

The wickedness of citizen science, law and planetary health: grappling with trust, democracy and representation

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The health of our planet is at risk and so are we. This is widely recognized as a highly urgent matter. National and international policy and governance bodies expect that citizen science can help addressing this urgency, e.g. through large scale environmental observations to monitor the SDGs or creating positive societal effects such as enhancing trust in science. For citizen science to have a significant role in attaining planetary health an important aspect is often forgotten: the roles of citizen science within the legal context.

Legal adaptation to the development of manifold citizen science(s) is too slow, hampering the roles of citizen science for planetary health. Individuals and communities now take action towards planetary health on matters such as biodiversity protection and climate change, expressing a discontent with political responses, perceived as lacking responsiveness, unwillingness, or inability to tackle environmental challenges. For such communities, the legal system become an alternative route for advancing decisions on environmental concerns. When citizen observations are taken to court this can produce legal but also societal effects as rulings may trigger legal and regulatory interventions. Democratically elected policy-makers may have to 'succumb' to the scrutiny of judges and this has clear implications for democracy and for traditional allocation of institutional powers.

We will tackle these and other "wicked" issues in our interactive panel, starting from the following questions:

Taking citizen to court might affect citizens' trust in public authorities and politicians. Even official science might not go unscathed. Is this an acceptable route towards societal changes if we wish to achieve a healthier planet?

What are the implications for democracy of bringing citizen science in courts? Can we accept this as an 'undemocratic' move yet needed for conserving biodiversity and halting climate change?

Citizen science projects display that the majority of participants are highly educated, upper-middle class, middle-aged or older, and white. Gender composition often show a strong bias of participants identifying as male. What does this imply for using court rooms in representing larger public interests? Does it risk to reinforce societal polarisation and biases not only in science but also in judicial decisions?