

APHELEIA: THE PRAXIS OF HUMANITIES TRANSDISCIPLINARY CONTRIBUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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In the days following the Rio+20 summit, in 2012, in which relevant side-debates took place focusing integrated landscape management and new approaches and conceptualization of sustainability, the need to better structure academic global research on the topic anchored in diverse case studies and real-life processes, became clear for some of the participants. This led, in 2014, to the establishment of a European Commission funded project, APHELEIA, on Humanities and Cultural Integrated Landscape Management, which brought together scholars engaged in the summit events, members of the team preparing the International Year of Global Understanding (that would occur in 2016, under the coordination of Prof. Benno Werlen, from Jena University), experts coordinating major European networks in archaeology, cultural heritage, and several human and social sciences domains.

From 2015, yearly seminars in Mação, Portugal, brought together a few dozens of scholars and research students, tackling major conceptual concerns: dilemmas (how to move from the current problem-solving mindset into a strategic dilemma facing approach), sociocultural matrices (how to integrate informal knowledge and decision-making processes into governance), education, training and communication (how to overcome the artificial divide of these three expressions of the same knowledge cocreation process), and beyond. Every year, without any interruption (although conducted online in 2020, due to the pandemic), the seminars combined theoretical advances with the monitoring of case studies across the world.

This networking process, that from 2015 started to encompass scholars and projects in several continents, led to the transformation of the initial project into an international academic association, which became a member of the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences (CIPSH) from 2017. An important output of the APHELEIA project and association, with CIPSH, was the proposal for UNESCO to establish a new program on sustainability science based on these concerns (the “Declaration of Mação”, approved in 2019, that led to the process of establishment of the current new INITIATIVE of UNESCO: the program BRIDGES (approved 2021 and becoming fully operational in 2024).

APHELEIA is celebrating its 10th anniversary. Since 2014, APHELEIA promoted teaching and research activities in the field of cultural integrated landscape management involving more than 100 scholars and 200 research students, publishing 9 books and a wide range of papers. Moreover, it became implicated in site-based projects in more than 50 countries. Besides BRIDGES, itself a global sustainability science coalition organised within UNESCO’s Management of Social Transformations Programme, APHELEIA has also been active in the establishment of several UNESCO and CIPSH chairs, as well as in co-developing new Masters and PhD programmes.

Meanwhile, the context evolved, and with it the need to adjust APHELEIA to a new reality characterised by a growing sense of urgency for action. Current challenges include a mounting pressure on the Earth systems (from freshwater availability to climate change), an evident disintegration of some fundamental characteristics of sustainable social arrangements (including rising inequality, escalating individualism, and diminishing off-line social interactions) and the recent growth of politically motivated anti-science discourse. These trends occur amidst growing tensions, conflicts and wars, all sharing a focus on short term concerns and a dyslexic approach that tackles global challenges in an isolated way, instead of an integrated one. The energy transition is but one example, that addresses a real need but neglects the cultural and social implications, in some ways re-enacting the devastating effects of past major industrial transitions, like the steam transition in the 19th century or the concrete building techniques in the early 20th century.

To overcome any of these challenges, we need a humanities perspective: one grounded on a broad understanding of the richness and variety of the cultural phenomena, which is guided by critical thinking; and welcoming to different ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies, resulting from the belief that all stakeholders to a given wicked problem, or dilemma, have the right and the obligation to participate in the discussions that involve them. More than this, without such participation mistrust will continue growing and conflicts will continue to be aggravated. The social impact in this process of domains like history or anthropology is to allow societies to design convergent strategies that build upon a shared intellectual understanding of the past and its divides, focusing beyond short term isolated problems, overcoming the false contradiction between unity and diversity, or resuming the notions of time, space and causality. The humanities allow to understand that communities perceive reality through narratives, but that narratives do not create reality, except in the sense they guide human agency and, hence, its own impact in the world. As a result, anchoring in critical knowledge the narratives on relevant topics as the past, the identities, the boundaries or the resources, is of a major need, the alternative being the narratives of fake news, post truth, mistrust and war. Critical knowledge, itself, requires a conversation between the rational academic knowledge and the praxis of the communities, that codesign strategies for their own needs.

At APHELEIA, we want to leverage on this diversity to further discussions and raise questions concerning cultural integrated landscape management for local and global sustainability, which would otherwise rest in their original silos, thus allowing for the emergence of novel perspectives on both problems and solutions. We have the ambition of involving actors at different levels – local, regional, national, and international – in shared discussions concerning wicked problems affecting landscapes in its many interpretations. We have the intention of co-designing, co-developing, and co-deploying sustainable solutions, particularly with those that are most directly involved, by engaging in specific transdisciplinary research projects. For this purpose, besides the continuation of seminars, workshops and site-based projects, we will further support the establish of advanced studies programmes at a global scale and favour the regional coordination of local projects.

To achieve these objectives and our advocacy activities, APHELEIA became structured as a French law association, headquartered in Paris, and with regional chapters. This will allow us to be closer to the communities which we intend to impact, while strengthening our network and broadening the access to regional and national funding mechanisms.

South America, and namely Brazil, has been very active in APHELEIA for the past years, including the presence of Prof. André Soares in the BRIDGES Coalition, the establishment of a section of the UNESCO-IPT Chair in Humanities and Cultural Integrated Landscape Management at the Federal and Catholic Universities of Pelotas, or the involvement

of Prof. Erika Robrahn-Gonzalez as member of the governing council of BRIDGES. Criciúma, in Brazil, organized the first APHELEIA International seminar outside Europe, which resulted in this volume. All these elements explain why the first regional chapter being structured is in South America.

We have also decided to reinforce our on-line presence, by renovating our website (APHELEIAproject.org) and increasing our presence in different social networks, including Instagram, LinkedIn, and X. With this intent, we created a 5-member Editorial Board, led by Prof. Juliano Bitencourt Campos from UNESCO, Brazil, aiming to promote discussions between members, on topics relevant to APHELEIA. These can be initiated by members, who propose a topic supported by a short text to the Editorial Board. Once validated (in terms of its thematic adequacy and accordance with the aims and purpose of the Association), the text will be disseminated through different social networks. The texts and the corresponding exchanges will eventually be posted on APHELEIA's website, under the banner Atrium.

One important feature of the renovated website will be the match-making mechanism. A members-only area where participants will be able to mutualise efforts when applying to funding. This match making mechanism will work as follows: a member identifies a call, it announces it in the platform, and includes the profile of partner(s) it is looking for. Once this stage is completed, APHELEIA announces a call in the website; a mail is sent to its members to trigger a match-making process; interested members reply to that message and the negotiations for establishing the consortium start. Once the consortium is settled, the match-making process is concluded. The project is registered as APHELEIA's and moves to another area of the site, being registered as "on-going project".

This is the overall outline of APHELEIA. By explaining it, we invite the readers of this volume to also join the various initiatives of the Association and to bring their own suggestions and contributions, namely becoming affiliated to it.

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