely used concept in daily life language often having different meanings in different contexts. The word’s roots are linked to reliance on someone or something, religious faith, legal confidence and comfort (German “Trost”) (Etymonline 2019).

Scholars across disciplines discuss and analyse different quantities and (context-dependent) qualities of trust (Rousseau 1998). Social scientist Niklas Luhmann conceptualises trust as a societal way of problem solving for reducing complexity and stabilizing communication over time (Luhmann et al. 2017). In management and governance literature, trust is as a principle to coordinate and organize work of any kind of governing structure (private, public, NGO) (McEvily et al. 2003). In transdisciplinary (td) sustainability science, trust is conceptualised as an input in sustainability transition experiments, especially because of its crucial role in collaboration and relation-building as well as in respecting the nature of failure of experimenting (Luederitz et al. 2017).

### RELEVANCE

In inter- and td research projects, trust is a mutual process, it evolves between the members of the research team (researchers, non-academic partners). It rather represents a process of earning trust (as

opposed to “building” trust). Since trust is a universal, though subjective, psychological state, trust may also work as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989) and foster mutual understanding of a given problem and/ or possible solution. Understanding its different phases of building, stability, and decline might help reflecting and adapting collaboration processes.

Trust is not a static concept. In collaborations, we will always need to work on co-defining what we mean by trust together with those involved, understanding and respecting our different expectations and perspectives. Trust is currently not a major concept in inter- and transdisciplinary research, although the relevance of trust building and its methods is starting to be developed (Di Giulio, Defilia 2018). It may need to be considered more thoroughly in the development of (td) research projects, and when engaging in td collaborations. We need to acknowledge that building and earning trust needs time at the beginning of new collaborations, and it requires maintenance. It can be broken in a moment, and can take a long time to rebuild.

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