



Tackling Transparency

The Methodological Challenges of Research on Disclosing Sustainability

Course guide and Reader

Place: Hoekelum/Wageningen University, the Netherlands

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Course guide

Short introduction to the Summer School

On June 24 and 25, 2016, the Environmental Policy group (ENP) of Wageningen University will host an International Conference, entitled “Disclosing Sustainability; The Transformative Power of Transparency?”. Highlighting the relation between transparency and environmental governance from a social sciences perspective, the International Conference brings together a wide range of scholars who will present and discuss research related to three conference themes:

1. Transparency, accountability and empowerment in global environmental governance
2. Transparency and traceability in commodity chains
3. Citizen generated (and citizen-centered) transparency

In conjunction to the International Conference, a Summer School is organized, which is open to an international group of PhD candidates and Postdocs, who embark on, or are already involved in researching transparency, accountability and empowerment in the broad realm of sustainable development. The aim of the Summer School is to “tackle transparency”, so to explore the methodological challenges of operationalizing research on disclosing sustainability.

The Summer School is organized by dr. Machiel Lamers, dr. Sanneke Kloppenburg, dr. Hilde Toonen, and Moises Covarrubias Perez (PhD Candidate at ENP). The organizing team is supported by colleagues from ENP, dr. Aarti Gupta, prof. dr. Simon Bush, dr. Anastasia Moiseeva, and Martijn van Staveren (PhD Candidate). Prof. dr. Esther Turnhout and dr. Art Dewulf, researchers affiliated with other groups of Wageningen University, will engage in the Summer School as well. Three invited key note speakers for the International Conference, dr. Susan Park, dr. Angel Hsu and prof. dr. Magnus Boström, will also contribute to the program.

Assumed prior knowledge, learning outcomes and ECT

No specific prior knowledge is assumed, although a keen interest and aspiration to gain insight in methodological considerations about assessing transparency challenges is expected. Students are expected to prepare themselves by reading and analysing a selection of key literature prior to the Summer School provided by the organisation. It is assumed that Summer School participants are able to reflect on their own role as researcher, willing to actively contribute to discussions and debates, and open to giving and receiving feedback.

On completion of the Summer School, the participants will be able to:

- Identify the main methodological considerations when operationalizing research on disclosing sustainability;
- Understand the key dynamics and challenges of putting transparency at the centre of analysis in studies on sustainability and environmental governance;
- Be able to critically question, and reflect on, the limitations of scholars who are, or aim to be, transparent in conducting and communicating research;
- Identify opportunities and strategies to tackle methodological challenges;
- Disclose one’s own research findings in an useful, attractive and fun way (infographic).

Participation in the Summer School equals 2.2 ECTS. After the Summer School the participants will receive a certificate.

Summer School structure and educational activities

The Summer School is divided into three main components: lectures, an assignment and participation at the International Conference. In the *lectures*, students are expected to have read the listed/provided learning materials, and to take up an active role. Theoretical and case study material is presented and discussed during the lectures. Some lectures (i.e. on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon) will have a workshop-like character. The lecture program is structured as follows: the first day (Tuesday) is devoted to setting the scene, in order to develop a common knowledge base, to get acquainted with key concepts, and to be introduced to complex questions which scholars face when researching transparency and sustainability. During the second day (Wednesday) participants will further dive into methodological challenges, focussing on whether, how and by whom transparency is produced, with what effects and what role is, or can be, played by researchers. The focus during the third day (Thursday) will be on ways of tackling transparency. Three of the invited key note speakers for the International Conference will shed light on their approaches and strategies of dealing with questions and challenges, bringing in the connection to the three conference themes.

The *assignment* is designed to facilitate and stimulate critical reflection by the participants, building on (and furthering) their creative, analytical and cooperative skills. The end product of the assignment is an Infographic, which will be presented at the International Conference. Two workshops (Wednesday evening and Thursday afternoon) will help the participants to structure their discussions, and to guide them in the process of making an Infographic. In the closing session of the International Conference, the best Infographic will be rewarded.

Participation at the International Conference is an integral part of the Summer School. The main aims are not very different from attending other conferences, so to present and/or to listen to presentations, and to converse and socialize with other researchers. However, the first three days in the Summer School will provide the participants an excellent base to get most out of their participation at the International Conference: to be well-prepared and inspired, to be ready to ask questions, and to be able to engage in discussions.

