



# Anticipating workshop fatigue to navigate power relations in international transdisciplinary partnerships: A climate change case study

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## Abstract

Workshop fatigue is a colloquialism to describe apathy towards facilitated discussions that, in interventions designed to build partnerships, tends to be viewed as somewhat inevitable. To challenge this assumption, this article theorises fatigue as a subtle form of resistance. Evidence is based on qualitative research as part of a climate change collaboration, with a focus on a methodology called ‘transformative scenario planning’. The author combines Goffman, Scott and Pratt to analyse interactions between facilitators, researchers and stakeholders in meetings and workshops. Historical representations of scientific endeavours are contrasted with performances of participation in Namibia, India and Botswana. The article concludes that anticipating workshop fatigue could be an accessible way to surface power relations in inherently unequal international partnerships, and bring a sociological sensibility to transdisciplinary climate change research.

## Keywords

Climate change adaptation, international development, participatory process, power relations, transdisciplinary partnerships, transformative scenario planning, workshop fatigue

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## Introduction

The involvement of social scientists in projects traditionally dominated by the natural sciences has come about, in part, due to critiques that projects are apolitical and overlook power relations (Eguavoen et al., 2015). This has been particularly so in research that advocates holistic approaches to helping people most vulnerable to the impact of climate change (Rickards et al., 2014). At the same time, funders have become increasingly interested in global partnerships that counter the historical paternalistic flow of knowledge and resources from global North to global South (Mawdsley, 2017). Consequently there has been an ‘explosion of participatory methodologies’ which put the last first (Chambers, 2017: 150). Ideally, methods ‘allow a safe space for open and frank discussion’ via co-exploration, serious gaming, experiential learning (Jones et al., 2015: 31), spaces for dialogue and joint learning. Therefore, despite the constraints of the ubiquity of workshops, participatory stakeholder engagements remain popular – especially for building relationships to bridge divides between the natural and social sciences, as well as the global North and global South.

Alongside the demand for international partnerships, the climate change agenda has been twinned with the global social change agenda. The premise that climate change is mediated by existing global inequities has been established since the 2007 Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Chakrabarty, 2012: 9). This means climate change is concerned with ‘the basic sociological question of *agency and structure*’ and challenging the ‘political and economic structures that have caused the climate crisis in the first place’ (Eguavoen et al., 2015: 1189, italics in the original). Interventions are therefore under pressure to bring about transformative rather than incremental change. But such seismic shifts require diverse collaborations, which have been pursued with varying degrees of success (Arnall et al., 2013; Foley et al., 2017; Mosberg et al., 2017; Nagoda and Nightingale, 2017). As a case in point, this study draws on social science research conducted as part of a transdisciplinary international climate change project.

My research objective was to assess the extent to which an intervention that was designed to be transformative was appropriate for enabling climate change adaptation in semi-arid regions. The intervention, called ‘transformative scenario planning’ (Kahane, 2012), was modified from its original design and trialled in Omusati Region (Namibia), Bobirwa (Botswana), Upper West Region (Ghana), Koutiala District (Mali), Jalna (Maharashtra, India) and Bangalore (Karnataka, India). Of these, I researched three transformative scenario planning processes. An emergent finding was the issue of ‘workshop fatigue’. Ordinarily, this sense of apathy is raised retrospectively when looking back on how relationships evolved between geographically spread teams (Mistry et al., 2009) and to explain why projects did not have the intended impact (Jones et al., 2015). Instead, this article conceptualises fatigue as an expression of resistance. I conclude that anticipating workshop fatigue could provide an opportunity to navigate power relations in efforts to interact on more equal terms in international transdisciplinary partnerships. I start with a synopsis of power and partnerships literature, and the theoretical strands that link resistance and performance. This includes initial interpretations of the settings in which interactions took place as illustrative examples of the project context.

## Power and partnerships

On a global scale, critical geographers have shown that although “traditional donors” continue to wield substantial power’ (Mawdsley, 2017: 109) there has been a paradigm shift ‘that upsets and transcends the old hierarchies of the “North” and “South”’ (Mawdsley, 2017: 113). This is evidenced by the rise of South–South partnerships, North–South collaborations and co-learning. Despite the difficulty of establishing relationships on an equal footing (Foley et al., 2017), the co-creation of knowledge remains a core part of transdisciplinary research. Following development literature that underscores the need for reflexivity (Hickey and Mohan, 2004), participation and voice are key concepts used to judge the extent to which international projects are genuine partnerships (Schaaf, 2015; Schmidt and Pröpper, 2017). Thus, the transdisciplinary partnerships literature exposes climate change projects to high levels of scrutiny with regard to how power relations are managed. In response, contemporary climate change collaborations are more likely to be conducted by multidisciplinary research teams.

