

# Anchoring Critique, Empowering Alternatives

*Unpacking the Critical-Constructive Approach of SDC and RSO*

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## Introduction

The twin chair groups *Rural Sociology* (RSO) and *Sociology of Development and Change* (SDC) at Wageningen University and Research share, in their teaching and research, what they refer to as a “critical-constructive approach”. Although the words “critical” and “constructive” may evoke quick associations for many, the tangible meaning of what a critical-constructive approach precisely entails tends to remain somewhat ambiguous to a wider audience. Following the recent 5-year mid-term review of both groups in 2020-2024, the reviewers therefore recommended clarifying and articulating the approach more explicitly in the form of a conceptual paper.

This report serves as an initial building block toward that goal. It aims to unpack and explore the *critical-constructive approach* to provide groundwork on which the groups can further develop and refine this conceptual articulation. As such, the main objective of this report is to clarify the imperative of a critical-constructive disposition, shared by SDC & RSO, within the walls of a traditionally technical university, long shaped by applied, solution-driven research.

The work will be divided in two chapters. Chapter One begins by outlining how the groups currently articulate critical-constructive approach in their most recent mid-term self-assessment reports (2020-2024). From there, it highlights the institutional and intellectual influences that have shaped the groups’ approach today. This includes a discussion of critical social theory in general, in which the most significant critical scholarly trends that influence SDC and RSO are outlined. Chapter Two focuses on the present-day manifestations of the approach, drawing from expert interviews conducted with staff members from both groups. The aim of this second chapter is to reveal how staff members apply and embody the critical-constructive approach in their teaching, writing and engagement with academia more broadly. This chapter also discusses how this approach directly resonates with the university’s broader ambition for transformative change and responsible knowledge production.

At its core, the report addresses the question of what it means, and takes, to be critically constructive in research and education. The report positions RSO & SDC’s commitment to critique as an anchoring counterbalance within a technical university: reserving a space for dialogue, reflexivity and imagination that might otherwise be overshadowed by a solution-driven ethos. Ultimately, this work aims to highlight how the approach helps students, staff, and the broader Wageningen university community to make future-oriented decisions that are both competent and conscientious, thereby contributing meaningfully and effectively to the enhancement of *quality of life*.

## Methodology and approach

The contents of this report have been obtained through qualitative, interpretative and reflexive research strategies. As stated in the introduction, the aim has been to unpack and clarify the critical-constructive approach of the groups *Rural Sociology* and *Sociology of Development and Change*. The focus has been on conceptual clarification and depth of understanding, as to provide groundwork on which the approach can be articulated and refined in future work.

### Sources and data collection

In terms of data and sources, this report has drawn both on documentary analysis and interviews with staff members.

**Chapter One** has been built primarily on documentary and archival literature. The main written sources used were:

- The 2020-2024 self-assessment (mid-term reviews) of both groups
- Two books which contain reflections on the historical trajectory of Wageningen sociology:
  1. Jongerden, J., & Wiskerke, H. (Eds.). (2022). *On meaningful diversity: past, present and future of Wageningen rural sociology*. Wageningen University, Rural Sociology Group.
  2. Hebinck, P. G. M., & Verschoor, G. (2001). *Resonances and Dissonances in Development Actors, networks, and cultural repertoires*. Van Gorcum.
- Other sources include the WUR Strategic Plan (2025–2028) and SSG Strategic Agenda (2025-2026), as well as a variety of literature on critical social theory.

**Chapter Two** was informed by nine semi-structured interviews with staff members from SDC (five respondents) and RSO (four respondents). Respondents were selected through availability over the summer-months and recommendations from colleagues, ensuring diversity and balance in agency/structure orientations. Questions asked were aimed at unpacking the how the critical-constructive approach is understood and practiced in research, teaching and everyday academic work.

### Analytical process and reflexivity

Throughout the writing process, my aim has been to structure the report as a coherent narrative. This was done to provide understanding; showing where ideas come from and how they connect. Themes were distinguished through close engagement with the material and emerged gradually through an iterative process of reading, reflection and (re)interpretation. The thematic and reflexive interpretations in this report were influenced by my own experiences with the two sociology groups at Wageningen University. I have done both my BSc and MSc at Wageningen in this field (scope: 2015 till

present). This may have offered valuable contextual understanding but has also influenced the interpretative lens through which the findings were viewed.

# Chapter 1: Foundations of the Critical-Constructive Approach

## 1.1. Present-day framing: how SDC & RSO present and frame the critical-constructive approach in the 2020–2024 mid-term reviews.

This section analyzes how the twin-departments *Sociology of Development and Change* (SDC) and *Rural Sociology* (RSO) at Wageningen University and Research present and frame their shared ‘critical-constructive’ approach to social science. References to the approach and other notions of criticality in their 2020-2024 self-assessment reports (mid-term reviews) will be discussed. A brief outline of both groups’ expertise will be sketched as well. The insights and definitions provided in this section will be further unpacked in the sections to come.

### SDC

In their 2020-2024 self-assessment report, the SDC group mentions that there are two components to their *critical-constructive approach*. The first component centers around their scientific objective, the second around their societal objective:

- 1) *"we critically investigate how global development challenges around inequality, marginalization, poverty and unsustainability manifest across everyday realities of people and the political-economic structures that influence these (scientific objective)."* (SDC, 2025, pg.3).
- 2) *"we develop and support imaginative possibilities and practical action for a more just, sustainable and equitable world (societal objective)."* (SDC, 2025, pg.3).

Together, these two components combine critical analysis with constructing more just and sustainable futures through the act of imagining and empowering real-world *alternatives*<sup>1</sup>.

In a similar manner, the groups’ vision and mission statements touch on these two components of being both critical in their scientific investigation and creatively constructive in their outputs. Their **vision** is to investigate broader structures of inequality, poverty, unsustainability and injustice. Their **mission**, on the other hand, reflects the constructive purpose of translating their knowledge into substance and action. Taken together, the group combines the analysis of broader structures of power

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Alternatives’, then, to political-economic structures which exhibit extractive, unsustainable or exclusionary tendencies.

with an emphasis on agency: showcasing how actors around the globe bring about their own creative solutions and capacities as practitioners and citizens.

