The Role of Power in Social-Ecological Governance Transformation

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In order to build more resilient social-ecological systems there is a need to transform the way that we govern. Consequently, transformation in social-ecological governance has become an increasingly central concern within resilience scholarship. There are many social dynamics involved in such transitions, including leadership, social capital and networks to name just a few, but one that has always been central to the study of politics and society is the issue of power.

The concept of power is essential to understanding governance innovation in complex systems but has not been a central concern of resilience scholarship (Armitage 2008). The emergence of social change that genuinely challenges and alters existing governance frameworks often involves the (re)integration of marginalized social groups and alternative discourses into mainstream institutional settings that actively resist this challenge. In order to achieve both disruption and reconciliation, change agents have to find means of accessing different and often novel sources of power, and must become skilled at employing this power for a variety of strategic ends.

A comprehensive understanding of the role of power is thus vital and the application of theoretical frameworks that enable the analysis of how power dynamics shape transformation processes is needed. Unfortunately, while many power frameworks exist, their application is often one dimensional, focusing for example on only coercive power (the power to compel others to act against their wishes) or discursive power. This paper presents a framework, created by Barnett and Duvall (2005) which has emerged out of scholarship in global governance and attempts to describe the many and varied ways that power operates in complex global systems. As this presentation seeks to demonstrate, such a multi faceted approach is highly appropriate to an evaluation of social-ecological governance transformation where different forms of power are employed at different points in the transformation process, often by agents without formal positions of authority. To illustrate how Barnett and Duvall’s approach can enrich our understanding of such processes this paper will present three case studies of social-ecological transformation and the role of different forms of power that were critical to the process.