Transcultural Student Research on SDGs – A Higher Education Project for Sustainable Development

Jessica Geraldo Schwengber, Post-Doc, Zeppelin University (corresponding author)
    Jessica.Schwengber@zu.de
    (0049) 7541 6009 2265
    ZF Campus, office 1.63
    Friedrichshafen, Germany, 88045
Julika Baumann Montecinos, Professor, HFU Business School
Tobias Grünfelder, Ph.D. Candidate, Zeppelin University

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 by all United Nations member states as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people can live in peace and prosperity by 2030. This is a historic achievement on a global scale and provides the starting point for conversations and learning across different cultures, countries, disciplines, sectors, etc.

Due to their global dimension, the SDGs offer abstract direction and a rather general description of global problems and challenges, the concretization of which requires context-specific implementation[1]. The Transcultural Student Research Group (TSRG), as a project of the Transcultural Caravan[2], aims to contribute to this process of rendering in concrete terms the abstract concept of sustainable development. In particular, the project aims to promote sustainable education by promoting real-life experiences of cross-cultural cooperation. The project is part of the research and work at the Leadership Excellence Institute Zeppelin on a relational view[3] of cultural complexity[4]. The metaphor of the Transcultural Caravan thereby represents the potentials of an ongoing learning journey across cultures.

In the following, after a theoretical overview of ESD and transcultural learning, the TSRG is explained in more detail, focusing on the 2022 TSRG with a focus on the SDGs in Vietnam.

1. Higher Education for Sustainable Development

The debate on Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD) predates the agreement on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, its predecessor being approaches to "environmental education"[5]. The role of education gained prominence in the international debate after the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, and the concept of ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) emerged from the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit[6]. With the Millennium Development Goals and later the

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[1] Ryle, Collected Essays 1929-1968; Geertz, The interpretation of cultures; Walzer, Thick and Thin. Moral Argument at Home and Abroad

[2] ttps://transcultural-caravan.org/

[3] Wieland, Relational Economics. A Political Economy

[4] Baumann Montecinos, Grünfelder and Wieland, A Relational View on Cultural Complexity

[5] Barth and Rieckmann, State of the Art in Research on Higher Education for Sustainable Development

[6] Calder and Clugston, International Efforts to Promote Higher Education for Sustainable

SDGs, the concept of ESD took on a more holistic approach, meaning that although the environment still plays a role, it also encompasses other issues such as international development, cultural diversity, and social equality, inter alia[7]:

"Education for sustainable development (ESD) is expected both to make people more aware and better qualified to take part in shaping future developments responsibly, and to raise their awareness of the problems related to sustainable development, and bring forth innovative contributions to all economic, social, environmental and cultural issues."[8]

Currently, UNESCO defines ESD as follows:

"ESD gives learners of all ages the knowledge, skills, values and agency to address interconnected global challenges including climate change, loss of biodiversity, unsustainable use of resources, and inequality. It empowers learners of all ages to make informed decisions and take individual and collective action to change society and to care for the planet. ESD is a lifelong learning process and an integral part of quality education. It enhances the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural dimensions of learning and encompasses learning content and outcomes, pedagogy and the learning environment itself."[9]

Accordingly, and in its connection to the SDGs, in addition to Goal #4 (quality education), ESD, can also be a mechanism to support the achievement of all SDGs in their totality since it has the goal of promoting knowledge, awareness, critical thinking, and concrete skills.

HESD regards the specific role of higher education for ESD. In this perspective, higher education institutions play an important role for ESD as they contribute to teaching and practicing development principles[10]. Over the years, various practices have been developed by higher education institutions to put ESD into practice. These include, for example, changes in curricula to include courses on sustainability, education for educators, new degrees focusing on sustainable development, surveys to assess ESD, to name but a few examples[11]. Current trends in the field of ESD in high education institutions include[12]:

- Virtual initiatives involving international collaboration between several universities, turning the inevitable shift to online formats into an opportunity.
- Expansion of education for the SDGs into a greater range of disciplines, including

Development

[7] Calder and Clugston, International Efforts to Promote Higher Education for Sustainable Development

[8] Barth and Rieckmann, State of the Art in Research on Higher Education for Sustainable Development, 100.