The SDC group mentions that they apply their approaches chiefly in relation to the Global South, though with important links to the Global North and global dynamics and power relations generally. Their self-assessment report shows that their research and investigations are often done through methods of ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative engagement at the local level, with casework in regions such as South/Central/West Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Pacific Islands. Their fieldwork research is often reinforced by insights of development sociology, anthropology, political economy and political ecology, international law, history, feminist epistemologies and postcolonial/decolonial thought. This allows the group to examine conflicts, disasters, conservation struggles, power relations and governance matters in depth. The group is therefore well-acquainted in critically perceiving how global structures intersect with the local realities of marginalized communities. (SDC, 2025).

## **RSO**

Respectively, in the Rural Sociology department's self-assessment report it is stated that their mission is:

*"to advance a scholarship within the social sciences that is both critical towards existing power dynamics and identifies responsible alternatives for agrarian, food, and social systems in crisis". (RSO, 2025, pg.7).*

Like SDC, the RSO group is *critical* towards existing power dynamics (e.g. structures of inequality, poverty), whilst their *constructive* dimension aims at identifying and empowering real-world alternatives. In the self-assessment report, it is mentioned that the RSO department often works from the ground up, which means they focus on the everyday practices and lived experiences of farmers and communities. The groups' research is often grounded in ethnographic and place-based fieldwork, combined with qualitative research, case studies and participatory approaches. They focus, for instance, on how rural communities navigate agrarian change, food provisioning and social movements. This is done mostly in the Netherlands in Europe, but RSO also has strong engagements with regions outside Europe, such as Latin America, Southeast Asia and Turkey. The group often collaborates with local actors and aims to make visible the creative responses and reflexes of these actors and farming communities. The RSO group emphasizes that these alternatives (though often overlooked by mainstream technocratic narratives) offer innovative responses to all sorts of modern-day crises. (RSO,2025).

With the critical-constructive approach, RSO wants to take the lead in promoting justice-oriented initiatives, mostly in the domains of food provisioning, agricultural change and rural development (RSO, 2025). They emphasize the use of *critical*

*pedagogy*<sup>2</sup> in their education to equip students with the competences and skills to identify, evaluate and co-create such initiatives. This is in line with their commitment to *public sociology*, which is about positively impacting society not only in terms of advancing knowledge but also ensuring that this knowledge can empower and be of practical and political use to social groups, while exposing processes of marginalization and disenfranchisement. (RSO, 2025).

### Critical & constructive synergy

In their self-assessment reports, both sociology groups emphasize the interest of cultivating both *critical awareness* and *collective imagination* in their education and research. This seems to be what the critical-constructive approach is: critically examining on the one hand, constructively working towards alternative futures on the other. The constructive component illustrates that their critiques are not merely reactionary or oppositional for the sake of being rejective. Within a critical-constructive approach, reflection is important: denoting where current trajectories fall short, as to be able to reimagine alternate ones better aligned with justice, equity, sustainability and WUR's prospect of quality of life.

Both groups have a commitment to *public sociology*, which means their *constructiveness* extends beyond the classroom. The groups emphasize that the knowledge they produce is not only relevant in academia but is also politically and practically useful for marginalized groups around the globe (SDC, 2025; RSO, 2025).

The *critical-constructive approach* thus speaks to a synergy of reflective critique and ethical transformation, operationalized through the surfacing of alternatives and potentialities. As becomes clear in the self-assessments, the promotion of such alternatives within the groups can take many forms: from substantiating counter-hegemonic discourses and practices, to advancing proposals like convivial conservation, to foregrounding alternative modes of agrarian production, to empowering agency-infused practices of local communities or asserting new forms of citizenship and state–society relations (SDC, 2025; RSO,

### Key Insights from the Self-Assessments

- Both groups link critical analysis of structures to a constructive aspiration for (more just, sustainable and equitable) practical alternatives.
- Critique is not reactionary but reflexive: it examines why certain practices and interventions fail to foster sustainable futures, and what this reveals about power dynamics.
- Constructiveness extends beyond the classroom: producing knowledge that is politically and practically useful for marginalized groups.
- Alternatives are made visible in diverse forms: e.g. counter-hegemonic discourses, convivial conservation, alternative modes of agrarian production or empowering agency-infused practices of local communities.
- Together, SDC and RSO position themselves as chair groups committed to critical reflection and constructive imagination.

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<sup>2</sup> An educational approach rooted in social justice, emancipation and consciousness raising, most famously associated with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

2025). In all cases, the aim is to make visible and validate fair opportunities for change that growth-oriented paradigms often overlook. As such, the groups seem to function as an engine of critical thinking, enabling different horizons to be both imagined and pursued within Wageningen University and Research.

To further interpret how the critical-constructive posture is embedded within the groups, it helps to place them in their historical and institutional context. The next section therefore frames the role of the two groups and their relation to their institutional home: Wageningen University and Research.

## 1.2 Intellectual and institutional positioning of the groups

### RSO and SDC within today's WUR landscape

The RSO and SDC groups are part of Wageningen University and Research (WUR). As of today, WUR is known for its expertise in food, feed & biobased production; natural resources & living environment, and society & well-being. All of its programmes are tailored to WUR's broader institutional mission: *'to explore the potential of nature to improve the quality of life'*. The research and education of the institute is focused on climate change, biodiversity, feeding the world, circular economy and healthy food & living (Wageningen University & Research, 2025). In WUR's most recent strategic plan, *Shape Responsible Change 2025-2028* the university expresses the ambition to allow time for curiosity-driven science and critical and reflexive thinking. This, the plan voices, is essential for asking the right questions, for fueling creativity and enabling the transitions needed to reimagine living on planet Earth in ways that are more sustainable and reciprocal (WUR, 2025).