The role of social scientists in environmental projects has, for example, involved a Foucauldian analysis of sustainable development (Zingerli, 2010), discursive constructions of climate change (Adger et al., 2001), post-colonial power relations (Schmidt and Neuburger, 2017), elite capture (Arnall et al., 2013) and nepotism (Mosberg et al., 2017). As a contribution to these discussions, I draw on Pratt’s (2008) analysis of European scientists’ travel and exploration scholarship. Pratt’s “‘contact perspective” emphasises how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other’ (2008: 8), in imperial encounters, that are easily ignored when told from the invader’s perspective. Pertinent to critiques of climate change adaptation as apolitical (Eguavoen et al., 2015), Pratt shows how Linnaean approaches to the study of nature secured the innocence of European bourgeois subjects in the same moment as they asserted European hegemony (Pratt, 2008: 9). For example, by naming plants in Latin, language becomes a marker of superiority and immediately elevates the status of Europeans. Pratt uses ‘anti-conquest’ (Pratt, 2008: 9) as an umbrella term for the range of strategies used in interactions that erase the significance of power asymmetries. In doing so, academe can present ‘dedicated scientists’ as concerned to bring order to the chaos of nature (Pratt, 2008: 12) which omits their role in entrenching hierarchical power relations.

The Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions project (ASSAR hereafter) encompassed the tenets of best practice espoused in transdisciplinary partnerships literature. Although funded by Canada and the UK, ASSAR was a South–South partnership orientated towards making a difference to people who are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions, 2018). To this end, ASSAR was divided into 11 cross-cutting themes, one of which was participatory processes. Of these different processes, I focus on the one that had transformative intent, hence making ASSAR stand out from competing funding bids. Although funding representatives were very flexible about the commitments made in the project proposal and the reality once the project began, understandably, changes needed to be justified. In anticipation of these interactions, regional research teams were under pressure to trial the process or have a good reason for its omission.

Transformative scenario planning (Kahane, 2012) is a process designed to transform relationships, which evolve into otherwise unlikely collaborations, between people with diverse and conflicting perspectives. In line with decolonising methodologies, collaborations are formed only after a thorough examination of underlying assumptions, motivations and values (Smith, 2012). As advocated by transdisciplinary researchers (Lang et al., 2012), professional facilitators were hired because of their expertise in transformative methodologies. The intention was for the facilitation team to work in partnership with regional research teams to plan the process and deliver workshops in a way that was context-specific and culturally appropriate. Phrases such as '*working together* to change the future' (Kahane, 2012, emphasis added) epitomised both the participatory nature of the process and the ethos of the facilitation team. The value of transformative scenario planning was to achieve ASSAR's research objectives and avoid the pitfalls of power asymmetries which have thwarted collaborative partnerships in other international transdisciplinary projects (Arnall et al., 2013; Mosberg et al., 2017).

## Resistance and performance

*Weapons of the Weak* (Scott, 1985) is a reminder that despite appearances, people who are not in a position to overthrow inequitable structures have other means by which to undermine structures that perpetuate inequality. Scott's ethnography in Malaysia illustrated how villagers' seeming conformity should not be mistaken for unreflexive obedience. Complying with requests by people in positions of influence was a form of 'pragmatic submission' (1985: 317), and 'foot dragging' (1985: 29) was a type of resistance to exploitative arrangements. Thwarting the will of authorities was subtle enough that it would not lead to reprisals yet successfully represented a 'refusal to accept the definition of the situation as seen from above' (Scott, 1985: 240). Hence, acts of defiance are embedded in everyday interactions where actors can oppose a course of action in the same moment as they agree to participate in it. This means that signing an agreement to partner with an academic organisation, or confirming attendance at a workshop, cannot be equated with an obliviousness to the unequal terms upon which requests for cooperation are made. One way to view these oblique power dynamics is through a dramaturgical lens.

Aligned with symbolic interactionism, performativity in everyday life has permeated English phrases. 'Putting up a front' alludes to the moment when audiences witness an act of (unsuccessfully) concealing one's feelings. The purpose that such acts serve and the mechanics of constructing a front are detailed in Goffman (1959: 13–19). Fronts are composed of appearance and manner (personal front), such as what a person looks like and how they act. The impression conveyed via a personal front is affected by audiences' pre-existing ideas about the type of person they are interacting with (social front). Consequently, despite altering one's appearance and manner, audiences' prior experience may taint the ability of an individual to control how they are perceived. Especially if a person has a 'spoiled identity', their capacity to present a front of their choosing is somewhat constrained (Goffman, 1963). When individuals are aware of being prejudged, they may take steps to present an idealised front to distance themselves from negative stereotypes.

In the ASSAR project, fronts were constructed in association with the status afforded to actors by virtue of being an employee of a partner institution (see *Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions*, 2018). This large international consortium was divided into regional research teams, according to the country where work was taking place. These researchers were predominantly university staff and students, mostly located in the global South, whose work was supported by Oxfam staff to ensure research had impact beyond academic audiences. As soon as each regional research team lead indicated that they were ready to start the process, they were temporarily joined by transformative scenario planning specialists. These facilitators were equals inasmuch as their consultancy firm was a named ASSAR partner but distinct because they took on a leadership role. Facilitators coached each regional research team in planning meetings, led facilitation in workshops, and chaired daily workshop meetings and de-briefs. Stakeholders were people located in the same country where research was focused, who were invited by regional research teams to participate in the transformative scenario planning process. Stakeholders were mostly highly educated bilingual representatives from well-established institutions, ranging from national to local scale (for example, government, community-based organisations, traditional authorities, non-governmental organisations and faith-based groups). The distribution of representation varied from one workshop to another depending on the convening power of each regional research team.

