5th INTREPID Report
Transformative Knowledge for an era of Planetary Urbanization?
Questioning the role of social sciences and humanities from an interdisciplinary perspective

By:
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This report has benefitted from the contributions to discussions by all participants to the seminar, including those listed in the Annex, who actively joined the table discussions.

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Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 3

Table 1: Reorganising the social relations of knowledge production? .......................... 5

Table 2: (Critical) theory and the production of the ‘urban’ ........................................... 7

Table 3: In search of new epistemological and methodological approaches ........... 11

Table 4: On the role of SSH in envisioning and shaping futures ................................. 13

References ....................................................................................................................................... 17

Annex – List of participants to the tables .............................................................................. 18

Introduction

This document reports the main outputs of the world café discussion held during the seminar ‘Transformative Knowledge for an Era of Planetary Urbanization’ at the Institute of the Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (ICS-ULisboa) on 10 July 2017 – an event convened by the COST Action INTREPID, the research group Environment, Territory and Society of ICS-ULisboa, and the Young Academics Network of AESOP.¹

The seminar brought together a group of mainly early and mid-career scholars to discuss the kinds of transformative knowledge, pedagogy and practice required to contribute to sustainable development in an era of planetary urbanization. The event opened with the keynote lecture by Heather Campbell titled “The operation was successful but the patient died”. The tale of social science research. The fate of planning research?”.² The keynote, rooted in a long-term experience of research and thinking about knowledge and co-production (Campbell, 2012; Campbell and Vanderhoven, 2016), addressed the role of social science research in producing

¹ More information here: www.intrepid-cost.eu/

knowledge capable of fostering change. Citing Siemiatycki and Siemiatycki (2016), Campbell noted that our research is getting ‘narrower and more specialized’, but not necessarily more relevant; contributing through ‘interpretation, description and explanation’, but often falling short of providing recommendations or explications for practice. Reminding us that problems in the world do not frame themselves in neat disciplinary contours, thus debates around the need or otherwise of interdisciplinarity are, primarily, an academic issue and problem. She concluded advocating five steps towards rethinking the knowledge project:

• Expanding the knowledge ecosystem;
• Moving to more (genuinely) interactive and active forms of knowledge generation, including more meaningful questions and more partnerships rather than projects;
• Developing different ways of knowing that go beyond empirical investigation, description and analysis (the ‘what’ and ‘why’), towards synthesis and the normative and ethical questions (the ‘how’ and ‘should’);
• Getting beyond methods and assessment of desk-based narratives, beyond methodological rigour, to engage with ethical value;
• Embracing flexibility and reflective learning, not just blueprints and techno-rational approaches that often don’t work.

The core of the seminar was structured in a world café discussion, organised in four tables.³ Thirty-five people, representing fourteen countries (see Annex), stayed on after the keynote and participated in this exercise. The discussion was loosely oriented by a position paper distributed a few weeks before the seminar (Tulumello et al., 2017) and by Campbell’s keynote. In the following sections, we summarise the main topics discussed, based on the reports given by the moderators/rapporteurs of the four tables during the final roundtable of the seminar. The different styles of the four summaries mirror the quite different modes of discussion in the four tables – as it will be clear, even contents of discussion have been complementary, if not contradictory to some extent.

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³ In world café fora, participants are divided in equal groups among the thematic tables. After each short session, each group move to another table, until all participants have travelled through all tables. As such, in each table, there are different participants in every session; and the moderators are responsible to sum up the previous discussion and launch a new round.
Table 1: Reorganising the social relations of knowledge production?
*Rapporteur: Marco Allegra*

The idea that ‘knowledge matters’, and should therefore be put to use, was the starting point for the discussion of Table 1. Within this perspective, the participants debated whether or not cooperative practices that aim at the reformulation of traditional boundaries in academic research and higher education – in its various declinations (e.g. interdisciplinarity, multi-disciplinarity, post-disciplinarity, trans-disciplinarity, post-disciplinarity, co-production, co-creation, co-design, engaged scholarship, user engagement, participatory action research, etc.) – can foster a more positive and direct engagement with the society at large.

All in all, the participants seemed to share a consensus on the potential of these practices.