Historically and internationally, WUR is known for its agricultural and technical sciences. Among the universities of Delft, Eindhoven and Twente, WUR is one of the four technical universities in the Netherlands. The technical background of the university makes that it tends to orient towards innovation, efficiency and application-driven research; oftentimes steered to professional consultancy. Given the critical spirit of SDC and RSO, naturally this often generates some tensions with the techno-scientific orientation of WUR. In his farewell address, former chair of RSO Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2017) for instance warned that WUR tends to excel in mega-projects, but at the same time risks overlooking the need for modesty, internal critique and an attentiveness to many peoples lived realities. As can be derived from the self-assessment reports, the two sociology groups often feel pressured by the university to contribute to solution-finding within an instrumental paradigm of science, rather than to prioritize (time-consuming) critical reflection, theory building and teaching (SDC 2025; RSO, 2025). The latter, the groups emphasize, remain nonetheless invaluable when seeking the assurance of quality, legitimacy and reflexivity of knowledge. RSO explicitly stresses that *'responsible change is not a technical issue, but a social and political one – one that necessarily involves normative choices'* (RSO, 2025, pg. 5).

In the self-assessment reports, both SDC and RSO refer to the WUR as a neoliberal academia with top-down management and financialization, primarily focused on improving or optimising system components whilst risking imperceptiveness to the broader impact they have on the people and institutions affected. The sociology groups (as well as the broader Social Science Group at WUR) therefore emphasize the need of sustainable, economically viable, just, inclusive, equitable and responsible transitions in the WUR domain (SDC, 2024; RSO, 2024). For RSO and SDC specifically this includes asking uncomfortable questions, exposing systemic inequalities and critiquing dominant paradigms, even within their own university. Naturally, the groups thus both complement and challenge WUR's technological climate by foregrounding the political and ethical dimensions of *quality of life* and sustainability.

The next section discusses the early (agricultural) sociological work done by the groups, as this reflects how their critical posture came about.

### **Introducing the social dimension: early work of RSO and SDC at WUR**

Sociology was not always part of WUR. When the institute was established in 1918 as the Landbouwhogeschool (Agricultural college), all its 5 original study programmes were focused on forestry, horticulture and agriculture (De Koning, 2021). After World War II the institute expanded into new theoretical territories and started including new study programmes into its repertoire. Among them was the programme 'home economics'. The introduction of this programme marked the subtle - sometimes called disguised - entrance of *sociology* at WUR (Kooy, 1971; De Koning, 2021). This marked the beginning of the departments today known as RSO and SDC.

In 1946, the department '*Sociology and Social Geography*' was founded by Professor Evert Willem Hofstee. This group would be the precursor of what is today known as RSO. Professor Hofstee stressed that agricultural progress could not be achieved without the insights of social science. As such, Hofstee emphasized the need of studying cultural patterns, social relationships and understanding farming styles alongside technical-agricultural theories (Jongerden & Wiskerke, 2022). A few years later, in 1955, the department '*Agrarian Sociology of Non-Western Regions*' was founded by Professor Rudi Lier (SDC, 2025). This group (precursor of SDC) focused on the modernization of non-Western regions, as a counterpart to the RSO group which, at that time, was its Western-area equivalent: *Agrarian Sociology of the Western Region* (SDC, 2025; RSO, 2025). The aim of these Wageningen trained sociologists was to be able to *connect* and *apply* their intricate knowledge of societies, groups and cultures to the wider practical world and the natural sciences in general. For a social science group to be able to speak in the language of the natural sciences was seen as something innovative and unique to

## Key insights: RSO & SDC within the WUR

- WUR originated as a technical, agriculture-focused university.
- Sociology entered after WWII, initially as a valued tool to support the modernization process of agriculture.
- Early sociological research examined why technical interventions succeeded or failed. Later research showed that outcomes depended on farmers' agency, values, and livelihoods.
- By centering social dynamics and everyday practices, the groups challenged purely interventionist and technical views of progress.
- From early on, RSO and SDC carried a distinctive sociological role within WUR: making people, culture and lived realities visible; complementing yet also contesting the dominant techno-scientific paradigm.

Wageningen. Allegedly, at that time, sociologists from other universities were not fully equipped to do this yet (De Koning, 2021).

As such, the groups introduced WUR to the social dimensions of agricultural change. The agricultural sociological work in the early days (1950s, 1970s) was mostly utilized for Wageningen's modernization agenda: to support the shift from traditional to modern agrarian systems and to generate expert knowledge for agricultural policy-making (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). Questions in the early days of agricultural sociology were, for instance '*Why are certain farmers willing (or able) to modernize, and others are not?*' or '*Why have certain modernization technologies successfully implemented, whilst others fail to gain traction?*' (Jongerden & Wiskerke, 2022). The groups were increasingly called upon to mediate between farmers and scientists, to evaluate the social impacts of technological change, and to assess local knowledge systems (Box & Van Dusseldorp, 1991). Because of their contributions to processes of agricultural modernization, rural sociology in these early years (1950s till the 1970s) was recognized by the broader institute as being a vital and relevant field. These years are even referred to as the 'golden age' of rural sociology (Anonymous, 1997; Jongerden & Wiskerke, 2022).

The more critical posture of the groups began to emerge in the 1970s, when Dutch agriculture had largely completed its modernization process. With this transition 'completed', rural sociology entered a period of uncertainty. Sociological research began shifting towards the *effects* of modernization on family farms, rural livelihoods, and agricultural communities (Jongerden & Wiskerke, 2022). As such, during the 1980s, rural sociology incorporated more of a *critical-reflexive* posture towards the agricultural modernization processes, based on the experience of farmers and farming communities themselves. While WUR's natural sciences remained focused on technical solutions, these rural sociologists focused on how agricultural

change was largely shaped by livelihoods, values and social realities (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). This period eventually became characterised by lively theoretical debates about actor, agency and structure (Oosterveer & Spaargaren, 2001). The Wageningen position in this debate eventually led to the culmination of the, at that time, groundbreaking *actor-oriented approach*, developed by Professor Norman Long from chairgroup SDC.

