Seven years of the GAIA Masters Student Paper Award

At the same time that Agenda 21 was adopted in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, helping the idea of sustainability to achieve political breakthrough, a new scientific journal, GAIA, was founded. It provided a venue for a particular type of research that was only just emerging: science that analyzes the causes of environmental and sustainability problems and develops approaches for dealing with problems that do not lend themselves to easy solutions (wicked problems) – and therefore need novel scientific paradigms, following inter- and transdisciplinary criteria.

With this type of research arose the challenge of training a new generation of researchers. And with the growth of relevant study programs, a space emerged that received little publicity: student theses and projects that address sustainability challenges in often very creative and, in a good sense, unconventional ways. To make this body of work visible, GAIA launched its Masters Student Paper Award in 2015. The award developed into a great success with around 100 submissions from 13 countries and – as of last year – six papers making it into GAIA as peer reviewed research papers.

Taking stock after seven years into the award, the submissions reveal some insights: in terms of their focus, a number of awarded papers tackle concrete problems in key action areas of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) such as food or mobility, while others analyzed how stakeholders interact in sustainability transformations. Second, in institutional terms, it is apparent how sustainability research has broadened and diversified; in the early years, submissions came primarily from pioneering institutions in the field, while today they come from a variety of institutions around the world. Third, from a methodological perspective, it can be seen that many papers have reflexively developed and experimented with methodological approaches, for example in relation to real-world laboratories or transdisciplinary evaluation. Taken together, the array of submissions demonstrates the vigor with which early-career researchers have contributed to inter- and transdisciplinary sustainability research and have set new impulses.

This year, for the first time, the jury is awarding two winners. Both commendably represent the spirit of GAIA in the ways they address sustainability challenges: Rebekka Diestelkamp, who thoughtfully assembled a variety of approaches to address the question of how people construct niches for sustainability experiments, using an immersive ethnographic case study; and Christian Schnurr, who approached the question of how differently distinctions between natural and artificial substances are constructed from a natural and literary science perspective, thus making a genuinely interdisciplinary contribution to how language frames the way we communicate about sustainability.

As the jury, we congratulate the winners and thank all previous entrants for the ingenuity and courage with which they have sought answers to the pressing questions of our time through inter- and transdisciplinary research. Today, almost 30 years after Agenda 21, we need their voices and ideas more urgently than ever before.