

How would you define impact?

“According to my own thinking, impact is a change in people and organisations and a change in the way they behave and what they believe and value. If people and organisations change their behaviour, beliefs and values, you will see a change in the world – companies develop a new industrial strategy, consumers articulate other types of needs, policy makers develop new policies or implement their policies in different ways, researchers change the direction of their research and new types of technological solutions advance. When these changes are aligned, we see system change. It is this type of change that is needed to address the climate and biodiversity crises and respond to the call for a more equal world.”

Would you say that your own beliefs and values affect your work? What is it that drives you?

“If I would have to choose one theory that drives my impact philosophy, it would have to be The Idea of Justice by Amartya Senn. It is my firm belief that in any change process those people impacted should have a voice and be in a position and context in which they can raise that voice and make themselves heard. People have to consider how they want to respond to the great issues of our time such as the climate and biodiversity crises and rising inequality. This can be done as a citizen, but also through becoming a politician, an industrialist or through producing a product. I’ve decided to do this through my research. I am an engaged scholar. A lot of things happen because people do not respond. Fighting indifference is key, also for researchers.”

How does your work address those great issues? What makes your work impactful?

“Most of my research is transdisciplinary. This approach assumes that impact is not generated after the research is done but throughout the process. In more traditional approaches research is conducted, stakeholders may be interviewed, certain conclusions are drawn, and those conclusions are then disseminated. I’m not saying that this is not a valid model or that there’s no impact generated with such an approach, and I am also using a dissemination strategy. Yet addressing the great challenges of our time, I would argue, needs to engage stakeholders into the research process and work with them in co-creation. I consider their knowledge as valuable for the research process. This knowledge can be practical but also (proto-) theoretical, informal or tacit. Of course I stand with the values of academic freedom, which implies that I use scientific methods, embed my work into the ongoing scientific conversations (the literature) and come up with my own conclusions. Yet this can be combined with engagement.”

What are likely outcomes of your work? And who will benefit from it?

“In my projects, when I study Transformative Change & Science, Technology and Innovation policy, I do that through working with policy makers in experiments - testing grounds in which we collaboratively reflect on how certain projects and policy processes influence sustainability transitions. This common reflection is input for my research and also helps me to provide answers to my research questions or challenge them. At the same time, I contribute to their policy projects by involving in writing white papers for example. I provide scientific evidence and they provide practical knowledge. We dive into each other’s work to widen our horizon and maybe gain new perspectives. This process of deliberating and discussing can create new avenues for action. People can see new opportunities, limitations, things open up and they start to believe that change is possible. Oftentimes our own thinking is a prison. We are convinced that certain things are not possible because we all have a

limited set of options we see. Through participating in transdisciplinary research projects like the ones I do, people can gain new perspectives and they can get a voice. My projects are platforms for expressions of voices.”

So it’s also up to the people you work with to generate impact?

“If people participate in my research projects they will start asking certain questions about what they do and they will perhaps start asking questions about their beliefs and values. This also happens to the researchers involved, including myself. It is a slow process because it is about deliberation, it is about engagement and it is open in terms of outcomes. People need a space to think about certain things, a space in which they can express their doubts, their fears, what they want and what they don’t want. It is a diffuse process we are dealing with rather than a targeted one. And it is impactful in the sense that all of the people involved in the research bring the experience to what they do next. Fighting the climate crisis is about a change in lifestyles and the way we do policy, and research. Simply telling people what to do will not bring about deeper change. It is a process in which they need space for reflection, and deliberation and a voice they can articulate.”

You have a tendency to think big, setting up largescale networks, addressing global challenges, involving many different stakeholders into your research. Where does this fascination for complex projects and problems stem from? And isn’t this often the more difficult path?

“I see how it is difficult or frightening for many researchers to think about the great challenges of our time. They prefer to work on smaller issues that can be researched more easily, and this is also justified since science advances in this way. Personally, I like to think about bigger issues and to connect my research deeply to the troubles of our times. I’m really inspired by C. Wright Mills’ book *The Sociological Imagination* and his thinking on how you can act as a scholar in the world. It’s important to reflect on our relationship with the world and research is obviously public and funded through the government so there’s an obligation for scholars to contribute to the public good as best as they can by means of researching or teaching.”

Which role do universities play in generating impact?

“The university is an important stakeholder in generating impact. Universities are places that are organized in a disciplinary way with faculties and certain disciplines, while many problems in the world are interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. To address these, a collaboration among actors and several disciplines is needed. With my work, I am hoping to contribute to generating more space in universities for this type of research. For this reason, the Utrecht University Centre for Global Challenges is an exciting place and adventure for me, because the Centre’s mission resonates with this approach, so I feel have something to contribute.”

If you could phrase one plea or call to action to fellow researchers and to policy makers, what would this be?

“Engage! The world is facing a number of huge problems and there are no easy fixes. Necessary change is about our lifestyles, our role as people in the world, it is about our relationship with nature, our relationship with other humans. In relation to this, it is very important for me to make visible that actions of people matter. It is not just the large forces of history which shape society, forces that are completely out of our control. Our choices matter. Emphasising this human agency, that we can make decisions and that our behaviour is relevant, is important in my research.”