In conclusion, a critical orientation has long been embedded within the two sociology groups. Their focus on the social dimensions of change naturally brought them in close contact with local agents and communities, whose livelihoods often contradicted the assumptions of modernization or structuralist development frameworks. The rising popularity of Long's actor-oriented approach in the 1980s deepened this critical stance and brought about a more decisive move away from linear assumptions of modernization theory towards agency and everyday practices. This eventually opened the way for the critical-constructive approach found within the groups today. The next section reflects on the actor-oriented approach as an early embodiment of critical-constructive thinking.

### **1.3. Norman Long & the actor-oriented approach: an early embodiment of critical-constructive thinking**

#### **Re-centering agency: the actor-oriented turn in Wageningen Sociology**

Professor Norman Long developed the actor-oriented approach in response to the dominant development frameworks of the 1960s and 1970s. These were on the one hand modernization frameworks and on the other hand (neo-)Marxist and *dependencia* frameworks (Hebinck & Verschoor, 2001). Both, Long argued, treated development and change as a largely top-down, structurally determined and linear process. Long voiced that both were therefore '*tainted by determinist, linear and externalist views of social change*' (Long, 2003; 11). During his fieldwork in highland Peru, he experienced that these two frameworks could not explain why certain groups responded differently to development programs under the same structural conditions (Long, 2003).

Long realized that farmers, communities, NGOs and state agents were active negotiators and should therefore not be perceived as passive recipients, but as capable agents embedded in complex social fields. As such, he drew attention to the fact that there was much happening at the *interface* between external development interventions and local life worlds (Hebinck & Verschoor, 2001). Outcomes of development projects, he argued, were prone to unexpected and surprising results, shaped by agency, heterogeneity and contested meanings (Long, 2003). He solidified these insights in his actor-oriented approach: a social science methodology which deemed development as negotiated and co-produced in everyday practices of local actors. With this new approach, he was able to step away from the dominant macro-structural frameworks of his time.

His theory brought about a wave of ethnographic sociological research focused on how meaning is made on the ground and how complexity is navigated in everyday social life. It was widely influential and revived the 'Wageningen School of Development Sociology' (Hebinck & Verschoor, 2001). It inspired a shift at WUR's sociology from *praxeology* (a technocratic, steering-based, service-oriented sociology) (van Lier, 1979) toward fieldwork-based insight and collaborative knowledge-making (Hebinck & Verschoor, 2003). In this sense, what Long did was an early embodiment of critical constructive thinking: he sensed a knowledge gap in the dominant theory, critiqued linear, structural frameworks and henceforth constructed an alternative approach, inspired by the local life worlds of people. What Long initiated with the actor-oriented approach therefore set a precedent for the kind of scholarship that still defines Wageningen sociology today: a way of working that combines critical diagnosis with an openness to the creative practices and capabilities of actors in everyday life.

### Actor-orientation under debate: refining the lens

Despite the success of the actor-oriented approach, it was also actively debated and critiqued by the groups from the inside. These critiques, brought together in *Resonances and Dissonances in Development* (2001) by Paul Hebinck and Gerard Verschoor, were:

- **Romanticizing agency:** The actor-oriented approach subtly suggested that people are responsible agents and always have room to steer their lives.
- **Neglecting structure:** The actor-oriented approach stepped away from the dominant macro-structural frameworks of the 1970s, but in doing so, put structural analysis on the backburner and lost some systemic insight.
- **Risk of abstraction:** Verschoor (2001) argued that the approach became too theoretical and therefore paradoxically silenced the very actors it initially sought to foreground. Instead of giving people voice, the theory began speaking *about* or *for* them, not *with* them. He pointed to the distance between the theory and the messy, material realities of local life worlds.
- **Missing discourse and power:** Pieter de Vries (2001) argued that the actor-oriented approach needed to be bridged with a post-structuralist lens on discourse and the micropolitics of power.

### Key Insights: The Actor-Oriented Approach and Its Debates

- Norman Long's actor-oriented approach re-centered actors and agency, challenging structuralist and linear development models.
- It revived Wageningen sociology, inspiring ethnographic, fieldwork-based approaches.
- Actor-orientation embodied an early critical-constructive spirit: critiquing determinist frameworks while building an alternative method inspired by everyday life worlds of people.
- Internal critiques (Hebinck, Verschoor, De Vries) sharpened the Wageningen School, warning against romanticization, neglect of structure, abstraction, discourse and power imbalances.
- These debates kept the Wageningen School reflexive, warning against blind spots in its own methods. They also opened the door for integrating wider traditions of critical social theory.

Without it, actor-oriented and participatory approaches risked becoming merely administrative burdens, not necessarily empowering local people in a lasting way.

These sorts of debates show that the Wageningen School did not simply critique structures and isolated modernization paradigms, but that they were also critical of their own tools and methods. They did not shy away from pointing out blind spots, lacks and power imbalances. Since then, many different strands of critical social theory have been discussed and incorporated in the scholarly work of the groups. The next section provides a brief overview of these critical theories.

## 1.4 Theoretical currents informing critical-constructive thinking

### Critical theory: Frankfurter Schule

As touched upon in section 1.1, the critical-constructive approach has both the objective to critically investigate global structures and challenges, and to construct knowledge that is politically and practically useful for communities and farmers around the globe. The underlying idea of wanting to bring about knowledge that is empowering for people, much resonates with the ideas of the Frankfurter Schule. The Frankfurt School is generally considered the origin point of modern Critical Theory (Bohman, 1999; *Frankfurt School, Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Famously, the Frankfurt school made a distinction between scientific theories and critical theories. Scientific theories, they argued, were aimed at industrial mastery of the external world ("what is"). Critical theories, as opposed to positivist scientific theories, were aimed at question of emancipation and enlightenment, which meant that they could free people from hidden forms of coercion and make them *decide for themselves*. Critical theory therefore has the capacity to *reveal* and *transform* the social realities they critique (Geuss, 1981). The theories of the Frankfurt school therefore always had a critical-emancipatory impulse, as reflected for instance in this quote by Max Horkheimer, from his work *Traditional and Critical Theory* (originally published in 1937) : "*the problem is not that of finding a particular method, but of bringing theory into accord with the interest of the emancipation of man*" (Horkheimer, 1972, p. 246).

