

Institutional entrepreneurs, global networks, and the emergence of international institutions for ecosystem-based management: The Coral Triangle Initiative

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 March 2012

Received in revised form

29 May 2012

Accepted 29 May 2012

Available online 6 July 2012

Keywords:

Institutional entrepreneurship

Environmental regime building

Institutional change

Large-scale marine governance

Social-ecological systems

The Coral Triangle Initiative

ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of institutional entrepreneurship in the creation of an international agreement to radically transform management of coastal and marine resources in the Coral Triangle. It analyzes how institutional entrepreneurs develop strategies to overcome barriers to change and navigate opportunity contexts to mobilize support for ecosystem-based management. The analysis shows that institutional change depends on collaboration among several institutional entrepreneurs that have access to different networks and are supported by different types of organizations. It also shows that interplay between institutional entrepreneurship and high-level political leadership plays a critical role in institution building. Institutional entrepreneurs must therefore align their ideas of ecosystem-based management to multiple political priorities and transfer experience and social capital from previous multilateral projects. By supporting the development of new governance arenas for deliberation, institutional entrepreneurs may enhance the fit between domestic and multilateral policy making. Lastly, institutional entrepreneurship may raise critical questions about legitimacy, accountability and ownership.

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1. Introduction

Coastal and marine ecosystems provide essential services upon which human wellbeing, livelihood security, and economic development depend. Worldwide, more than 275 million people depend on ecosystem services derived from coral reefs and associated resources such as mangroves and seagrasses [1], and another 27 million people get their main income from the fisheries industry [2]. Yet there is growing evidence that “the rate of environmental degradation in the oceans may have progressed further than anything yet seen on land” [3:5]. For example, overfishing, destructive coastal development, and pollution have reduced ecosystem resilience and caused these systems to reach or cross critical thresholds and tipping points. This in turn has

resulted in a great loss of ecosystem services for human wellbeing and economic prosperity [4]. Climate change and ocean acidification exacerbate the detrimental impacts of these stressors [5].

This situation calls for a fundamental shift in institutions. New integrated management approaches like ecosystem-based management, which recognize the full array of interactions within an ecosystem, are needed to promote active stewards and restore the resilience of the Earth’s ecosystems [6,7]. Integrated approaches are especially important since many marine resources and ecological processes supporting human wellbeing know no political boundaries, and the drivers of their degradation often transcend both policy sectors and nation-states. Yet marine governance is often fragmented and poorly coordinated to deal with dynamic ecosystems and cross-scale drivers of change [8,9]. There is also a lack of institutional support for integrated approaches for managing and governing marine resources at the regional and international level [2,10–12]. Such piecemeal governance and the tendency to apply simple solutions to complex problems seriously threaten the ability of the oceans to continue to support humans with critical ecosystem services.

This study explores how institutions for ecosystem-based management can be introduced at the international level among littoral states sharing large-scale marine commons. More particularly, it investigates the role of institutional entrepreneurs – individuals and groups of individuals who leverage resources to

Abbreviations: Asian Development Bank, ADB; Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation, APEC; Conservation International, CI; 8th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, COP-8; 13th Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change, COP-13; Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security, CTI; Global Environment Facility, GEF; Indonesia, ID; Malaysia, MY; Papua New Guinea, PG; Philippines, PH; CTI Regional Plan of Action, RPOA; Solomon Islands, SB; Timor-Leste, TL; The Nature Conservancy, TNC; United States Agency for International Development, USAID; US CTI Support Program, US CTISP; World Wildlife Fund, WWF