Broadly speaking, these practices can offer significant advantages. On the more conceptual level, because a problem-based approach to the production of knowledge can offer a better match between research and education, on the one side, and pressing social issues on the other – providing a remedy for a situation in which ‘communities have problems, universities have departments’. On a more pragmatic level, they can stimulate meaningful and productive forms of cooperation between scholars, and between scholars and non-academics. Also, to the extent that these practices amount to a deeper engagement with the reality under study, they are likely to simply provide better data.

More specifically, cooperative approaches can be used to ‘locate’ knowledge within a given social environment by providing channels through which we can translate more abstract forms of knowledge into the local reality; by helping to maintain the research’s focus on real (as opposed to theory-driven) problems; by remedying the prevalent Eurocentric nature of academic knowledge; by integrating forms of local knowledge into the process.

Other observations concerned the role of the researcher as actor in these processes. Cooperative approaches can be fruitful, but entail several inherent challenges that can be met only if the researchers are able to deploy peculiar skills, namely the

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4 An expression employed by Heather Campbell, citing a report a report by the OECD (1982), during her introductory keynote.
ability to adjust to different sets of expectations and modes of operation; to code-switch and acquire fluency in different languages; to communicate their work in a more straightforward, simpler way; to orient themselves in a more complex geography of ethical problems.

Several critical observations, however, emerged in this respect in three broad areas.

First, many participants debated whether or not this represents a conceptual and practical turning point, or just a way to pour old wine in new, admittedly fancy, bottles – bottles that would essentially allow the researcher to successfully submit papers and/or compete for grants. ‘Do your research right (e.g. on real problems; developing a deep and respectful engagement with the actors involved; maintaining a certain degree of reflexivity)’, some argued, ‘and you don’t necessarily need to call it co-production’.

Second, participants pointed to the risks inherent to an aprioristic, positive mythology surrounding cooperative approaches. For example: do communities always and necessarily express a demand for this kind of engagement? And what could make this engagement meaningful – e.g. what could ‘researchers’ and ‘communities’ exchange in the course of their interaction? Also, some wondered whether or not ‘knowledge extraction’ (i.e. a non-cooperative mode of knowledge production) represents necessarily a form of blindness and insensitivity on the part of the researcher, with potential ethical implications. Finally, some observed that trust among actors (a necessary condition for the development of cooperative approaches) is difficult to build but easily destroyed: cooperation entails its own risks, because failure to bring positive results can undermine the possibility of future exchanges. Trust necessarily takes time, yet time is constantly being reduced under pressure to complete, produce outputs and move on to the next project.

These last observations connect to a third area of concern: to what extent is the environment in which research is produced conducive of meaningful forms of cooperation that cut across disciplinary and institutional boundaries? Some participants argued that characteristic features of contemporary production of knowledge (i.e. the projectification of the research, the individualization of research careers in an ultra-competitive environment, and so forth), together with broader issues of power and hierarchy within the universities, can undermine the vary basis of cooperative, long-term engagement with local communities and pressing social problems.
Table 2: (Critical) theory and the production of the ‘urban’

Rapporteur: Andrea Pavoni

What does it mean to theorise? In fact, what is (critical) theory? Thus the discussion (ambitiously) began. Etymology came to help. Theôria, the root of theory, means to look at, to see. So does idein, the root of idea. The idea of theory does not simply denote an attempt (and a will) to know, but first and foremost an intention to see, premised on gaining a vantage point from where an enlightening gaze could be thrown. Theorising is an ascending movement towards a panoptical observation point, as the World Trade Centre roof from where de Certeau (1984 [1980]) gazes down over Manhattan. Yet, what does make theory critical? This metaphorical exercise allowed to formulate some hypotheses in this regard.

First, the initial question was reoriented: from the what, to the where of theory, its inescapable location within a socio-historical milieu. Theory always occurs in the middle of a problematic field and, following Deleuze (2004 [1968]), it has to do with the creation of concepts as tools whereby we may understand, traverse and, possibly, reorient its parameters. Thus the pragmatic, situated, and urgent quality of theory was emphasised, against its ivory tower caricature.

Second, the event of theory. Moving from its etymological root (from krinein: ‘to separate’), we explored the veritable moment of rupture that characterises critique. Hence the question of how theory becomes critical by means of extrapolating itself from the specific socioeconomic and political relations of the epoch out of which it emerges, in order to gain a productive vision able to analyse and interrogate them. While constrained by the parameters of a given situation, theory emerges as a speculative breakage of said parameters, prompting their reformulation.