Summer School program

Day 1: Setting the scene	
Tuesday June 21, 2016 Venue: Boerderij Hoekelum, Edeseweg 122, 6721 KE, Bennekom	
Morning:	Arrival Due to different flight schedules, some participants might arrive already on Monday evening
12.00-13.00	Lunch
13.00-14.00	Welcome to the Summer School Introduction by <i>Machiel Lamers, Sanneke Kloppenburg, Hilde Toonen, Moises Covarrubias Perez (ENP)</i>
14.00-15.00	Disclosing sustainability: the transformative power of transparency? Lecture by <i>Aarti Gupta (ENP, WUR)</i>
15.30-18.00	Credibility and transparency research(ers) Lecture/workshop with <i>Simon Bush (ENP, WUR)</i>
18.00	Dinner: barbeque

Day 2: Methodological challenges	
Wednesday June 22, 2016 Venue: Boerderij Hoekelum, Edeseweg 122, 6721 KE, Bennekom	
7.30-8.45	Breakfast
9.00-11.00	The production of transparency: the role of mediation Lecture by <i>Esther Turnhout (Forest and Nature Conservation Policy, WUR), Sanneke Kloppenburg (ENP, WUR)</i>
11.15-12.30	The effects of transparency Lecture by <i>Machiel Lamers (ENP, WUR)</i>
12.30-13.30	Lunch

Day 2: Methodological challenges (continued)	
13.30-15.30	The role of the researcher in transparency research Lecture/workshop by <i>Art Dewulf (Public Administration and Policy, WUR)</i> , <i>Hilde Toonen (ENP, WUR)</i>
16.00-17.30	Introduction Summer School infographics Introduction by <i>Anastasia Moiseeva (ENP, WUR)</i> Introduction assignment (themes and groups) by <i>Machiel Lamers, Moises Covarrubias Perez (ENP, WUR)</i>
18.00-19.00	Dinner
19.30-21.00	Infographics workshops Workshops by <i>Anastasia Moiseeva, Martijn van Staveren, Moises Covarrubias Perez (ENP, WUR)</i>

Day 3: Tackling transparency	
Thursday June 23, 2016 Venue: Wageningen University campus, Forum Building	
7.00-8.00	Breakfast
8.15	Departure to the Campus
9.00-10.30	Assessing accountability in practice Forum C0103 Lecture by <i>Susan Park (University of Sydney, Australia)</i>
10.45-12.15	Seeking the signal through the noise: Lessons from the Environmental Performance Index Forum C0103 Lecture by <i>Angel Hsu (Yale-NUS College and Yale University, USA)</i>
12.15-13.15	Lunch at Restaurant of the Future
13.15-14.45	Getting behind the frontstage – Methodological challenges Forum C0103 Lecture by <i>Magnus Boström (Orebro University, Sweden)</i>
15.00-17.00	Designing your infographic Forum PC411 Technical assistance by <i>Anastasia Moiseeva, Martijn van Staveren, Moises Covarrubias Perez (ENP, WUR)</i>
17.15	Back to Hoekelum
18.30-19.30	Dinner

Day 4: Conference 'Disclosing Sustainability' (conference day 1)	
Friday June 24, 2016 Venue: Hotel Wageningsche Berg	
7.00-8.00	Breakfast
8.10	To the Conference venue (Hotel Wageningsche Berg)
9.00-10.30	Opening plenary See for further details the Conference program Summer School activity: presentation of Infographics during coffee/tea/lunch breaks
18.00-22.00	Conference dinner
After dinner	Back to Hoekelum

Day 5: Conference 'Disclosing Sustainability' (conference day 2)	
Saturday June 25, 2016 Venue: Hotel Wageningsche Berg	
7.00-8.00	Breakfast
8.10	To the Conference venue (Hotel Wageningsche Berg) *please note this is the "check-out" at Hoekelum: all luggage should be taken to the Conference venue.
9.00-10.30	Opening plenary See for further details the Conference program Summer School activity: presentation of Infographics during coffee/tea/lunch breaks
15.30-17.00	Closing Plenary, including award ceremony for "Best Summer School Infographic"
After closing	Short closing of the Summer School, saying goodbyes. Please note that the International Conference organizing committee offers the opportunity to join a social event on Saturday evening (trip to Amsterdam) and Sunday (trip to forested nature area De Hoge Veluwe). These activities are not part of the Summer School program, but of course open for its participants (a possible extra night stay in Wageningen/ Amsterdam should be arranged by the participants themselves).