The distinction between ‘settings’ (Goffman, 1959: 66–69) is a useful way to understand situations where regional research teams could be more or less concerned with presenting a united front. ‘Back region’ (back stage) settings are where conversations take place away from project beneficiaries (audiences). These included: planning meetings where professional facilitators coached regional research teams in the transformative scenario planning method; workshop meetings held before and after the workshop for daily planning and de-briefing sessions; ASSAR’s annual meeting where a conference style event is attended by the majority of project staff as well as by a representative from the funding body. In contrast, ‘front region’ (front stage) settings are important for creating and maintaining a desired definition of a situation, where project beneficiaries (audiences) make a judgement about transformative scenario planning. These included a one-off transformative scenario planning training workshop, attended mostly by senior researchers, and a two-day ‘scenario building workshop’ attended by a diverse group of stakeholders (audience) and researchers. This was followed several weeks later by a two-day ‘implications workshop’ attended by, where possible, the same people who attended the scenario building workshop. This workshop finalised stakeholders’ plan of action, and marked the end of the facilitators’ substantive involvement with regional research teams.

## Research design

My research design was grounded in a combination of social constructionist (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), interpretivist and interactionist epistemologies (Henning, 2004). I used a range of qualitative methods, drawing on ethnographic approaches (Gobo, 2008), to elicit actors’ interpretation of interactions from their point of view. My task was to evaluate transformative scenario planning and draw conclusions about the extent to which it was an appropriate method for tackling issues compounded by climate change.

Employing a researcher for this sole purpose was not originally planned but became a necessity given how overextended staff had become, and the centrality of transformative scenario planning in the ASSAR project proposal. Initially, I envisaged conducting a large-scale comparative analysis of transformative scenario planning, encompassing all the regional research teams. The intention was to report any changes to routines, decisions or plans in each region that might be attributable to participation in transformative scenario planning. But as plans in each region changed, I drastically scaled back the scope. I abandoned 'before and after' surveys, and focused on documenting experiences instead of outcomes. Consequently, my approach was less aligned with the evaluation methods of researchers in Ghana and Mali (Totin et al., 2018), who had completed the process by the time I joined ASSAR. Thus, my scope for comparison was limited to the analysis of the process of planning and executing transformative scenario planning, in Omusati (Namibia), Bangalore (India) and Bobirwa (Botswana).

My role as an ASSAR project researcher meant I simultaneously occupied insider (project member) and outsider (researcher) status (Dawson, 2010), and moved between front and back region settings. Techniques encompassed overt, covert, participant and non-participant observation depending on the demands made of me which were dictated by the situation. In workshops, for the most part, I remained a silent observer but in meetings I fully participated. Workshop planning sessions and de-briefs were structured discussions similar to a focus group, run by facilitators according to the reflexive ethos of their consultancy firm. Every meeting began with 'check in' questions that everyone responded to. For example, 'What have you sacrificed to be here today?' (Fieldnotes, Botswana, 23 January 2018). I found these settings to be illuminating, where interactions offered insights into team dynamics and hierarchies, which facilitators attempted to break down in the interests of forming an alliance.

Although ethical approval was obtained via the University of Cape Town's Science Faculty review process, I took a situated approach to ethics (Perez, 2019). I made fieldnotes available to teams to use for their workshop reports and was in continuous conversation with facilitators about my research. Despite attempts to level power relations, researchers and facilitators referred to my research as 'the TSP evaluation', which elevated my status and made it difficult to present myself as non-judgemental. Furthermore, some stakeholders assumed I had influence over resource allocation. In India I was asked if I was making the most of the resources that I had in regard to project partners (SH91, Bangalore, 21 July 2017). In Namibia I was invited to see conditions in rural areas first hand so that I could lobby funders for investment (SH12, Omusati, 14 February 2017). From a contact perspective, my presence contributed to ASSAR's use of transformative scenario planning being interpreted as an imperial encounter (Pratt, 2008: 8): I conducted interviews in English or via a translator and viewed workshops from the back of the room while taking written notes.

Qualitative data combined fieldnotes and interview transcripts. Fieldnotes documented interactions in formal spaces<sup>1</sup> where people met in their capacity as researchers. Across all three regions, I observed a total of 12 days of workshops and participated in 74 hours of meetings which were held before and after workshops. Of these, 28 meetings were online and 44 were face-to-face. All were chaired by professional facilitators who coached regional teams on how to proceed with organising and reflecting on workshops

and the process. I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders for an average of 35 minutes each (seven in Omusati, seven in Bangalore and five in Bobirwa). Analysis is therefore based on approximately 600 A4 pages of handwritten fieldnotes and 11 hours of interviews, between January 2017 and October 2018.