Third, and consequently, the imagination of theory, an aspect we dealt with through the concept of utopia. The table quickly dismissed two main connotations of utopia. On the one hand, its classical, and eminently urban usage: namely, the ideal city, a transcendent non-place where conflict and asymmetries have mysteriously disappeared. An untenable vision which, however, often is still surreptitiously at work within many strands of urban theory. On the other hand, the technocratic capture of utopia within the bulimic promotion of urban futures that increasingly congest the current urban debate, not to mention the visual surface. As some put it,
this entails mere projections of frozen presents, as status quo is conservatively confirmed while being techno-aesthetically disguised as a novel, smart future.

Whether we agreed on the limits of these connotations, we also converged in emphasising the potential that utopian thinking holds. Frederic Jameson’s suggestion (2004) came to help. To Jameson, utopia is not a positive capacity to envisage a better future, but a negative force that emerges out of the failure of imagination itself. It is when imagination reaches its limits, apparently confirming the prophecy of the TINA (There Is No Alternative) rhetoric, that it becomes able to make visible these very limits, ‘our imprisonment in a non-utopian present’, and ‘the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined’ (ibidem, 46), thus prompting its reconfiguration by releasing the possibility of a truly transformative utopian thinking.

As we were framing critical theory as a tentative navigation towards the limits of imagination, then the questions of time and participation surfaced. Time, in fact, appeared as crucial: how to reconcile the demanding, uncertain, failure-bent, and time-consuming effort theory seemingly requires, with an increasingly result-orientated academic world? How to foster a theoretical thinking able to explore unknown avenues without having to succumb to consequentialist pressure, whilst at the same time avoiding postmodern acquiescence to a self-satisfactory dérive?

This was initially tackled from the point of view of the relation between theory and academic structure. It seemed to many that producing valuable and effective urban theories requires suitable spaces, and times, for this to be carried out, even in the face of the sense of urgency constantly imposed upon academia. As the age of the impact-factor impinges upon us, the question of theory cannot be separated from the reformulation of the very structure through which it is produced, expected, and evaluated. In fact, some even argued whether the very spirit of this seminar, by implicitly tying social sciences and humanities to the production of transformative knowledge, unwittingly reinforced such a pre-emptive entrapment of theory into a consequentialist trap.

The discussion on whether or not a theory (and in general, a research effort) should be able to demonstrate in advance its value, seeped into that of whether this effort should be disentangled from the, at time hubristic, search for a ‘grand’ theory. The theoretical elephant in the room (if anything, for its explicit reference in the seminar’s title) was Neil Brenner’s theory of planetary urbanisation. Different,
around the table, were the opinions about this theory, that some praised for the capacity to grasp a *planetary* process that may be useful vis-à-vis urban studies empiricist tendency; and others reprimanded for overlooking specific and contingent forms in which urbanisation unfold (especially in the so-called *South*). Through this debate two interesting positions crystallised.

On the one hand, the need to assess a theory vis-à-vis the urgency prompted by the problematic field out of which (and to challenge which) it emerges: namely, neoliberal urbanisation. Planetary urbanisation’s totalising afflatus was in this sense justified as a strategic response to neoliberal urbanisation’s as much totalising push. However, some also questioned whether this is just a symptom, for the tendency of urban theorists to succumb to the hypnotising force of – and thus to end up fetishising – a process which, at a closer look, appears as far less coherent, functioning, and planetary, than it is conceptually implied.

On the other hand, such *strong* theoretical ambition was opposed by the concept of *weak* theory. Developed in the field of queer studies, this notion points to a theorising that, à la Latour, intends to *follow* the objects rather than trying to enclose them into a grand all-encompassing view (cf. Kosofsky Sedgwick, 2003). A weak theory is meant to be immanent and flexible vis-à-vis its field of study, without aspiring to universality and rather focusing on dwelling on contradictions, rather than overcoming them. A weak theory, some noted, chimes significantly with the notion of anamorphic politics as recently proposed by Jodi Dean (2016). *Anamorphism* refers to distorted images that become visible only when seen with a special manner, or device, or from a particular angle or vantage point. Classic example is Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*, at the London’s National Gallery. Dean proposes it as a way to ‘escaping the fascination of the [big] picture’ by willingly assuming a localised ‘partisan perspective [from which] the whole will not appear as a whole. It will appear with a hole’ (ibidem, without page).