Reader

Day 1 Setting the scene

The first sessions of the Summer School are aimed at introducing the rationale and the programme of the Summer School, key notions and reasons why studying transparency and sustainability is important. After the introduction of the Summer School by the organising team, two sessions will follow by key lecturers from the Environmental Policy Group of Wageningen University that deal with these issues.

Session 1: Disclosing sustainability: the transformative power of transparency? (Aarti Gupta)

In the first session Dr. Aarti Gupta will provide the stepping stones and the rationale for transparency research in the environmental social sciences, by describing contemporary trends and providing examples of how environmental information disclosure and transparency are changing environmental governance. She will also provide a theoretical framework for understanding the transformative power of transparency in the environmental governance. The first session of the Summer School will thereby provide the participants with a substantive introduction of the issues and the theoretical handles to explore them.

Reading:

- Gupta, A. and M. Mason (2014). A transparency turn in global environmental governance. In: Gupta, A. and M. Mason (eds.). *Transparency in Global Environmental Governance. Critical Perspectives*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Session 2: Credibility and transparency research(ers) (Simon Bush)

In the second session Prof. Dr. Bush will share with us his experiences not only as a researcher involved in transparency research, but also as a transparent researcher. Prof. Bush will base his lecture on his research on ecolabelling in the global seafood sector, as well as his attempts to further enhance the transparency of various labelling schemes and disclose research results to a wider societal audience. Next to the need for these research themes and approaches, also the challenges will be discussed and exercised. This session will contribute with an experiential take on why transparency research is important but challenging, and why it is relevant to look at the role of researchers. Next to reading the article and the code of conduct, the participants are requested to watch the video in order to prepare this session (see link below).

Readings:

- Miller, A.M.M. and S.R. Bush (2015). Authority without credibility? Competition and conflict between ecolabels in tuna fisheries. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 107: 137 – 145.
- VSNU (2014). *The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice. Principles of good academic teaching and research*. The Hague: Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU).
- Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTXsZbZiW0Y>

Day 2 Methodological challenges

The second day of the Summer School highlights different methodological challenges connected to research on transparency and sustainability through focusing on three themes: mediations of transparency; effects of transparency; and the role of the researcher in transparency research. The first session takes a critical perspective on projects and programs for transparency by investigating how transparency is produced. It takes as a starting point that all efforts to create transparency rely on mediating technologies and measurements, and that these technologies and measurements are never neutral. This has important effects on the way in which transparency programs make visible and knowable sustainability issues. The session discusses methodological challenges in studying such mediating technologies and measurements and their epistemological effects. In the second session we further look into different effects of transparency programs and projects by focusing on how they relate to and may transform existing power relations. We also look at intended and unintended environmental consequences of disclosing information on sustainability. The third session focuses on the role of the researcher in studying and engaging in transparency projects and programs. We discuss different roles of researchers, ranging from being merely observer to acting as a spokesperson, and whether and how to move (strategically) between different roles. Also, assessing one's own role is not possible without considering how to position oneself and others in different fields of research practice. In this session, challenges, considerations and possible lines of action will be discussed.

Session 1 *The production of transparency* (Esther Turnhout, Sanneke Kloppenburg)

Monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) procedures, indicators, auditing and performance measurements play a central role in projects and programs for the pursuit of transparency. These 'technologies' are often assumed to be producing objective knowledge in a straightforward manner. Yet, counting, measuring, and visualising are far from neutral activities. Technologies and measurements make visible, knowable and governable sustainability issues in specific ways, but they also keep out of sight other ways (Flyverbom 2016¹). In this session we approach these technologies and measurements as mediations in the production of transparency. We look at how, and with what effects, issues are transformed into data, data into information, and information into knowledge.

Readings:

- Hansen, H. K. and M. Flyverbom (2015). The politics of transparency and the calibration of knowledge in the digital age. *Organization* 22(6): 872–889.
- Turnhout, E., K. Neves, and E. de Lijster (2014). 'Measurementality' in biodiversity governance: knowledge, transparency, and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). *Environment and Planning A* 46 (3): 581-597.

¹ Flyverbom, M. (2016) 'Transparency: Mediation and the Management of Visibilities'. *International Journal of Communication* 10(2016): 110–122.