According to the Frankfurt School, it was not enough to study and understand how society works: one also must try and change it. Critical social theory, therefore, is very much engaged with ideas of 'what should be' (Frymer, 2010). Again, much of the critical-constructive approach found within SDC and RSO is in line with this sort of critical thinking. It has those elements of interrogating into dominant structures, with the aim of bringing about emancipatory knowledge that can be used by marginalized groups. On top of that, this knowledge is at the same time liberatory for researchers themselves, as it demands reflexive self-awareness of a scholar. In education, it stimulates students to examine their own assumptions, positionalities and responsibilities within systems of power.

Different strands of critical theory address different areas of contestation. Each tradition brings its own “lens” to study and make visible particular dynamics of power and possibility. There are various strands of critical theory that RSO and SDC actively draw on in their research and teaching. The next section briefly outlines these traditions.

### **Critical social theories the groups build on**

Based on RSO & SDC self-assessment reports (staff expertise, course portfolios and keywords), the key critical traditions that the groups draw on are (neo-)Marxist perspectives, Foucault’s concept of governmentality and biopower, political ecology, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, decolonial thought, gender studies and feminist perspectives of various kinds. Each of these has a distinctive angle that allows for the interrogation of inequalities and power struggles:

- **(Neo-)Marxist perspectives (political economy):** used to interrogate systemic inequalities, crises of (neoliberal) capitalism and class relations in agrarian and food systems. Focus on labour, land, and historical processes of accumulation. (e.g. Karl Marx, David Harvey, Neil Smith).
- **Governmentality & biopower:** examines how governance, law, and policy shape everyday life through discourses of security, water management or humanitarian intervention. Makes visible hidden technologies of control and normalization. (Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow).
- **Political Ecology:** links environmental change, conservation and agrarian struggles to dynamics of power and inequality. Critiques neoliberal conservation, land grabs and depoliticized sustainability. (e.g. Piers Blaikie, Paul Robbins, Bram Büscher & Robert Fletcher)
- **Post-structuralism:** interrogates discourse, subjectivity and the micropolitics of development and governance. Unpacks how meanings are contested in everyday practice. (e.g. Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, Jacques Derrida).
- **Psychoanalysis:** uses Lacanian/psychoanalytic perspectives to unpack desire, fantasy and the unconscious in development discourse. Highlights affective and symbolic dimensions of power. (e.g. Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek).
- **Decolonial / Postcolonial thought:** interrogates colonial legacies, Eurocentrism and indigenous struggles. Foregrounds pluriversal and subaltern perspectives. (e.g. Edward Said, Arundhati Roy, Gyaatri Spivak).
- **Gender / Feminist perspectives:** analyzes gendered power relations, care and intersectionality in agrarian and rural change. Reveals hidden dynamics of social reproduction and alternative economies (e.g. Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Gibson-Graham).
- **Posthumanism, More-than-human:** explores human–nature relations, multispecies ethnography and alternative food/circular economies. Critiques

anthropocentrism and growth-oriented paradigms. (e.g. Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Sarah Whatmore).

In their research and education, these theories are frequently combined and together can be seen as forming the theoretical critical backbone of SDC and RSO. The combination of these theories makes a deconstructive lens through which the world can be studied: one that challenges taken-for-granted truth and makes visible structures of power. The next chapter talks more about how this criticality actually manifests in practice, and also addresses why the input of critical social theory is indispensable when one seeks to find alternatives that contribute to responsible change and transformation.

# Chapter 2 - Practicing Critique and Construction: Insights from SDC & RSO Staff

## 2.1 Critical-constructive approach for transformative change

This chapter outlines how practicing a critical-constructive approach in research and education offers concrete potential for the transformations that are being called for today. As touched upon in chapter one, WUR's strategic plan aspires to make time for critical and reflexive research in pursuit of sustainable futures (Wageningen University & Research, 2025). Within this broader vision, the Strategic Agenda of the Social Science Group (SSG) at WUR emphasizes *Transformative Change* as a central notion in their agenda (SSG, 2025). Transformative change, the SSG agenda voices, is needed because the planet deals with unresolved challenges of overconsumption, the depletion of nature and its resources, resource-based conflicts, persistent environmental pollution, widespread malnutrition, polarization, persistent poverty and inequality, a rapidly changing climate and continued, unabated biodiversity loss (SSG, 2025). The fact that these challenges are unresolved and persistent emphasizes the necessity of transformation: something fundamental needs to be altered if we are to build our futures differently.

According to SSG, transformative change requires deep reflection on how we view ourselves, what we value and how we relate to nature, others and the planet we live on (SSG, 2025). In line with this, WUR's broader educational ambition "*to foster the development of responsible changemakers for science and society*" calls for educational methods which cultivate responsibility in students and scholars. To become a responsible changemaker, one needs to be able to think reflexively and discern what kind of change is truly needed. As shown in this chapter, the critical-constructive approach speaks directly to such ambitions.

This chapter synthesizes the most important elements of adopting a critical-constructive approach for transformative change. The findings in this chapter are derived from nine expert interviews with staff members.

## 2.2 Critical-constructive research: what does it demand?

To be a transformative and responsible changemaker, one needs to be able to think critically about what is, recognize what no longer works, and act constructively about what could be.

In the interviews, I asked RSO and SDC staff members which principles and practices, in their view, make research and education *critical-constructive*. The following elements came to the forefront:

## **Critique with practical implication**

Various staff members emphasized that within a critical-constructive approach, *being critical* does not necessarily mean being dismissive, or always actively seeking faults in something. Rather, they expressed that being critical in this context is inherently tied to wanting to be constructive: it comes from an open-curiosity and desire to find (or create space for) (re)new(ed) ways to address longstanding problems.

Although not defined by fault-finding, multiple staff members emphasized that the critical-constructive approach often does begin from the awareness and acknowledgement that dominant development and global trajectories of social change are “*not on a good track*”. The basis, various staff members emphasized, is therefore often critique of dominant systems, paradigms and discourses. This flows naturally from the critical social theory in which the sociology groups are grounded: “*We are specialized in critique; we are trained to look at any given probe and immediately see them through critical social theory. That is perhaps why we are considered more critical compared to other groups*”.