The suggestion, found interesting by many, led directly to the key question of normativity: whether it is important to challenge the hubris of ‘strong’ theory with the sensibility of ‘weaker’ efforts, it is also crucial to take into account the normative effort every theory *should carry*, and thus the necessity for urban scholars to engage in this complex and perilous path: anti-normativity was challenged by some as an ultimately irresponsible position, whilst others criticised the notion of normativity and its disciplinary premises. The table split in multiple positions on this theme, testifying its centrality in the urban question. Whilst some saw weak theory in
opposition to what was perceived as the (white, male, western) hubris of the ‘planetary’, others pointed towards its potential use not in substitution, but to complement the totalising scope of Brenner’s planetary urbanisation, with a strategic effort to explore and exploit the holes, cracks, and fissures in the system, where there is no absence of normativity but rather different minor and counter normativities emerge through the cracks.

The other point related to the critique of strong theory was that of the elitist isolation of the theorist. On this note, the question of participation was lively engaged with. Whether participation was assumed as a crucial recalibration of theory’s top-down tendencies, the concept to many (if not all) appeared as exhausted. Not only in relation to the role the rhetoric of participation plays in defusing conflict and co-opting more and more individuals into (neoliberal) decisional processes. But also vis-à-vis the extent to which participation may become a self-neutralising tool for the researchers themselves, as when ‘participatory’ tools and bottom-up rhetorics are uncritically employed as self-validating shortcuts able to instantly legitimise and qualify a research project. A problem that directly resonates with the creeping empiricism of contemporary urban studies, where the ‘local’ is often fetishised as an instrument of legitimation for the research, rather than as an active participant in its very production: evidently, sharing the results of a research with its participants and incorporating their feedback is not the same as co-producing it with them.

This led to a complex discussion on how theorising can avoid either fetishising a local/global dichotomy or simply flattening it. How to make theory in a properly participatory manner, as a way to co-produce novel, shared worlds, rather than simply reducing participation to the moment in which a given theory is communicated and debated with the ‘participants’? A classic case for endorsing a Deleuzian right to problems in the city, that is, the right to participate in the individuation of urban problems, rather than being co-opted a posteriori in the search of ‘solutions’. Perhaps the very concept of participation is to be done with, some maintained, since far too drained and co-opted. A linguistic effort that obviously points to a methodological one: while the question remained unanswered, everyone converged in stressing the necessity to develop novel and innovative methodologies in this regard.

The question of mapping was raised in the conclusion, as a methodology that could be promisingly reworked, both conceptually and technologically, away from the
colonising representation of the past, into a way to strategically produce novel imaginaries, as in Jameson’s *cognitive mapping* (1988) of Guattari’s *machinic cartographies* (1995 [1992]). Mapping in fact responds to the visionary impulse of theory (both as seeing and imagining), and in conjunction to novel technologies may allow not only to make visible the abstract structures of the neoliberal urbanisation, but also the always uncertain ways in which they actualise into given locales.

Some mentioned the recent mapping of Airbnb-proliferation in world cities, whilst others cautioned against the risk for these maps of being reduced to aesthetically pleasing exercises in shocking the viewer, rather than tools to materialise theory and propel it further. This resonates with Srnicek’s recent suggestion that mapping should not simply concern ‘how to represent power, but how to create power’ (2015, 310). As Tiqqun write: ‘rather than new critiques, cartographies are what we need’ (2010, 216). The methodological and ethical implications of a critical theory beyond critique were left open, as the debate was forced to an end.

**Table 3: In search of new epistemological and methodological approaches**

*Rapporteur: João Morais Mourato*

A preliminary note. The way the discussion evolved in this table was on a sort of ‘top-up’ system. The first group outlined some core issues, which I read to the following group who both added to it or introduced altogether different points.⁵ I then relayed the collective message to the third group and so forth. Although freely available and advised to do so at will, no one felt inclined to write up anything on the white sheet of paper – this summary is therefore based on the points I outlined during the seminar’s final discussion, then joined with other written of mine. I have organised the main outputs around three main topics.