Session 2 *The effects of transparency* (Machiel Lamers)

Environmental information, and information systems, are increasingly affecting and driving societal and economic activities, as well as the way these activities are governed. However, our understanding of these effects of environmental information disclosure remain ill-understood. In this session we will discuss the effects of environmental disclosure in Arctic marine governance. It is argued that due to the remote, dynamic and resource-rich character of the Arctic, actors and institutions gain power by developing and securing access to environmental information systems. Climate change is rapidly turning the region into a focal point of economic and geopolitical development. Simultaneously, the Arctic features in fierce debates over the implications for wildlife, ecosystems and indigenous communities. Large public and private sector investments are currently made in the development of environmental information systems to gain control over the fundamental changes in the biophysical environment (e.g. sea-ice, storms, fish, polar bears, pollution), as well as over the increasing economic activities (e.g. shipping, fisheries, oil).

Reading:

- Lamers, M., A. Pristupa, B. Amelung, and M. Knol (2016). 'The changing role of environmental information in Arctic marine governance'. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 18: 49-55.

Session 3 *The role of the researcher in transparency research* (Art Dewulf, Hilde Toonen)

Researching transparency gives rise to questions about one's own responsibilities in bringing about transparency about the research. In this session, we will discuss the roles and positioning of transparency researchers, which we will link up to the different fields in research practice as well as to various methods often used in social science studies. Together we explore action research methodology, in order to find out what lessons can be learnt about the extent to which we can be(come) transparent researchers. We will discuss how this approach can help us to reflect on the roles we can take up in our research, and whether and how we can deliberately change between different roles.

Readings:

- Dewulf, A., M. Craps, R. Bouwen, F. Abril, and M. Zingri (2005). How indigenous farmers and university engineers create actionable knowledge for sustainable irrigation. *Action research* 3(2): 175-192.
- Huntjens, P., J. Eshuis, C. Termeer, and A. van Buuren (2015). Forms and foundations of action research. In: Van Buuren, A., Eshuis, J. and van Vliet, M. *Action research for climate change adaptation: Developing and applying knowledge for governance*. New York: Routledge.

Day 3 Tackling transparency

During the third day of the Summer School we will move towards the three main themes which are at the core of the International Conference. Three of the invited key note speakers will focus on methodological issues in transparency research and provide their views on approaches and strategies for researching transparency.

At the International Conference, Dr. Susan Park from University of Sydney (Australia) will deliver a key note in line with the conference theme of *Transparency, accountability and empowerment in global environmental governance*. In her session for the Summer School., Dr. Park will draw on lessons and insights from her research on international organisation behaviour and change, focussing on the study of accountability.



The key note at the International Conference by Dr. Angel Hsu from Yale-NUS College and Yale University (United States) is related to the conference theme of *Citizen generated (and citizen-centered) transparency*. In the Summer School session, focus of Dr. Hsu will be on discussing her experiences and considerations in developing data-driven approaches, such as the Environmental Performance Index, which are designed to inform environmental decision-making and policy.



Prof. dr. Magnus Boström from Orebro University (Sweden) is the key note speaker affiliated with the conference theme on *Transparency and traceability in commodity chains*. In the Summer School session, Prof. Boström will elaborate on methodological challenges and considerations he encounters in his research on participation, communication, and organization in the governance of sustainable commodity chains, emphasizing issues of (non-) transparency.



Readings:

- Boström, M. (2015). Between Monitoring and Trust: Commitment to Extended Upstream Responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics* 131(1): 239-255.
- Hsu, A. et al (2016). *Environmental Performance Index 2016*. Policymakers Summary. Available from <http://epi.yale.edu>
- Park, S. (2015). Assessing Accountability in Practice: The Asian Development Bank's Accountability Mechanism. *Global Policy* 6(4): 455-465.

Infographics assignment

Visualizing key challenges in transparency research and methodologies (Anastasia Moiseeva, Martijn van Staveren, Moises Covarrubias Perez)

As part of the Summer School participants will be assigned to present key methodological questions and challenges associated with (their) transparency research in a visually explicit way. Participants will form teams of 2-3 and work in small groups on clarifying a methodological question or challenge of their own choice.

The results of this exercise will be projected during coffee breaks of the conference. A team of experts will assess the visual products during the conference; the best product will be awarded in the closing ceremony of the conference.

Instructions will follow during the Summer School.

Preparation: please bring any photos, video footage or other graphical material related to your research to the Summer School, because this might be of use for your Infographic.