Fieldnotes and transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. Initially, I looked for pre-defined themes that connected with my overall research question: To what extent is transformative scenario planning appropriate for tackling climate change issues? I therefore coded text according to changes that the process was designed to bring about, such as shifts in understanding, relationships and language (Kahane, 2012). It was during initial rounds of coding that I noticed the behaviour associated with workshop fatigue. Using this as a theme, I went back to interviews and re-coded transcripts. I re-read these sections of coded texts to conduct a discourse analysis in order to think through the ways that talk positioned and was positioned by assumptions about workshops (Johnstone, 2008). These analytical techniques are compatible with the locus of Pratt (2008), Goffman (1959) and Scott's (1985) work around the multiple ways that meaning is made and re-made in interactions.

## **Fluid roles**

I have grouped actors together according to how they were positioned by audiences: facilitators, stakeholders (SH) and researchers (R). Although not everyone in regional research teams were researchers, they tended to be regarded as such due to their ASSAR affiliation. These categories also mask actors' multiple roles. Some researchers participated in the workshop as stakeholders due to their expertise and influence, facilitated small group activities in workshops, and helped translate from English (the language of facilitators) to the local language. The purpose of simplification is to foreground moments when actors, traditionally trusted to adhere to expectations, became unreliable. I start with interactions between facilitators and researchers, then move on to settings designed to facilitate collaborations between researchers and stakeholders.

## ***Fractured team dynamics***

Attitudes towards transformative scenario planning varied across all regional research teams, which became evident after facilitators held transformative scenario planning training workshops. These were held in 2016, two years after ASSAR research began, attended by senior members from each regional research team. Subsequently, regional team leads started the transformative scenario planning process in Upper West Region in Ghana and Koutiala District in Mali. This culminated in cooperation between researchers and stakeholders, to give an idealised performance of the benefits of having participated in transformative scenario planning (ASSAR Project, 2018). In contrast, regional team leads for research in Ethiopia and Kenya rejected transformative scenario planning as ill-suited to the contexts in which they would be working. Instead, they negotiated permission to replace the process with an alternative of their own design that, unlike transformative scenario planning, enabled them to interact with people not traditionally involved in high-level decision-making (Tebboth et al.,

2020). At the end of 2016, transformative scenario planning had yet to commence in Namibia, Botswana or India.

A facilitator's progress report noted 'the appetite for TSP [transformative scenario planning] has varied greatly amongst the regions' and at times there was 'significant resistance to the TSP [transformative scenario planning] from some members of the hosting team [regional research team]'. Such resistance has been described elsewhere as a refusal to passively accept metropolitan power (Connell et al., 2018) or a 'silent rebellion' (Schmidt and Neuburger, 2017). Similarly, what I observed resembled 'foot dragging and evasion' (Scott, 1985: xvi). There was no explicit objection to transformative scenario planning by researchers once the process was underway in Namibia, Botswana and India. But facilitators continued to be regarded by some as expensive external experts, whose job it was to prove the value of transformative scenario planning.

This imbalance was evident in planning meetings. Facilitators stressed that the process had been significantly modified in order to meet the needs (and limited budget) of ASSAR (Fieldnotes, 4 July 2017). Further, facilitators felt the need to remind regional research teams that ASSAR was a partnership, of which they were a part (Fieldnotes, 14 February 2017). Planning meetings were designed to be back region interactions between regional research teams and facilitators, so as to build a 'strong container' that could withstand conflict (Kahane, 2012). But it was not until a reflection was held by facilitators at ASSAR's final annual meeting that researchers admitted how they had originally felt.

One project team member [academic] looked back on how they initially thought about all the ways they could avoid doing TSP [transformative scenario planning]. Another [researcher] shared their resentment at having to sacrifice research-related work to organise workshops. This was compounded by scepticism that a process which involved only 25 invited stakeholders could instigate change in India, a country of over a billion people. Yet this was the same person who, immediately after the workshop, posted a blog on the ASSAR website espousing the merits of the process?! (Fieldnotes, 15 June 2017)

The suppression of these doubts show how planning meetings were experienced as front region spaces where an insincere performance (Goffman, 1959) of participation was enacted by some researchers. The masking of scepticism was coupled with fatigue that resulted from regional research teams finding the process draining. In workshop debriefs, the overriding emotion seemed to be relief that the workshop was over and researchers could, at last, turn their attention to other tasks (Fieldnotes, Omusati, 6 July 2017; Bangalore, 7 December 2017; Bobirwa, 25 January 2018). The combination of initial scepticism and continued apathy towards transformative scenario planning somewhat undermined the potential for ASSAR to instigate systemic change of the sort called for by climate change adaptation scholars (Rickards et al., 2014). As a result of putting off initiating the process, transformative scenario planning was reduced to a series of workshops. Although intended to be a non-linear process, transformative scenario planning became one of a list of activities that needed to be ticked off before the funding period ended. Facilitators became weary at having to drag some regional research teams through a process, merely to fulfil commitments made in ASSAR's funding proposal (Fieldnotes, 10 January 2017).