1) *(Disciplinary) context-dependency*

This was a core issue. In all four rounds participants discussed how problem-based integrated approaches clash with the heritage of individual disciplinary backgrounds. This has implications in terms of both ontological and epistemological stances, as well as methodological choices.

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⁵ Cf. footnote 3 supra.
The most visible symptom of this clash is the issue of concept definition. Interdisciplinary research tends to develop its own hybrid language. And the latter doesn’t promote an inclusive research environment, as it creates an additional layer of codification.

The notion of disciplinary context dependency was also highlighted as the cornerstone of the discussion of the limits to universalism. In particular, participants focused their discussion on how social sciences should avoid the pitfall of trying to emulate the natural sciences’ epistemological rigidity.

So...

We come across some of the ii) gridlocks of interdisciplinary research.

Participants highlighted that to engage trans-multi-interdisciplinary research we must first un-learn some of the normative boundaries (disciplinary/methodological) we were taught. They discussed their disciplinary experience as ‘luggage’ and the challenges of managing such luggage in trans-multi-interdisciplinary contexts.

There was also a collective understanding that there is a power play in trans-multi-interdisciplinary research contexts, between weaker and strongly institutionalized disciplines; and in this particular context, planning comes up short.

At a methodological level, it is difficult to address the limits to our traditional practices in contexts of experience-based, practice-based research. Participants outline that only the promotion of greater dialogue between different disciplines and the cutting across existing knowledge-transfer boundaries will allow to fully address the complexity of problem-based research.

How will this impact iii) the role of academia/the academic?

Participants agreed that alternative or transformative research practices bring to the fore a set of challenges to the role of the academic. The idea that ‘we need to transform ourselves before we can promote transformative research’ was presented and discussed. Some participants highlighted the need to seek spaces of academic subversive practices and fully own the role of knowledge brokers-mediators-facilitators.
This claims comes hand in hand with a call for social sciences to be more engaged with the debate of alternatives in policy contexts. As claimed by a participant, ‘rarely a paper brings something innovative’. Thus, academics should focus not only on problem solving, but also on reframing the structural boundaries of our activity. Should academia be politicized? Can it avoid it? Although no consensus was reached the need to re-frame the political dimension of academia and to reform its epistemic community was debated.

Table 4: On the role of SSH in envisioning and shaping futures

*Rapporteur: Andy Inch*

*The spectre of utopia*

Discussion at this table started with the concept of UTOPIA and a question about whether and how utopia could become core to social research methods (Levitas, 2013). Beneath this idea was a belief that, by more explicitly representing the normative horizons that motivate social change, it might be possible to develop more inclusive processes of participatory future-shaping, generating badly needed debate about the futures we want and need. The role for social research here might therefore involve uncovering, excavating and rendering visible existing utopian impulses in society and contributing to debates about their implications. More problematically it also involved answering the question of what utopia is and of the relationship between the ideals and normative commitments of researchers and the requirements of research, not in search of a mythical objectivity but in order to develop a deep level of reflexivity about how our values shape our accounts of the social and the ways we act within it.

Other participants, however, were uneasy or outrightly opposed to the idea of utopia and raised a range of concerns about the practical, conceptual and political consequences of introducing it as a horizon for research or society.

In a more practical register, utopia seemed to some too distant, remote or idealistic. They questioned whether the future has to be about utopia and asked whether, in these dystopian times, the focus should not be on avoiding the catastrophic futures that seem to be inevitably approaching? This led others to wonder whether we have time for utopia given the urgency of acting now to tackle more immediate future threats.
In conceptual and political terms, some participants felt that the concept and political consequences of utopia was problematic. Referencing well-established anti-utopian arguments, they saw utopia as a static representation of a fixed future, lending itself to authoritarian imposition of one preferred future vision over others and so necessarily closing down political possibilities. Instead they argued for a more open conception of a future to be struggled over (whilst accepting that our futures are far from a blank slate as past and present actions necessarily shape and lay claim to it).

This linked also with a desire to explore and celebrate the heterotopic potential of a wide variety of contemporary practices that point towards alternative ways of organising society. This more pluralist and anarchist vision was seen by some as opening the way to experimentation and the cultivation of agency and awareness of new possibilities for transformative change.

Towards future-orientated methods?

