

Conflict and resilience in ecohealth education: a social network case study in Costa Rica

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Recent educational policy in Costa Rica —as elsewhere— has opened the door to an integrated ecohealth approach, and the University of Costa Rica is leading a nation-wide program in this subject for in-service training of primary and secondary teachers with all four public universities. This includes at the regional level trainers from the ministries of education, health, environment, agriculture, and public works. The program is well into its fifth year, striving to articulate micro, meso and macro scale personal networks within nested polycentric institutional arrangements. Although this network of networks has survived its first four-year national government administration cycle and is beginning its second, it is now confronted with strong fiscal cuts originating in the ongoing global recession. Public universities are engaging these cuts with concerted yet not uniform strategies, while potent undercurrents begin to surface in all constituencies of this complex political process.

In this context, my case study approaches two related issues of theoretical and practical interest in the field of social network analysis (SNA): how does such a network of networks deal with fiscal and institutional conflicts arising in turbulent new times, particularly in terms of its resiliency; that is, how capable is it to sustain its mission notwithstanding increasingly destabilizing circumstances.

The theoretical and analytical focus of the study is Mark Granovetter's classic argument about the strength of weak ties (Granovetter 1973, 1983). Does resiliency of Costa Rican ecohealth educational networks rest squarely on low or high density qualities? Or is there in fact something more complex sustaining these networks, having to do both with low and high density, in proportions and operational dynamics to be observed with concepts and tools available to SNA? (In addition to connectivity and density: centrality, betweenness, closeness...)

To illustrate these issues and begin to tackle the finer methodological imprint of the argument, a baseline, current scenario of the selected network is presented, as well as a profile of its previous evolution to this point (in retrospect). This is accompanied by the research design for a longitudinal monitoring process of the network as it responds to evolving challenges within the new national government administrative cycle begun in 2010.