## *Suppressing scepticism*

Just as researchers suppressed scepticism towards the process for the benefit of the project, so too did stakeholders in Omusati, Namibia. Despite workshops being designed to invite conflict (Kahane, 2012), the closest that anyone came to non-conformity was a stakeholder who was subsequently characterised by researchers as ‘difficult’ in workshop meetings (Fieldnotes, Omusati, 6 July 2017). SH1 was a seasoned workshop-goer, often targeted because of her seniority, who had become accustomed to hiding her aversion to workshops. The following extract demonstrates the characteristics of spaces and patterns of interaction between audience (stakeholders) and performer (facilitator), which have become familiar workshop tropes. But it is also indicative of the levels of prejudice, seemingly unbeknownst to researchers, that facilitators were faced with.<sup>2</sup>

And then you go to all these workshops, and then, ‘ok, what is it this time?’ And then some of these things, we have seen so many of them, it’s just repetition. Like, I remember the one day at Swakopmund a consultant came from Germany. You know, it’s just people trying to get themselves jobs, you know. [She] Came from Germany, book[ed] us all in [at] Swakopmund, and then when the process worked, it was all these things like flip charts and what what [et cetera]. And at the end of the day people were like, sometimes when the lady’s there in front talking we’re like, we want to laugh, because people were like ‘really, this is something that you call children from the kindergarten’. It’s really kindergarten things, you know. And they were like, ‘this insult, what do you think of us, that we can’t think?’ And it’s like at the end of the day the facilitator was so surprised that the things we were talking about. Because we have, already have plans, like strategic plans, and all these things they are already in there. And then she was like ‘I am surprised that the things you are talking about are actually matching your plan!’ And we were like ‘ja!’ [yes!] you know. (SH1, Ongwediva, Namibia, 15 February 2018)

The exclamation ‘what is it this time?’ alludes to the quantity of invitations to be part of projects, workshops, or new methodologies, to the extent that the same subjects are duplicated (‘we have seen so many of them, it’s just repetition’). She reconciles their ubiquity, in the absence of any demand, as surely owing to a foreign job creation initiative (‘it’s just people trying to get themselves jobs’). The space is immediately familiar because of the recognisable paraphernalia (‘all these things like flip charts and what what’). Initially, the tone of facilitation is comical (‘we want to laugh’) but this quickly descends into resentment (‘this insult’). Workshop participants interpret the facilitator’s performance as a product of having woefully misjudged her audience’s level of education, cognition and preparedness (‘what do you think of us, that we can’t think?’). Having seemingly not read the audience and/or the audience not making their true feelings apparent, the facilitator went on to congratulate workshop participants for having exceeded her expectations. These prior experiences expand on the constraints of workshops identified by others (Holman, 2009; Jones et al., 2015; Martínez-Santos et al., 2010; Mistry et al., 2009), which acted as a yardstick against which stakeholders judged ASSAR’s engagement methods.

SH1 went on to praise ASSAR facilitators and the transformative scenario planning method, but the turn that her account takes shows that fatigue is much more than feeling fed up. Her initial resistance echoes literature that connects fatigue to low attendance and

lateness to workshops (Jones et al., 2015: 31). Her subsequent explanation for the persistent futility of interactions points to how workshops are experienced by audiences as front region settings in which they are expected to perform. This results in stakeholders suppressing contempt in the face of paternalism of the kind that scientists were guilty of in imperial encounters of the past (Pratt, 2008; Smith, 2012). The suspicion that colleagues are resisting historical and hierarchical power relations has been pointed out in other work (Schmidt and Neuburger, 2017), but seems to remain accepted to some degree as a trade-off in light of inevitably unequal partnerships. Put another way, if viewed as a refusal to give a sincere performance of participation, workshop fatigue can be theorised as a form of resistance (Scott, 1985) against anti-conquest strategies (Pratt, 2008). In SH1's account, confining criticism to back region settings resembled 'pragmatic submission' (Scott, 1985: 317) where the audience refrained from undermining the regional research team. This was not the case in Bangalore, where stakeholders discredited idealised fronts presented in workshops.

### *Attendance and resistance*

The regional research team in Bangalore struggled to convene a diverse *and* influential group of people. For example, the absence of government officials threatened the credibility of the methodology. Equally striking were the divergent expectations of stakeholders compared to researchers. Following historical power differentials between natural scientists and lay perspectives (Pratt, 2008), researchers (mostly academics) were free to come and go, while stakeholders (mostly non-academics) were expected to stay for the duration of the process. This difference is illustrated in the following two quotes. SH53 has a background in consulting and the facilitation of change processes and Krishna MB<sup>3</sup> is an ornithologist.