The constructive component of the approach emphasizes that the objective of the approach is not *only* to diagnose, deconstruct or debunk, but always carries a direction for practice. One person mentioned that after engaging in critique and critical social theory, one always asks: “*And then what?*” Another person summed this up succinctly, saying that “*critical-constructive research is critique with a practical implication.*”

## **An agency-structure interplay**

Across the interviews, there was a balance between structural and agency-oriented perspectives. Although the groups engage in critique of dominant structures and paradigms, it was voiced by staff members that critical-constructive research does not necessarily have to *start* with structural critique: it may as well begin by observing and empowering forms of agency or resistance across people and societies. Structure and agency seem to go back and forth in the critical-constructive approach.

Interviewees for instance mentioned doing research into the agency of local farming communities (e.g. in Myanmar, Brazil) or working together with social movements like Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and regenerative agriculture initiatives, or collaborating with urban residents co-creating disaster-resilience initiatives (e.g. in areas prone to landslides). The way these people and groups navigate, resist, negotiate and do things differently are often seen as affirmations of other trajectories being possible, and therefore as inspirations for transformative change. Inspiration could also be derived from traditions, cultures and indigenous communities across the globe, as the very existence of them points to alternative ways of knowing and living. One staff member, for instance, explicitly referred to the concept of *prefiguration*, or the idea that through movements, networks and everyday practices, people are *already* building the

worlds they wish to inhabit. The task of the critical-constructive scholar, then, is to make visible and graspable these (often overlooked or underrepresented) practices and potentialities of living differently, so they can inform wider processes of change and transformation.

Staff members confirmed that some people within the groups lean a bit more toward structural theory, while others orient more towards agency. One staff member highlighted how their own work emphasizes *everyday agency* and feminist epistemology. They explained how their agency-focus complemented the more structural focus of their colleagues who, for instance, gave courses in political ecology. Another explained that in their teaching they often use real-world examples of people's agency to showcase that other alternative social orders already exist: for example, by incorporating documentaries in lectures which help students recognize that, even within conditions of survival and structural exclusion, people find their own ways of resiliency, meaning and social life.

On the other hand, there were also staff members whose focus mostly revolved around critique and diagnosing the persistence of problems. One respondent for example said that their research was "*typically more critical than especially constructive*" but quickly revised their statement and emphasized that thorough critique is actually *essential* for being effectively constructive. They explained that their work often begins with exposing the limits of technocratic framings, and from thereon out introduces the social (human-nature) dimensions back into the discourse. They (as well as other respondents) therefore stressed how "deconstructing" is necessary to "reconstruct": first you work your way through critique and question assumptions, then you offer paradigmatic alternatives that speak to transformative change.

It was noted that maintaining this agency–structure balance within and between the groups is crucial because it keeps the collectives dynamic and reflective. It also keeps this interplay between deconstruction and reconstruction alive. In this way, the critical-constructive approach both *anchors critique and empowers alternatives*: it calls on scholars to maintain a critical awareness of broader structures while making visible the practices and imaginations through which alternative future trajectories can, or *are* already, taking shape.

### **Attending to history, power relations, context**

When asked *how* one can ensure that scholarship is genuinely critical, most staff members referred to the necessity to incorporate historical awareness, power-relations and context when conducting research. One respondent particularly clarified this, and distinguished critical theory from problem-solving theory. They referenced the work of Robert Cox (1981), who explained that problem-solving theory often seeks for the solutions to a problem *within* the prevailing framework, which means the framework

(and the existing social and institutional order) are taken as a given. Within problem-solving theory, the objective is often for existing systems to work more *efficiently*.

They explained that critical theory, by contrast, does not seek efficient solutions within the prevailing framework but instead seeks to question the very framework itself, by considering the history, positionality and context of that framework or system. Within critical theory, a researcher for example asks: What are the power relations that compose this framework? How did the framework come to be, and whose interests does it serve? What is the broader paradigm in which it is situated? What kind of discourses sustain and legitimize it? What hierarchies are embedded in that paradigm, and who or what is excluded, silenced or marginalized in the process? Critical theory therefore always says something about the order and legitimacy of structures and seeks to comprehend how they are produced and maintained. The aim is not to find *solutions* within a certain system or framework, but to transform them where they perpetuate inequality, unsustainability or injustice. In this sense, it connects directly to the objective of *transformative* change.

Other interviewees also shared similar insights and emphasized that critical research should always contain historical and power-relational analysis. This, for instance, also means that development projects and interventions should not be taken as self-evident, neutral, or universal. One respondent explained how in their research on participatory projects, they discovered that these projects (albeit giving the impression of being especially empowering to local people) are not self-evidently and inherently equitable. In their work, they therefore seek to make visible who designs these projects, whose interests they serve, and how they might unintentionally reproduce inequality or exclusion.

Such work shows that critical-constructive research requires scholars to look behind first-appearances. Much like the recently popularized concept of ‘greenwashing’, this staff member explained how participatory projects may potentially be used by dominant institutions or donors for purposes of ethical showcasing. The task of the critical-constructive scholar, then, is to remain alert to such tendencies without slipping into nihilism or cynicism. The aim is not to dismiss such projects outright (as there are often genuine good intentions involved) but to gain a deeper and more reflexive insight into how they take shape, whose realities they really reflect, and to perhaps steer them into a more equitable direction. In conclusion, a more layered historical-political understanding (*critical*) is needed to make such initiatives more responsive to lived realities, thereby creating conditions in which peoples livelihoods can genuinely be improved and ideas for transformative change can take root (*constructive*).

### **Openness and awareness of assumptions**

Various staff-members mentioned that critical-constructive research demands of a scholar to enter the field with an awareness of one’s own assumptions and

presuppositions. This means not taking things as self-evident and being willing to question taken-for-granted ways of organizing and doing things. One respondent explained that it requires a willingness to alter one's own perceptions of how things work. Another person emphasized that this calls for approaching anything and everything with an openness to it, and for striving toward an integrated understanding of the situation in its complexity.

