Ecohealth and resilience thinking: Trading lessons for human health research and practice

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The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, MA, (2003) defined human well-being as a multi-dimensional concept comprising health, materials for a good life, social relations, safety and freedom. The general character of the MA framework led to its widespread adoption as a tool for assessment in a variety of situations. While indisputably useful, specific research about the linkages between ecosystem services and each of the components of well-being seems necessary to understand the mechanisms and feedbacks that underlie these relationships and to inform practice. For instance, almost a decade after the development of the framework, specific research on health issues and social determinants of health within the resilience literature remains scant. There is however a flourishing literature among health practitioners that use ecosystem approaches to health, or ecohealth. Ecohealth is theoretically rooted on systems thinking and practically oriented towards adaptive management and participatory research (Waltner-Toews 2004). Given the partial overlap between ecohealth and resilience thinking we think that there are potential synergies arising from trading lessons between researchers of these two frameworks at the levels of practice, theory and purpose (ethos). In this panel we present case studies from ecohealth researchers whose work in India, Costa Rica, and Brazil has been influenced by resilience thinking. We first explore the ways in which resilience ideas have informed ecohealth work, particularly how the resilience framework: (1) directs attention to the dynamic interaction of social-ecological systems; (2) considers phenomena occurring at different spatial, temporal and governance scales, as well as cross-scale interactions; (3) emphasizes the integration of different perspectives and forms of knowledge; and (4) manages for learning and adaptation under conditions of uncertainty. We then look at the lessons from ecohealth that can further resilience thinking, especially how ecohealth: (1) is based on the guiding principles of equity, transdisciplinarity and participation; (2) considers human health as an emergent property of management interventions; (3) has a long tradition of bottom-up, participatory research as well as policy impact at different levels of governance; and (4) includes key insights deriving from the behaviour of actors and their ensuing relationships. We conclude that there are important overlaps and synergies between these two fields that can come from a further integration of human health research with resilience thinking frameworks.

Please note that the aforementioned case studies from Brazil, Costa Rica and India have been submitted to the conference as individual papers. However, it would be more effective to present this work as one panel. The titles and references for the individual papers are:

Panel participants and papers:
Frédéric Mertens, Jordan Oestreicher, Leandra Fatorelli, Lígia Valadão, Maria Berçot, Johanne Saint-Charles, Robert Davidson, Donna Mergler, Marc Lucotte - “In the field with the PLUPH and CARUSO projects: tools to bridge Ecohealth and Resilience approaches”

Alvaro Fernandez – “Conflict and resilience in ecohealth education: a social network case study in Costa Rica”

Martin Bunch – “Slums as social-ecological systems: A case study in managing for resilience and health in Chennai, India”