[9] UNESCO

[10] Franco, Saito, Vaughter, Whereat, Kanie and Takemoto, Higher education for sustainable development: actioning the global goals in policy, curriculum and practice

[11] Lozano, Merrill, Sammalisto, Ceulemans and Lozano, Connecting Competences and Pedagogical Approaches for Sustainable Development in Higher Education: A Literature Review and Framework Proposal.

[12] unsdsn.org

those less traditionally associated with sustainable development.

- Initiatives for engaging learners beyond degree-level students - such as alumni, language proficiency students, and learners studying professional development.
- Comprehensive programs engaging students in addressing local sustainable development challenges.
- Whole-of-university initiatives to build educator capacity - as well as staff in general - to understand and engage with the SDGs.
- Sector-wide approaches to develop tools and resources, and to influence higher education policies.
- Integration of innovation and entrepreneurship into curricular (rather than just co-curricular) programs.

Against this background, this paper aims to address some of these current trends by focusing on the potential of a transcultural approach to learning as a contribution to higher education for sustainable development.

2. Transcultural Learning as a Higher Education Approach for Sustainable Development

In this paper, transcultural education is proposed as a concept for HESD. Transcultural education is defined here as relational learning based on the idea of a relational self that considers learning accordingly as a relational, lifelong and holistic process[13]. From a theoretical perspective, this is based on theories of experiential[14] and social learning[15], as it combines the concept of learning through concrete experiences in culturally heterogeneous contexts with the concept of learning from and with each other[16]. In practical terms, it is about cultivating communities of practice, considering a culture of collaboration as being crucial for effective HESD[17.] Thereby, transcultural learning as described in this paper refers not only to cooperation between students from different cultural or disciplinary backgrounds, but also between the supervisors involved (micro level) as well as between institutions (macro level). The goal is to enable all those involved to experience and practice a focus on commonalities in a conscious and didactically consistent way. This is in line with current research on transcultural competence, where the emphasis is on constructing new shared actions and meanings through cooperation, while stressing the importance of concrete experience[18].

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[13] Baumann Montecinos, Schwengber, Grünfelder, Transcultural Education – The Transcultural Caravan as a Relational Learning Journey

[14] Kolb, Experiential learning. Experience as source of learning and development; Kolb and Kolb, Experiential learning theory. A dynamic, holistic approach to management learning, education and development; Kolb and Kolb, Experiential learning theory as a guide for experiential educators in higher education

[15] Bandura, Social Learning Theory

[16] Baumann Montecinos, Schwengber, Grünfelder, Transcultural Education – The Transcultural Caravan as a Relational Learning Journey

[17] Wright, Ritter and Gonzales, Cultivating a Collaborative Culture for Ensuring Sustainable Development Goals in Higher Education: An Integrative Case Study.

[18] Baumann Montecinos and Grünfelder. What if we focus on developing commonalities? Results of an international and interdisciplinary Delphi study on transcultural competence

