

The Global TraPs Project Transdisciplinary Processes for Sustainable Phosphorus Management (2010–2015)

Phosphorus (P) is a key human, animal and plant nutrient with enormous significance for global food security and an important ingredient in many non-agricultural products. While knowledge on the production and utilization of phosphorus is scattered among very diverse stakeholders – from fertilizer and food industries to farmers, academics in various disciplines, and regulatory bodies, to name just a few – two broad issues surrounding phosphorus are increasingly being discussed and debated: the finite nature of phosphate rock resources vis-à-vis their importance in future food security, and the negative environmental impacts of excess phosphorus, particularly in freshwater and coastal marine ecosystems.

Concerns and opinions have been voiced in both scientific and popular media by individuals or groups often representing only a single stakeholder group. What has been lacking is a multi-stakeholder forum involving key actors with differing viewpoints, knowledge and concerns to guide and optimize future P use through an assessment of the current knowledge and knowledge gaps, and the development of options for the way forward. The Global TraPs Project (Global Transdisciplinary Processes for Sustainable Phosphorus Management; 2010–2015) is addressing this broad need. Focusing on the sustainability of future phosphorus use, Global TraPs will bring together “practice” (producers and users of phosphorus, along with those facilitating their efforts, such as extension and development organizations) and “science”¹ (researchers

from various disciplines with an interest in phosphorus) to work towards a common aim, expressed in the guiding question of the project:

What new knowledge, technologies and policy options are needed to ensure that future phosphorus use is sustainable, improves food security and environmental quality, and provides benefits for the poor?

This high-visibility international project with broad participation is led by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) and the International Fertilizer Development Center (IFDC), each assuming responsibility for leadership of complimentary facets – science (ETH) and practice (IFDC). It is expected that a large number of stakeholders will be involved: as many as 300 will likely participate during the project.

The project uses the transdisciplinary methodology which, through mutual learning involving ‘science and society,’ integration of diverse knowledge, and consensus building, enables groups to develop socially robust options for the future. While focusing on the global situation, Global TraPs incorporates knowledge and perspectives from location-specific, transdisciplinary case studies designed to address specific issues of interest within the human-environment system. Study and discussions will take place in ‘nodes’ organized around the global phosphorus supply chain, i.e., from exploration of phosphorus resources to its utilization and recycling. These nodes are led by three leaders, one from practice, another from science, and a third with in-depth experience in transdisciplinary methodology; participants in each node also come from practice and science in equal proportions.

¹ Science and theory are usually used synonymously. Representatives from the scientific community are members of scientific/academic institutions whose primary goal is the production of knowledge, embedded in scientific publications, theories, methods etc. From a “normal science perspective,” this means that the goal of the work of scientists is to approach reality and truth by models and theories

The transdisciplinary methodology acknowledges and respects the differing interests and backgrounds of the stakeholders. Exchanges on views and values are integral to the process which operates in a precompetitive and non-politicized arena. Two rules of conduct will ensure constructive dialogue leading to results with benefits for all stakeholders: (1) a code of confidentiality of information, when requested by any participant; and (2) a commitment to not engage in discussions, nor make recommendations on, specific, day-to-day political or geopolitical issues. Instead, the Global TraPs project deals with policy options supporting sustainable P access and management.

Thus, Global TraPs will contribute, at the global level, to a constructive P dialogue and sustainable P use in the future by defining, in a multi-stakeholder forum, the following:

- The current stage of knowledge on phosphorus and its use, and new knowledge which is necessary to ensure sustainability of its use,
- New technologies which are needed to better process, use and re-use phosphorus, and
- Most valuable areas for policy intervention to ensure sustainable P use in the future.

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For updates about the Global TraPs effort, visit <http://www.uns.ethz.ch/gt>

The outputs of Global TraPs will be made available globally for high-level decision-makers in policy and politics, industry, science and development. Specific case studies and their outputs will benefit particular locations.

Why get involved?

Private sector, in particular the fertilizer and food industries, is a key stakeholder in the global P arena and the food security it serves, and an important partner in the TraPs process. As 'practice' node leaders, private sector partners can strongly influence the direction of TraPs efforts, including foci of case studies. They will also be a highly visible contributor in the TraPs global communications, both spoken and written. Specifically, participation in the TraPs process will allow the private sector to:

- At the global level, actively and visibly participate in a context of a multi-stakeholder forum in discussions on sustainable phosphorus use
- Drive future scientific and technology generation efforts to areas where knowledge gaps exist
- Shape future policies on phosphorus, its production and use.