The lack of ‘facts’ about the future was understood as a key challenge for social research, undermining the predictive claims of traditional scientific methods and raising important ethical challenges for technological change and contemporary celebration of ‘innovation’. In this regard, consideration of the future reveals important limits to the claims for a social science.

For some participants it was important to hold to the value of certain critical social theoretical traditions. Critique they argued can itself be future-orientated and future-shaping, pointing to what is missing in the past and present as a way of stimulating action for change.

For many participants, however, the ethical and political limits to knowledge of the future also pointed towards a need for new ways of thinking about the role and purpose of social research, including by developing more democratic forms of knowledge production and new ways of debating how knowledge is used to shape change in the world.

In both real-world planning practice, participatory and more orthodox modes of research practice, engaging wider publics with the future was, however, understood as a significant challenge. Engaging with the future requires the temporary suspension of present concerns to focus on potentialities beyond our customary
horizons of thought and action. For many people, however, the weight of much more immediate challenges can make such exercises very difficult.

Methodologically, some participants expressed frustration with the limitations of prevailing genres of social scientific writing or presentation of data. There was a strong feeling that these are ill-equipped to grip people and animate their interest in possible futures. Fiction and film were seen as having much greater potential in this regard, suggesting a desire to experiment with more creative media as a way of bringing futures to life. More powerful images of the future were seen as a way of suspending the present, opening up speculative possibilities and provoking people to consider new ways of thinking and acting.

However, it was also recognised that such exercises must always also remain rooted in present possibilities. Plans need to be implementable and people need to see what they can do today to shape tomorrow, rather than either having their expectations unduly raised or slipping into despair at the scale of the challenges involved. This perhaps suggests a need for a constant movement between more speculative and more immediate modes of thinking about the future, pointing towards possible roles for planners, activists and social researchers.

Time

Discussion of the future consistently turned towards wider reflections on the nature of time and its consequences for developing new models of social research.

There was a strong feeling that, despite long-standing critiques, social science remains rooted in a linear and very limited conception of time. This is deeply ingrained into many aspects of the ways in which researchers think about and organise their worlds: the logic of research projects for example is founded on a strikingly simple notion of time as something that can be predicted and controlled.

There was also a marked sense that processes of social acceleration presented significant challenges both in their effects on the urban world ‘out there’ and on academic practice.

The ubiquity of change, disruption and innovation can be embraced and celebrated or feared and resisted. The urgency of responding to and shaping change and the
pervasive sense that ‘all that is solid melts into air’ also therefore requires that we pay attention to affective dimensions of the experience of time.

There are again ethical and political choices here and a feeling that (progressive) urban researchers may benefit from reflecting more on their underlying conceptions of urban change – has capitalist realism now succeeded in so closely associating itself with progress and change that the only left alternatives are rooted in a desire to turn back time?

Within the academy, time is frequently seen as a scarce resource, a constraint that limits what can be done. Time deprivation and pressure, and the need to respond to many different obligations are a particular issue for participatory or engaged social research which does not readily fit into the neatly defined project logics required by research funders.

It was also highlighted that any attempt to co-create or co-produce futures needs to be aware of the variety of different temporalities that need to be worked across to generate knowledge and shape action: people’s everyday lives; political and policy cycles; planning horizons and decision-timelines; and research itself, all operate to very different and often contrasting rhythms. One intriguing suggestion was that engaged social researchers might have a role to play in seeking to harmonize or bring these different temporalities into (temporary) alignment so as to enable real opportunities to democratize knowledge production and find ways of influencing how the world changes.

The future therefore raises a great many challenges for social research and for any attempt to shape social change. In many respects, the times do not seem favourable. But the urgency of the challenge means societies arguably have little choice but to find ways of taking back control their collective futures. The task for social researchers is to find out what roles they might play in this pressing task.
References


### Annex – List of participants to the tables

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (listed alphabetically)</th>
<th>Country (15 represented)</th>
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<td>1. Alessandro Colombo</td>
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<td>2. Andrea Pavoni</td>
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<td>3. Andy Inch</td>
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<td>4. Antonio Eduardo Mendoça</td>
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<td>5. Cansu Civelek</td>
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<td>6. Carolina Neto Henriques</td>
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<td>7. Chandrima Mukhopadhyay</td>
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<td>10. Dana Shevah</td>
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</table>