As shown in Figure 1, the locus of learning is communities of practice[19] where educators and learners meet and where the learning process takes place. This learning process would be a transcultural learning process (Figure 2). The latter is a three-stage learning process that builds on the recognition of cultural complexity and then focuses on how to identify existing commonalities as well as to develop new ones.
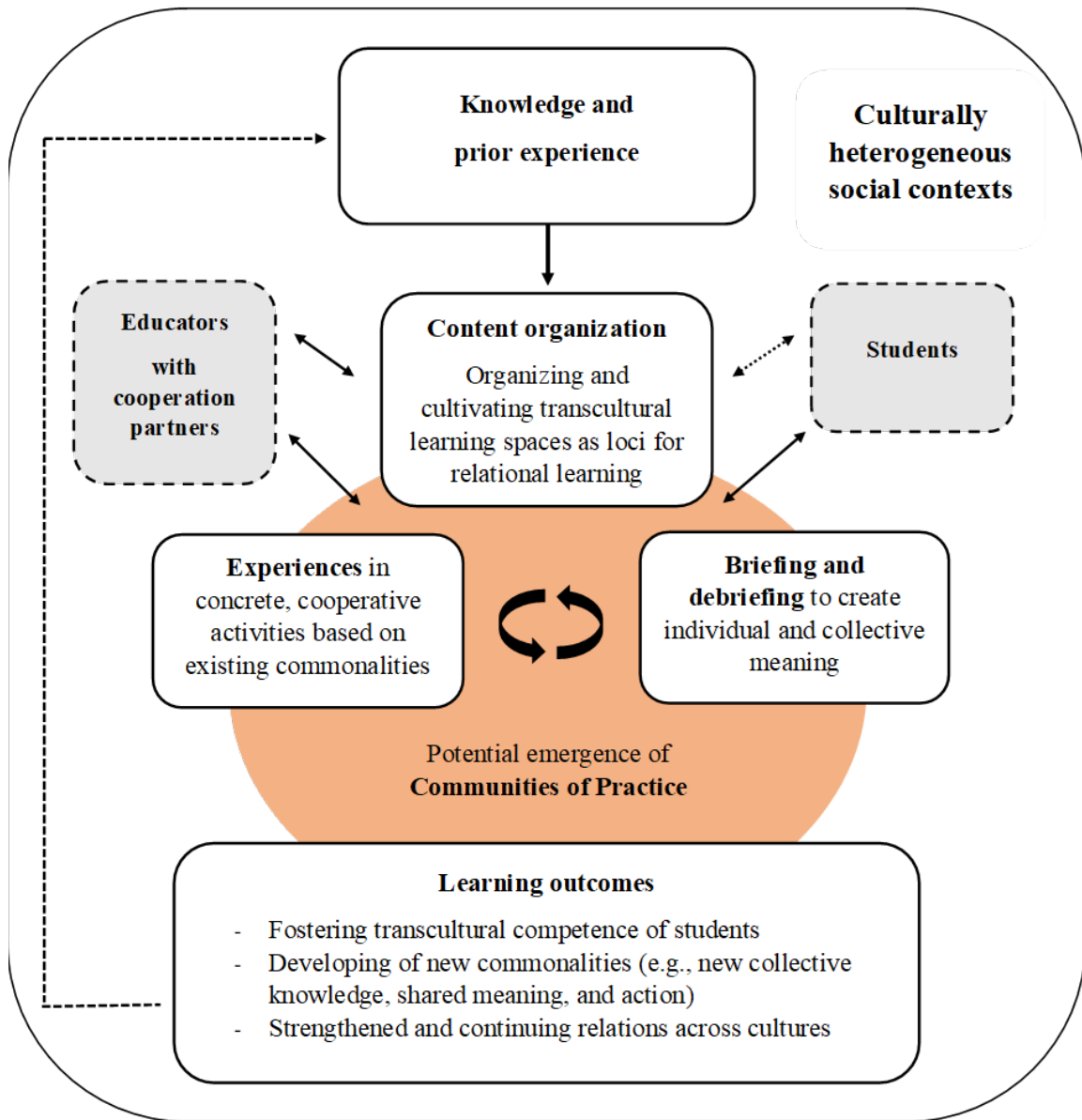

Figure 1: Transcultural Learning in Higher Education. Source: adapted from Baumann Montecinos, Schwengber and Grünfelder (2021, p. 256).