Who was there? Which decision maker of any government body was there? R1 was probably the most powerful man in the room, because now that he has built this institution, he has clout. He has some political clout, right? He wasn't there at all for any of the thing. He came and gave a big speech at the beginning, gave a big speech at the end, and left. (SH53 transcript, Bangalore, 8 December 2017)

To Krishna it seemed unfair that he was silenced in the name of time constraints when the workshop had started late. He arrived on time but was made to wait two hours before proceedings began. When they did begin, he listened to R1 speak for 30 minutes in an unstructured circular manner. When Krishna was not even 3 minutes into articulating a response to R1, he was cut off. (Krishna MB, Interview notes, Bangalore, 24 July 2017)

R1 is a senior figure in ASSAR whose status and standing is immediately recognised by SH53 (he has clout). In the absence of government officials, 'political clout' was missing from a methodology that was presented to stakeholders as transformative. Further, some researchers were able to limit their role to a ceremonial function and return to their everyday work routines once this had been performed. Stakeholders, also invited because they are in positions of influence, were expected to commit to and attend a minimum of two, 2-day workshops. Krishna expands on this double standard by explaining how time

constraints were used dissimilarly by researchers. Although R1 was asked to keep his talk short, it was difficult for less senior researchers to cut him off because R1 was their superior. Although Krishna is aware of this back stage power dynamic, he remained aggrieved. The agenda was adjusted to take into account late comers and a speech that overran, whereas the extent of Krishna's participation had to fit in with the workshop programme. In connection with critiques of partnerships (Schaaf, 2015; Schmidt and Pröpper, 2017), community development (Hickey and Mohan, 2004) and methodologies from the West (Smith, 2012), the regional research team's performance was not interpreted as a collaboration among equals.

Rather than express disgruntlement in back region interactions, as SH1 said was common in Namibia, SH53 and Krishna challenge the authority of facilitators and researchers. SH53 took over the stage normally occupied by facilitators to give an impromptu talk about the global water crisis and the need to think differently.<sup>4</sup> Although his argument against rigidly technical mindsets supported the underpinnings of transformative scenario planning, his presentation also demonstrated that such philosophies are known to the audience. Consequently, the researcher's presentation of the methodology as innovative, a feature used to attract stakeholders to the workshop, was undercut. SH53's presentation implicitly questions the necessity for consultants, flown in from South Africa and Mumbai to Bangalore, when expertise was in the room. When theorised as resistance using Scott (1985), SH53's performance is an imposition, especially in comparison to other stakeholders who were ostensibly deferential.

In contrast, Krishna initially refused to complete workshop activities as instructed. Instead, he moved from his table and sat next to me at the back of the room. He asked about my research and advised on ways that I could quantify and improve the accuracy of my observation notes. I tried to steer our conversation back to the workshop-related task at hand. Despite my best efforts to persuade him that conventional participation might be worthwhile, he spent most of the rest of the session sharing with me what he has observed and noticed (Fieldnotes, 19 July 2017). Through a dramaturgical lens this is disruptive because he refused to give a sincere performance of participation. Rather than merely leave, as some others did immediately after R1's speech, Krishna used the workshop as an opportunity to help me regiment my research. He suggested videoing the workshop to make research more reliable and adopting similar techniques that ensure accuracy when researching birds. His suggestions hark back to Linnaean logic and 'visual scrutiny as the means of knowledge' (Pratt, 2008: 51). Similar to SH53, he entrenched the impulse to categorise in the same moment as he resisted his use of time being dictated by a facilitation plan. In his interview, he talked about colonisation, power and politics but this remained a back stage interaction between us. This was not the case in Botswana, where such concerns took centre stage.

### *Pragmatic submission*

Scenarios have become a popular way to plan for climate change as a path to long-term, systematic planning for uncertain futures (Rickards et al., 2014). In Botswana, four scenarios were developed in the first workshop, revised by the regional research team and distributed for discussion in the second workshop. Researchers stressed the

importance of all stakeholders feeling able to speak freely to avoid the setting being dominated by male, educated, multilingual stakeholders (Fieldnotes, 19 October 2017). Unlike in Namibia and India, the scenario stories were printed in the local language, Setswana, as well as English. Despite these efforts to make the workshop inclusive, SH4 decided against querying what he found to be the problematic use of statistics in the scenario stories. The following extract illustrates how the avoidance of taking issue with the scenarios in front region settings was an act of ‘pragmatic submission’ (Scott, 1985: 317).

So while I was there, I thought maybe I could raise the point and say ‘ah’. But then I thought people here are going to make too much noise. So I thought ‘ah no let me. . .’ [. . .] I didn’t say anything [. . .] Sometimes, like last year, we stopped for a while arguing. So I said ‘ah no.’ [. . .] But all in all, even this [report], when they go and write. They shouldn’t try to say too much things that will put [people in Omusati region] on the bad side. . . Like here it says [he reads one of the scenarios in the workshop report] ‘where does this lead by 2035? Agriculture production has declined drastically. 62% of farmland is not being used at all.’ [. . .] Because again if I saw it here, I say ‘ah maybe the government will see this thing’, maybe it will be, maybe around 2034 and 2032 and most of the people will be a new generation. This [workshop] will be gone. They will say ‘no, during the time of your fathers, we used, we made a research’.