When asked what it means to have such an openness in research, one respondent likened it to how people often, when they begin to watch a movie, read a certain book, or visit a certain place, have some sort of expectation or presumption of it in advance before truly experiencing the thing itself. They explained that in research such premature or self-assured forms of judgment can lack context and empathy. Within a critical-constructive approach, they emphasized, one should not close off too quickly through preconceived evaluations. They added that when one goes too quickly into critiquing, one risks missing the nuances or opportunities and potentialities that context may present. They explained that in their supervision, they often encourage students to ask *What* questions instead of *How* questions, because the latter tends to carry assumptions within them. For example, a question like "*How can governments create more sustainable ...*" already presupposes that something needs improvement and that governments are the agents that need to enact it. *What* questions (e.g., "*What are the health policies on [topic], and what effects do they have on [group/context]*")? encourage students to stay longer in inquiry and to interpret before intervening. Such questions stimulate students to uncover how things come to be as they are before imagining how they might be otherwise.

Open inquiry is therefore part of doing critical-constructive research: *to question* not just in analytical sense, but to approach a problem as a form of *quest*, entering the context of a topic with curiosity and openness to be changed and inspired by what is encountered.

### **Cultivating epistemic humility**

Another key element of the critical-constructive approach mentioned throughout the interviews was striving for epistemic humility. This involves being aware of one's own scientific framework and what it means to work from a Wageningen University and Research, a Dutch (and thus Western) university. The topic epistemic humility was mentioned in relation to doing fieldwork (when interacting with research participants who may come from different backgrounds and knowledge systems) but also as a staff member in teaching and supervision, in relation to students. Several staff-members referred to this as *critical pedagogy* (Freire, 1968), which is a style of education which aims to stimulate students to find their own voice and formulate their own ideas and alternatives. In critical pedagogy, teachers trust their students' capacity for insight and creativity. Another respondent referred to this as *constructivist teaching*: based on the

idea that knowledge is continually constructed in the interaction between student and teacher. Within such ideas of pedagogy and teaching, learning is recognized as a co-creative process in which understanding emerges through dialogue: it is not seen as a one-directional transmission from expert (e.g. researcher/teacher) to learner, but as a dialogical educational partnership between all parties involved.

The topic of epistemic humility also translates into the variety of methodological options through which critical-constructive research can be conducted. One respondent explained how they teach a course in creative methods, which emphasizes the importance of interpretative and imaginative research methods that can open up space for multiple worldviews and forms of knowing. This respondent noted that there are “*multiple ways leading to Rome,*” and that things such as role-playing, mapping, storytelling, and art-based methods can all serve as valid routes for knowledge output. Because these methods are less conventional within academic research, they argued that legitimacy for them is part of cultivating epistemic humility. These methods are alternatives to more traditional, positivist approaches to science and experiment with how knowledge itself can be generated. Transformative change, one could argue, may also call for transformative methods.

### **Stay with the trouble, yet hold on to possibility for change**

As mentioned priorly in this work, critical theory often comes with asking uncomfortable questions and making difficult acknowledgements. Acknowledging that current trajectories are *not* on a good track necessarily, and that many global challenges remain unresolved and persistent, can be a bitter pill to swallow. It often comes with the insight that many well-intended projects and interventions can inadvertently perpetuate unsustainability and inequality, because they are embedded in structures, systems and paradigms that reproduce such conditions. Several respondents described how engaging deeply with critical theory can, as two staff-members put it, “*be shattering*” or “*break a person’s bubble*”. I asked various staff members how to mitigate this process, as this can be challenging for students. One respondent noted that especially at WUR this can be a challenge, as students often arrive with an expectation of solutions, given the university’s applied orientation and focus on improving quality of life.

*Staying with the trouble*—as one respondent called it—when the situation is distressing and complex, without collapsing into quick causality or losing sight of the possibility for change, demands of a scholar the capacity to remain reflective within discomfort and uncertainty. The “shattering of the bubble”, and being left with the broken pieces, can be seen as a crucial stage in critical-constructive scholarship. It urges one to dwell with uncertainty, after which new forms of understanding and orientation can be formed. One respondent, for example, likened it to their own experiences as a young student abroad. For them, that year of exchange in the Global South was the moment they were

confronted with the complexities of poverty, colonial history, and global debt. They explained how this “*shattered their own worldview, and also urged them to reflect really fundamentally on themselves.*” They recalled this as an “*incredibly difficult but also wonderful year.*” They now see it as part of their task as a teacher to help students face similar complexities when they are first exposed to the unsettling realizations that critical social theory can bring about. They explained that the greatest impact often lies in these moments of disruption, when students start to perceive the world from perspectives they had not previously considered.

Several courses and projects related to the chair groups seek to ensure that, while students are encouraged to stay with the trouble, they do not lose sight of the possibilities for change. Another staff-member for example explained that within the groups’ students are continuously invited to imagine and enact alternatives. This, for example, is practiced in courses such as ‘*Climate Crisis, Resources, Rights, and Resistance*’ where the final assignment is called *Museum of the Future*; an exhibition curated by students about alternative futures. Such assignments stimulate students not just dwell in critique or abstraction, but to translate it into tangible and forward-looking forms.

### **Practicing discernment**

The last element that was being touched on in the interviews was the reflection that, within a critical-constructive approach, a scholar sometimes is required to say *no* to actions, collaborations or research directions that do *not* align with more just and equitable futures. If the object is transformative change, one needs to refrain (as much as possible) from undertakings that reproduce trajectories that pertain to inequality, exclusion or unsustainability.

