

# Seven years of the *GAIA Masters Student Paper Award*



**Dr. Daniel Fischer**

Wageningen University | Strategic Communication Group | Associate Professor for Consumer Communication and Sustainability | Wageningen | The Netherlands | daniel.fischer@wur.nl

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<sup>1</sup>.

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 *SDG* action areas 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, papers 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<sup>2</sup>. 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<sup>3</sup>, 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.

Daniel Fischer, Renate Hübner, Franz Rauch, Irmi Seidl, Bianca Vienni Baptista

<sup>1</sup> Please visit <https://www.oekom.de/gaia/c-131> for an overview of winners and shortlisted papers of the *GAIA Masters Student Paper Award* 2015 to 2021. We welcome submissions for the next *Award* by young sustainability researchers from around the world (deadline is October 17, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See also the announcement in the *GAIASKOP* section of this issue (p. 6).

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to all previous jury members: Daniel Lang (Lüneburg), Jörg Matschullat (Freiberg), Pim Martens (Maastricht), Ulrich Strasser (Innsbruck), Ulli Vilsmaier (Lüneburg).