(SH82, Bobirwa, 24 January 2018)

He does not immediately dismiss the idea of speaking up (‘I thought maybe I could raise the point’) but ultimately chooses to stay silent to avoid causing a scene (‘people here are going to make too much noise’). He bases this decision on his memory of a session in the first workshop held at the end of 2017. Stakeholders stopped following instructions and spent an hour questioning the project’s intentions and power dynamics between local stakeholders, researchers and foreign institutions (‘Sometimes, like last year, we stopped for a while arguing’). After careful deliberation he decides that on balance his concerns are not worth raising (‘So I said “ah no”’) because what is more important is what will be recorded by researchers (‘when they go and write’). The frequency of objections is correlated to the increased likelihood that report content will be negative (‘They shouldn’t try to say too much things that will put [people in Omusati region] on the bad side’). This is important to him because the scenarios are written like predictions (‘“where does this lead by 2035? Agriculture production has declined drastically. 62% of farmland is not being used at all”’). In future, although SH82 now knows this report is not research-based (something I was able to clarify when interviewing him), scenarios can be appropriated by the government (‘maybe the government will see this thing’). The use of dates and percentages means that a ‘new generation’ will argue that their decisions are evidence-based (‘during the time of your fathers, we used, we made a research’).

These concerns speak to the politics of representation summarised by Pratt (2008). Representations of Southern Africa in the 1700s involved an absence of people and instead focused on flora and fauna, for the purpose of scoping out regions that the empire could exploit (Pratt, 2008: 30). SH82 similarly anticipates how the Botswanan government might use outsiders’ representations of the workshop to justify their plans for Bobirwa. Unlike Namibian stakeholders who expressed workshop fatigue in back region spaces among themselves, SH82 did not share his criticisms with other stakeholders in

private. This could be due to the antagonism between government and residents, which was apparent in other interviews with stakeholders but not overtly raised.

Although transformative scenario planning is a critical process by design, the portrayal of workshops in reports defines Bobirwa and its residents. To SH82, arguing is undesirable because any conflict has the potential to be interpreted as dissent. In turn, this feeds his worry to present stakeholders as productive in the face of accusations that they are not using land that could otherwise be developed. The methodology as it unfurled in the regional research team in Botswana unintentionally conformed to the tendency of well-meaning academics who entrench the colonisation of knowledge (Smith, 2012). Workshop fatigue can be interpreted as an objection to the sense of entitlement that scientists assume when they experiment with methodologies, and a seeming obliviousness to the parallels between academia and imperialism.

### **Conclusion: The power of workshop fatigue**

Transdisciplinary and participatory approaches are being developed as part of the global climate change agenda. Reliance on the cooperation of international partners has somewhat shifted power relations, but employees in the global South are often in a weaker position compared to their relatively privileged counterparts at wealthier institutions in the global North. This puts collaborators under pressure to demonstrate that research will create equal partnerships between different academic disciplines; build relationships between academic and non-academic stakeholders; ensure everyone learns from one another to co-create knowledge; be a catalyst for individual and collective transformative change; and challenge social, technological, economic, environmental and political structures that exacerbate inequality. Well-facilitated workshops continue to be popular because they are often the best way to pursue these aspirations.

Workshops become demanding rather than relaxed settings when participation is a requisite project component. Consequently, workshops can become stage-like when actors (researchers, facilitators and stakeholders) feel pressured to demonstrate progress towards the ideals set out in the original research proposal. Despite involving highly reflective facilitators, the ASSAR project's use of transformative scenario planning did not consistently elicit a sincere performance of participation from either researchers or stakeholders. The intervention placed emphasis on involving a diverse range of perspectives represented by people in positions of power. This exclusionary approach is not a problem per se. However, presenting the process as a somehow new, innovative, unique opportunity was to ignore the ubiquity of workshops with over-researched populations. Insincere performances interfered with workshop settings, otherwise dominated by a transdisciplinary research agenda, but without sacrificing the opportunity to potentially benefit from them.

Resistance to Eurocentric methodologies has been thoroughly discussed in terms of underlying power dynamics, the implications of these for research relationships, and the need for reflexivity. Rarely mentioned and conceptually limited, workshop fatigue functions as an explanation for underperformance among research teams and invited stakeholders. This positions workshop fatigue as a side issue, characteristic of development work in general, a problem with the 'other' in building partnerships, and a familiar gripe in back region interactions. In contrast, when conceptualised as an expression of

resistance, I conclude that anticipating workshop fatigue provides an alternative approach to surfacing power relations.

In multidisciplinary teams, it is tempting to annex issues of power relations to social scientists. Workshop fatigue is a concept that is accessible across social and natural scientists and can bridge this stereotypical disciplinary division of labour. In considering why invited stakeholders may not want to attend a workshop, or why regional research teams are sceptical, matters of historical research relationships are inevitably raised which brings power relations into conversations. This is not to say that talking about workshop fatigue will level power relations and make amends for historical exploitation via a mere acknowledgement of it. But it is a conversation topic that inevitably involves grappling with what and who has come before. It is therefore a way to present oneself to others in a manner that conveys an awareness and concern about the traditionally exploitative nature of research relationships, that is otherwise easy (to pretend) not to notice.