Given the structures and systems within which a scholar is required to perform, this is not always an easy undertaking. This point, therefore, is not about a person’s moral purity, but more about deciding where one’s time and energy can meaningfully contribute, and where it inadvertently could reinforce the dynamics which one seeks to change. For the groups collectively, it seems to be an effort of staying attuned to the equitable and transformative change they wish to see in the world. One respondent explained how this, for example, can manifest in declining lucrative research opportunities which are funded by large corporate actors, just because it conflicts with ethical or epistemic commitments. They recalled a moment in which there was a proposed research project in collaboration with a major private actor, which they ultimately decided to decline. Although this decision back then was met with disbelief by others at the university (because there was a more-than significant amount of funding involved), they considered it the right decision because it allowed them to stay on course with the kind of values, work and trajectories they aim to contribute to. It

reminded me Boaventura de Sousa Santos’: “to say no is to say yes to something different” (2012, pg. 54).

Although none of the respondents explicitly mentioned the word *discernment*, this seems to be the term that encapsulates what such decision-making cultivates in the group and therefore ripples out in their teaching and personal lives. Discernment here points to the ability to judge carefully and respond accordingly instead of acting reactively or out-of-habit. Respondents for example touched upon how critical-constructive choices are not always visible or momentous like in the example of the major research project, but also often happen in day-to-day choices and interactions. One respondent, for instance, described how this could even happen in a casual conversation at a birthday party, when one engages in conversation and plants a small seed for reflection on the necessity of equitable change and transformation in the other person.

The capacity for discernment also ties back to the educational ambition of the WUR, which was mentioned in the beginning of this chapter: “to foster the development of responsible changemakers for science and society.” Several respondents emphasized that the critical-constructive approach is not about providing students with ready-made solutions, but about equipping them with the tools to let them engage with complexity and alternatives themselves. One respondent explicitly said that he wanted to provide students with theories so they can come up with their own well-considered responses to the world. In this way, students, by way of being schooled to become responsible changemakers, can go out and plant seeds of reflection and transformative change in the worlds they enter.

### 2.3 Working with tensions: limits, mitigations, and future directions

In the interviews, as well as in the self-assessments, the tensions and limits of adopting a critical-constructive approach in research were being voiced. The table on the next page briefly touches upon these tensions, includes reflection on how these are currently mitigated, and mentions possible future opportunities and directions to further strengthen these mitigations.

Tension	Mitigations	Future directions
Being deemed ‘overly critical’ in negative sense <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dismissive</li> <li>• Judgmental</li> <li>• Deconstructive</li> </ul>	Emphasizing the <i>constructive</i> orientation of critique.	Reframe <i>criticality</i> and <i>judgment</i> as forms of <i>discernment</i> : cultivated evaluative abilities to navigate complexity. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• semantic and discursive exploration of how these terms are valued.</li> <li>• Further frame criticality and</li> </ul>

		discernment as important in this 'age of acceleration'
Time pressure: critical-constructive research being time consuming	<p>WUR talks about transitions needed to reimagine living on planet Earth in sustainable &amp; reciprocal ways. Says it wants to allow time for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• curiosity driven science</li> <li>• critical &amp; reflexive thinking</li> <li>• fueling creativity</li> <li>• asking right questions</li> </ul> <p>&gt; opportunity for SDC &amp; RSO</p>	<p>Explore "slow scholarship": can be an essential condition for quality and depth.</p> <p>Develop shared reflexive frameworks and methods can help make critical-constructive work more time-efficient, as researchers can build on established patterns rather than reinventing them each time.</p>
Students are sometimes left uncertain about the purpose of ongoing critique and deconstruction within the curriculum	Staff members already address this by linking course content to real-world transformation and reflexive practice.	<p>Grounding and articulating the approach for students and staff: providing direction and cohesion. Develop a reflexive process framework staff-members can build on in research and teaching.</p> <p>Make the connection between critique and constructive change more explicit throughout the curriculum. Would help students to see meaning in the process of deconstruction.</p>
Funding (competitive, dependency on external grants)	<i>The tensions with funding were mentioned by several staff-members, but for scope of this project not further explored</i>	

# Final Reflection: Towards A Reflexive Process

## Framework of the Approach

This project’s aim has been to unpack, clarify and contextualize the critical-constructive approach of RSO and SDC. It has traced the origins and historical trajectory of the groups’ critical posture and shows that the groups’ *critical-constructive approach* is the outcome of decades of evolving thought. Although the groups have operated like this (with reflexivity, power awareness & commitment to transformation) for a long time, much of the reflexive arc of the approach has stayed implicit. Hopefully, this report – by making parts of it explicit - helps formalizing what critical-constructive research is, and what a critical-constructive posture demands. This report has also hoped to touch upon the necessity of this sort of thinking for the future of social science and education at Wageningen and beyond, as it directly seems to speak to transformative change and cultivating responsibility in students and scholars. Since SDC and RSO have worked with complexity and critique for a long time, the groups could further assist the university’s vision for transformative change as expressed in the strategic agenda 2025-2028.

Although it goes beyond the time and scope of this project to develop a framework for the approach, I propose that the approach would benefit from being translated into a reflexive process framework oriented toward transformation. Based on the findings in this work, I would therefore like to end this report by making a first attempt at providing an outline of phases which I think are encountered by scholars who aim to do critical-constructive research. The table below is mostly intended as food for thought and to keep the conversation (and reflection) going.

<b>Orient / Attune:</b> What values, futures, or forms of flourishing do I wish to see in the world?	<b>Grounding, Reflexive</b>
<b>Observe &amp; Embed:</b> Attend to what is present and absent; perceive context and phenomena with openness.	<b>Critical</b>
<b>Diagnose:</b> Identify lacks, tensions, contradictions or harm.	<b>Critical</b>
<b>Remember:</b> Trace historical and structural roots.	<b>Critical, Reflexive</b>
<b>Deconstruct:</b> Expose and untangle assumptions, categories, discourse and power relations.	<b>Critical, Reflexive (epistemic)</b>
<b>Find Alternatives:</b> Open/make visible imaginative and empirical space for what could exist beyond the given frame.	<b>Constructive (exploratory)</b>
<b>Reconstruct:</b> Build or accompany new forms, grounded in awareness of the limits and lessons revealed by critique.	<b>Constructive (integrative)</b>

Table 1. Proposed reflective phases within the critical-constructive approach

The phases in this able are not linear, but could overlap or loop back or happen at the same time. This, as well, remains yet to be further discussed and explored.

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