[19] Schwengber, Organizational Learning: A Conceptualization in the Framework of the Relational Economics Theory
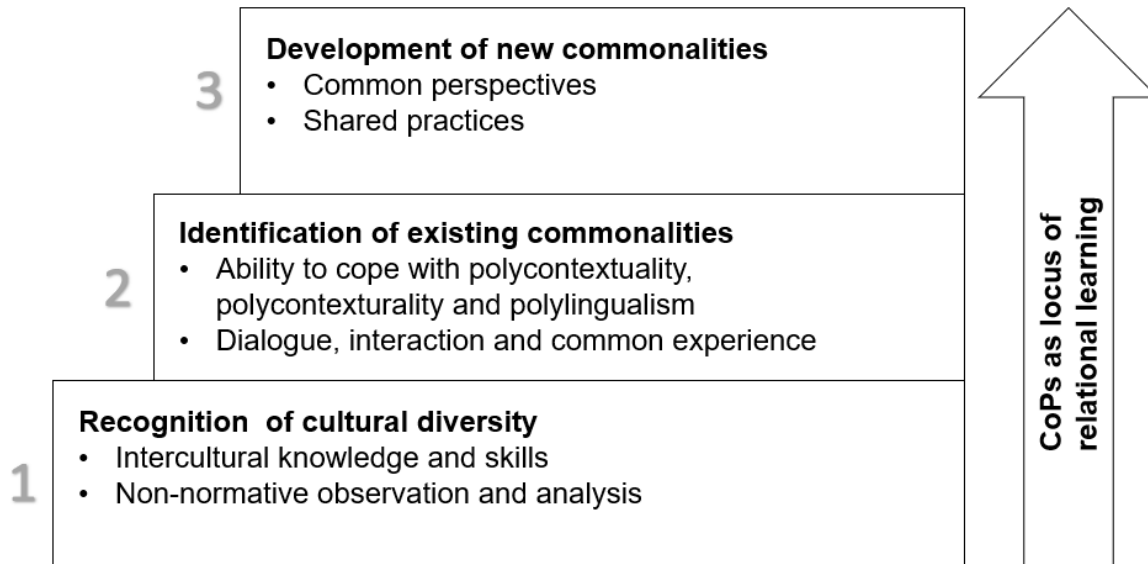
Figure 2: Three Steps of Transcultural Learning. Source: Adapted from Baumann Montecinos (2022)

3. The Example of the Transcultural Student Research Group

This section aims to provide a concrete example of how transcultural learning for sustainable development can be put into practice. By referring to the distinction between thin abstract concepts and thick local contextualization, the TSRG aims to provide a concrete, and thus thick, example of the application of the thin and global concept of ESD. Thin means that ESD has a global dimension. It is an abstract concept whose interpretation and application can vary depending on the context. In different contexts and situations, ESD can be applied differently[20]. Here, the Transcultural Student Research Group (TSRG) is presented and discussed as an example of the concrete application of the global concept of ESD.

The TSRG is a project that is part of the Transcultural Caravan and was initiated in 2017 by the Leadership Excellence Institute Zeppelin (LEIZ) at Zeppelin University (ZU) in Germany. It is an annual student research project involving students and supervisors from several international universities. Each year, the TSRG identifies a focus topic for its research. In the project, students (BA, MA and PhD) from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds work on specific research questions for one year. Students are divided into groups. To facilitate a transcultural experience, care is taken to ensure that groups are heterogeneous in composition (at least two nationalities). To encourage collaboration, groups are formed according to each student's research interests (their common areas of expertise) so that students with diverse backgrounds but with similar research interests are brought together in one group. The TSRG framework provides the context in which the learning takes place (TSRG as CoP). It is a project that has been carried out in collaboration with local and international partners from the beginning. This international partnership has been consolidated in the Transcultural Caravan Network - a network of universities and institutions from Europe, Asia, South America and Africa[21]. A call for

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[20] See note 1

[21] https://transcultural-caravan.org/tcn/

applications is issued each year for the selection of students. Students from all members of the network are invited to apply to the TSRG each year.

Since 2017, six TSRGs have been conducted and have tackled various themes focusing on different countries[22]. Over the six years, more than one hundred participants have taken part in the project, half of whom are international students, i.e., from outside Germany. The TSRG program includes different steps:

- Preparatory phase
- Research trip
- Transcultural learning school
- Publication preparation.

The steps are explained in more detail below. After the explanation of each step, the example of the TSRG 2022 on the topic of "SDGs in Vietnam" is used to illustrate how the individual steps are implemented in practice. In 2022 the project was conducted in collaboration with the University of Lodz (Poland), Fulbright University (Vietnam), and the Vietnamese-German University (Vietnam). Over 20 students from all partner universities participated in the project. The students were divided into 8 subgroups according to the corresponding topics:

Group 1	Environmental issues in the Mekong Delta
Group 2	Road transportation and air quality in Vietnam
Group 3	Air pollution in EU and ASEAN countries
Group 4	The role of education system in promoting gender equality in Vietnam
Group 5	Women in leadership position in Vietnam
Group 6	Driving factors on gender inequality in Vietnam
Group 7	Generation Z and HR practices
Group 8	Public-private partnerships

Table 1: Groups in the TSRG 2022. Source: own elaboration.