Hence anticipating workshop fatigue can be a simple, practical, and accessible way to begin engaging with power relations in a constructive yet critical manner. In doing so, people in positions of relative privilege can non-verbally communicate that, unlike their predecessors, they do not assume that their status gives them the inalienable right to build adaptive capacity by convening people they have identified as influential stakeholders. In parallel with decolonising methodologies, pre-empting workshop fatigue lends itself to a more ethical engagement with the intended beneficiaries of research by seeing research from the perspective of others. However, anticipating workshop fatigue will not on its own lead to trusting relationships. Equally important is a willingness to view partners (researchers, stakeholders and facilitators) as people rather than merely representatives of a specific institution or research field.

On one level, the power of workshop fatigue might involve a purely academic engagement: theorising the constraints of apathy and scepticism for the purpose of scholarly debates at the intersection of development, sociology and climate change. On a practical level, workshop fatigue could be a way to apply a sociological sensibility to climate change projects. It does not involve developing new terminology or development buzzwords. Yet the capacity of fatigue to constrain means that it is imbued with power and therefore any anticipation of it engages with the subtleties of navigating hierarchical interactions. Rather than waiting for people to resist, anticipating fatigue could be a way to view climate change research projects from the audience's perspective. In doing so the image of academics might be improved in the eyes of people who see climate change research as an extension of development paradigms or colonial era paternalism.

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## Notes

1. My interpretation of interactions has been heavily informed by informal conversations that I had with team members. These have not been included here due to ethical considerations. Although everyone was aware of my identity as a researcher, the setting in which conversations took place (pub/hotel room) meant it was not obvious at the time that information shared with me would be used in my research. This is because at the time, these informal chats did not seem significant so I did not know informal conversations would become relevant.
2. An activity titled 'cynics and believers' was used on the first day to invite dissenting voices and scepticism. But ultimately stakeholders were asked to set these aside in the interests of keeping an open mind.
3. Krishna requested that my interview notes be cited as personal communication with him and that he be identified by name.
4. He asks prior permission from researchers to give a presentation, which was interpreted as showing initiative and therefore granted. This was against the wishes of one of the facilitators whose objections were overruled.

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### Author biography

Teresa Sandra Perez specialises in qualitative and transdisciplinary research. Her work aims to tackle global problems by achieving a firmer grasp of the perspectives of marginalised social groups. She divides her time between the UK and South Africa. She is currently investigating plastic waste in a collaboration between the University of Cambridge and the Anglican Church of Southern Africa's Environmental Network. This builds on her PhD, which examined the stigma management strategies of 'waste pickers' in Cape Town.

### Résumé

La lassitude des ateliers (*workshop fatigue*) est une expression familière pour décrire l'apathie ressentie à l'occasion des discussions organisées qui, dans les interventions visant à établir des partenariats, semble être considérée comme quelque peu inévitable. Pour bousculer ce postulat, je théorise la lassitude comme une forme subtile de résistance. Les résultats de cette étude sont fondés sur des recherches qualitatives réalisées dans le cadre d'une collaboration sur le changement climatique, portant plus particulièrement sur une méthodologie appelée *transformative scenario planning* (« planification de scénarios de transformation »). Je fais appel à la fois à Goffman, Scott et Pratt pour analyser les interactions entre les modérateurs, les chercheurs et les parties prenantes dans les réunions et les ateliers. Les représentations historiques des efforts scientifiques sont mises en contraste avec la qualité de la participation en Namibie, en Inde et au Botswana. Je conclus qu'anticiper la lassitude des ateliers pourrait être un moyen accessible de faire émerger des relations de pouvoir dans des partenariats internationaux intrinsèquement inégaux et d'apporter une sensibilité sociologique à la recherche transdisciplinaire sur le changement climatique.

### Mots-clés

Adaptation au changement climatique, développement international, lassitude des ateliers, partenariats transdisciplinaires, planification des scénarios de transformation, processus participatif, relations de pouvoir

### Resumen

La fatiga del taller (*workshop fatigue*) es un coloquialismo para describir la apatía hacia las discusiones organizadas que tiende a ser vista como algo inevitable en intervenciones diseñadas para construir partenariados. Para desafiar esta presunción, se teoriza la fatiga como una forma sutil de resistencia. La evidencia se basa en la investigación cualitativa realizada como parte de una colaboración sobre el cambio climático, centrándose específicamente en una metodología llamada *transformative scenario planning* ('planificación de escenarios transformativos'). La investigación combina las aportaciones de Goffman,

Scott y Pratt para analizar las interacciones entre los mediadores, los investigadores y las partes interesadas en reuniones y talleres. Las representaciones históricas de los esfuerzos científicos se contrastan con la calidad de la participación en Namibia, India y Botswana. Se concluye que anticipar la fatiga del taller podría ser una forma accesible de hacer emerger las relaciones de poder en partenariados internacionales inherentemente desiguales, y aportar una sensibilidad sociológica a la investigación transdisciplinaria sobre el cambio climático.

**Palabras clave**

Adaptación al cambio climático, desarrollo internacional, fatiga del taller, partenariados transdisciplinarios, planificación de escenarios transformativos, proceso participativo, relaciones de poder