

Course Globalisation and Sustainable Development 2025-2026

Lecture 7: 27/11/2025 - Creating Tables for the unseated

Participatory Design as an intersectional approach to globalisation and sustainable development. The case of the Einstein Telescope

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Abstract:

With this lecture I want to provide an insight on how a feminist literature and research practices, can inspire alternative approaches to spatial analysis and development. We explain how setting up intersectional research processes, require another way of “setting the table”. Feminist author Ahmed (2010) calls the table a kinship object, a tangible thing over which families or professionals gather and have polite conversations around certain things. She refers to the expression “a seat at the table”, which is a reference to power, to whom is involved in the discussions that influence decision-making. We will discuss a case study, namely the Einstein telescope project, where scientists, spatial experts and policy makers, were included at the table from the start, but some other actors, such as local inhabitants, or local entrepreneurs, such as farmers, were not, or only included later in the process. Ahmed observed how these tables are not transparent, since many decisions are being made not at the meeting table, but at the lunch-table. In the places where decisions are supposed to be made, like committees, the tables often act as doors: mechanisms to carry decisions from one phase to the next. Those who fall out of certain categories (in this case: not being a scientist) are invited to these tables as doors, where they can become the ‘killjoy’ when they disturb the fragility of peace by asking to be part of decision-making, instead of passing decisions through. Ahmed invites us to open the possibility of creating new types of tables for those who feel “unseated” (Ahmed, 2022). We will explain how - with the way we set up Participatory Design processes - try to create tables for the unseated. We will demonstrate this with the workshops, walks, interventions and lab activities organised in the framework of the Einstein Telescope project - the potential integration of Europe's “most advanced observatory for gravitational waves” in the Euregion - that takes shape in an international, and even interscalar context.

Article referring to another case study in which we wanted to create tables for the unseated: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15710882.2025.2457492?af=R>

Bio:

Liesbeth Huybrechts is Professor in the areas of participatory design, design anthropology and socio-environmental transformation processes in the research group Civic and Policy Design, Arck, University of Hasselt, Belgium. She has developed a research interest in the design for/with participatory exchanges between human and the material/natural environment and the “politics” of designing these relations in just ways.