3.1 Preparatory phase

The preparatory phase consists of interactive workshops in which project participants prepare to conduct their research. The workshops cover topics such as methodology, transcultural leadership and collaboration, as well as the specific research topic for the year in question.

The first workshops are especially designed to offer opportunities for intercultural dialogue and getting to know each other. They are designed to create awareness of the cultural diversity inside the research group (step 1 of the transcultural learning process) and provide the conditions for the identification and creation of existing and new commonalities (steps 2 and 3). In this phase, students should strengthen their abilities to adopt and see things from different perspectives, practice empathy, embrace ambiguity and endure complexity. To paraphrase Binder and Holla, this preparatory phase is intended to allow participants "to fully enter into a cultural encounter with the Other, the ability to hold complexity is required: both in terms of being aware of our own complex social and cultural identities as well as those of our partner or partners in this interaction. The ability to hold

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[22] https://transcultural-caravan.org/

complexity thus requires adding other thinking tools to our cognitive toolbox" (Binder & Holla, 2023, p.253).

In 2022, the preparation phase lasted from May to July and included three workshops: A workshop on "Transcultural Collaboration", which was designed to equip students to collaborate effectively with international colleagues; a workshop on the "SDGs", which provided an overview of the history of sustainable development, the 2030 Agenda and the goals, and how the goals link to each other; and a workshop on "Research Design", which was designed to equip students to design a research project. Students were also invited to submit a research design proposal prior to the research trip and feedback was provided.

3.2 Research trip

Consistent with the theories of social and experiential learning[23], the purpose of the research trip is to provide participants with the opportunity to conduct field research together in international teams, learn from and with each other, and gain new experiences in a new environment. It is also intended to provide a learning experience that goes beyond the classroom experience. It usually lasts one week to ten days and is the first time the participants meet in person. The destination depends on the topic to be researched. To date, TSRG participants have conducted field research in Hong Kong, Uganda, Brazil, Poland, Germany and Vietnam. With reference to the TSRG 2022, the destination of the research trip was Vietnam and took place from 31 July to 9 August, 2022. The program of the research trip included workshops, practical perspectives, cultural activities as well as field research (Table 2).

Workshops	Gender equality and women's empowerment, environmental issues, circular economy, transcultural education
Focus on Practice	KPMG Vietnam – Presentation about sustainability and leadership
Cultural activities	Ho Chi Minh City Museum, Truc Lam Southern Zen Monastery, war museum Ho Chi Minh City, tour of Ho Chi Minh City, Cai Rang Market
Interactive activities	Dos and Donts in Vietnam, product quiz, simulation game
Field research	Trip to the Mekong Delta

Table 2: Activities during the Research Trip to Vietnam in 2022. Source: own elaboration.

The aim of the research trip to Vietnam was to approach the SDGs from different perspectives, to deepen the participants' knowledge of the SDGs and get an overview of how they are applied in Vietnam, to give students the opportunity to get to know each other personally and to get to know a new, culturally complex environment.

3.3 Transcultural learning school

The transcultural learning school, usually held in November, consists of lectures, workshops, and panel discussions on transcultural leadership, research methodology, and the student research groups' topics. In the past, the transcultural learning school was held on site. Since 2022, it has been of a hybrid nature to make the project more inclusive (anyone can participate, regardless of geographic location, as long as participants have

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[23] See notes 14 and 15.

good internet access) and to increase environmental sustainability by reducing the carbon footprint associated with transportation.

