

The Interplay of Wellbeing and Resilience Concepts: Towards a social-ecological perspective

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Social-ecological resilience concepts have found greater support among applied ecologists than among social theorists and those engaged in poverty reduction efforts. One of the reasons for this may be that the ecological theory in social-ecological systems analysis has been more influential and better articulated than the 'social'. Recent syntheses of resilience, vulnerability and political ecology (see Nelson et al., 2007; Leach, 2008; Miller et al. 2010; Turner 2010) have, however, helped to emphasize the social dimensions of resilience and point to the importance of power/knowledge, the manner in which different actors construct and frame trade-offs associated with strategies to sustain ecosystem services and meet livelihood needs, and the challenge of articulating desirable pathways of change given the influence of complex relational networks. Nevertheless, these discussions remain largely conceptual and further effort is required to unpack the social dimensions of resilience in the context of specific places and problems. This paper first develops a strategy to address the limitations of ecological resilience concepts applied to social systems, primarily through increased attention to social theory as articulated in the concept of wellbeing. We define wellbeing as a state of being with others and the natural environment which arises where human needs are met, where individuals and groups can act meaningfully to pursue their goals, and where they are satisfied with their way of life (adapted from Gough and McGregor, 2007). The wellbeing concept offers a grounded framework in which explicit attention is given to the material, relational and subjective dimensions of social systems.

The paper then examines the interplay of resilience and wellbeing concepts in fostering a social-ecological perspective that can be translated into management and policy action. While resilience and wellbeing concepts have important differences (as reflected in their different conceptual starting points), they also intersect in ways that are crucial to better understand and apply a social-ecological perspective. We examine several key points of interplay: 1) the challenge to optimality inherent in both concepts; 2) the different explanations of change and links between social and ecological systems generated by wellbeing and resilience perspectives; 3) the potential of wellbeing to illustrate the central role of values and to provide the normative context for resilience thinking; 4) the different but productive ways scale can be considered through social and ecological frames; 5) the insights on "controlling variables" provided by both a wellbeing and resilience perspective; and 6) the implications for integrated thinking about thresholds and boundaries. In this regard, the limitations of wellbeing are also examined. Our synthesis is exploratory and we seek to add value to current debates, rather than propose an alternative framework.