The purpose of the research school is to give the participants the opportunity to continue working on their projects, receive feedback on their research and maintain contact with each other after the research trip. In this respect, the research school fosters a continuous discussion among groups and a sense of belonging to the project. In 2022, the research school took place from 7-11 November and included the following activities:

Workshops and discussions	Academic writing, Sustainability in practice – the example of the SDSN network, Female leadership in Africa
Coaching session	Public speaking
Focus on Practice	Visit to Zeppelin GmbH and discussion about their sustainability strategy
Conference	Attendance at the international conference "Transcultural Leadership Summit" 2022

Table 3: Activities of the Research School 2022. Source: Own elaboration.

3.4 Publication

The final phase is publication. The results of the research groups are published in a joint volume in the series "Transcultural Management Series" (Metropolis-Verlag). In addition to the research results, the publications usually also contain chapters by practitioners and renowned scholars. In this way, a topic is explored from different perspectives: established scholars contribute to the conceptual development of the topic, practitioners provide empirical insights into the topic, and TSRG participants have the opportunity to present their research findings. From the beginning, the publication is the common ground for the entire group that motivates teamwork and holds them together. The publications are the tangible manifestation of a learning journey and can be the springboard for further research.

The publication of the findings of the TSRG 2022 is currently in progress (status July 2023). This publication will include eight chapters with the findings of each group, as well as some additional chapters by senior researchers and professors. The latter will provide a theoretical framework for the students' chapters and include topics such as the history of the SDGs and sustainable development, sustainable development in Southeast Asia and Vietnam and a systematic literature review of how the topic of the SDGs has been researched since their implementation in 2015. In this way, the publication is intended not only to benefit project participants, but also to contribute to the dissemination of knowledge, debate about the literature, and practical implications for the general public.

3.5 Learning outcomes, contributions and challenges

The TSRG 2022 contributes to ESD in two ways. First, the project was thematically focused on sustainability. The SDGs and their application in the Vietnamese context were the main theme of the project. In this way, the first learning outcome of the project was an increase in students' knowledge of sustainable development, which is reflected in their publication on the topic. The inclusion of different themes in the project (environment, gender, etc.) was intended to provide a holistic view of sustainable development by including many of its facets: environmental, social, cultural, economic, etc. Secondly, the project aimed to contribute, through the methodology itself, to the development of the

competencies for ESD considered necessary by UNESCO. Through the research trip and continuous exchange within the group over a period of about one year, the project aimed to help participants acquire knowledge, skills, and values for addressing interconnected global challenges. The development or enhancement of such transcultural competencies constitutes a second learning outcome. A more general learning outcome is the cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioral dimension of the learning process, which was enhanced by the contact with international colleagues and the opportunity for concrete experiences on the ground during the research trip. The project outcome itself (publication containing the results) and its dissemination can also contribute to raising awareness about sustainable development not only among students but also among the general public.
Despite the contributions and learning outcomes, the project is not without limitations and challenges. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Challenges in working with different universities and in different legal frameworks.
- Lack of international university curricula. Universities are still very limited in implementing such projects. Curriculum design is often very national in scope.
- Transcultural learning requires time and commitment from students and supervisors.
- Lack of institutional support for transcultural education in higher education

4. The transcultural learning journey goes on

The metaphor of the "caravan" was chosen very deliberately to designate the platform for projects such as the TSRG briefly presented here. It stands for the transcultural approach in the sense of a community of diverse people who are connected by a common destination, common interests and the shared experience of travelling together with and despite all the differences that arise. The connection is thereby based on the potential and hope to achieve more and progress further through cooperation than alone. In the process, caravans usually travel together for rather a long time, along existing routes and on new routes to be explored across borders.

The analogies between this metaphor, understood in these terms, and the concerns of the SDGs are obvious. Not only Goal 17, which explicitly calls for a global pact between players from different sectors, but the entire agenda was built from its very foundation on cooperation so as to address the complex challenges of our world. The coexistence of commonality of global goals and diversity in local implementation reflects a reciprocal interplay that shapes realities at different levels and whose potentials are to be further recognized and described. If the students participating in the TSRG are prepared for discovering and utilizing these potentials by practicing their willingness and ability to cooperate in an experiential way then the Transcultural Caravan has succeeded in its mission. And, again by analogy, the same applies to the Transcultural Caravan as to sustainable development: there is still much to do, so let the learning journey continue.

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