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create new institutions or transforming existing ones [13] – in the emergence of the Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI). The CTI is an international agreement and partnership for ecosystem-based management of coastal and marine resources in the Coral Triangle, a large-scale marine ecosystem at the confluence of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. While research has addressed the role of institutional entrepreneurs in natural resources management at the local and national level [14,15], few studies have explored their role in the emergence of integrated approaches for natural resources management internationally. Such understanding is important for at least three reasons. First, principles of state sovereignty may encroach on opportunities for integrated action and multilateral cooperation [11]. Second, decision-makers with vested interests in current management paradigms have a tendency to resist institutional change, even when there is a clear recognition that change is essential [16]. Third, institution building is often out of sync with ecosystem dynamics from what follows an inability to resolve problems of transboundary character [17]. The paper is outlined as follows. Section 2 focuses on relevant literature on institutional theory, institutional entrepreneurship, and linked social-ecological systems. The subsequent section gives a brief overview of the emergence CTI. Section 4 outlines the methodological framework. This is followed by a presentation of the results. The paper concludes with a discussion on some key features of institutional entrepreneurship in the context of transboundary marine governance and international institution building.

2. Analytical approach

In this paper, institutions or institutional arrangements are defined as systems of formal and informal rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that govern the behavior of social and political actors within a particular domain [18,19]. They enable ordered thought, expectations, and action by imposing form and consistency on human activities [20]. At the international level, the creation of new institutions is often referred to as regime formation or regime building [12,21]. That is, efforts by autonomous actors, primarily states, to negotiate and reach agreement on rights and rules that are expected to govern their behavior within particular areas of international politics, for example trade in endangered species, whaling, fishing quotas, or climate change.

The concept of institutional entrepreneurship has emerged to explain how new institutions arise and how shifts in policy occur. The concept usually refers to the activities of individuals who leverage resources to create new institutions or transform existing ones within particular problem domains [13,22,23]. These individuals, denoted as institutional entrepreneurs, support institutional change by identifying political opportunities, framing the problem domain, linking otherwise dispersed actor groups, building alliances, mobilizing resources, and inventing new policy options [13,22,24–26]. As described by Rao and colleagues, “they spearhead collective attempts to infuse new beliefs, norms, and values into social structures” [27: 240].

To solve interacting environmental problems that span multiple policy sectors such as marine pollution, collapsed fisheries, and climate change, institutional entrepreneurs cannot realize change unilaterally. In such instances, a broad network of actors will have to support and share responsibility with institutional entrepreneurs [28,29]. This indicates that institutional entrepreneurship will have to attune to broader system conditions that create both opportunities and constraints for actors to translate knowledge, concern, and new policy into action [25,30]. As Maguire and colleagues note [13: 658], “key to their success is the way in which institutional entrepreneurs connect their change projects to the activities and interests of other actors

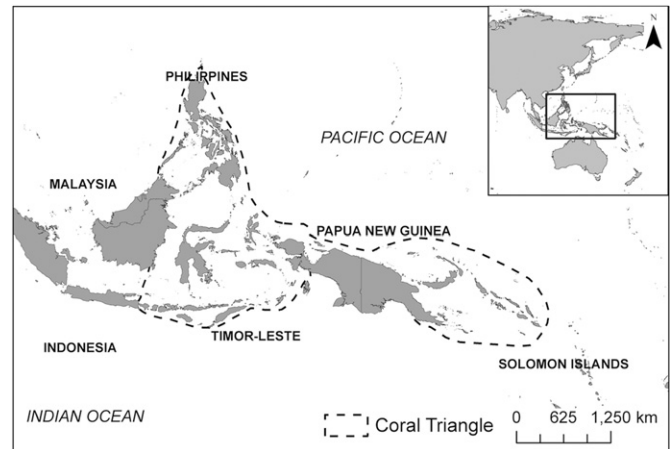


Fig. 1. Map of the Coral Triangle.

in a field, crafting their projects to fit the conditions of the field itself”. Moreover, as shown by research on social-ecological systems, the development of new institutions are often enabled by windows of opportunity (i.e., particular points in time when political systems are susceptible to novelty) and experimentation by shadow networks operating independently of formal networks [14,31,32]. Such insights suggest that institutional change reflects the interests of particular actors.

Without knowledge of ecosystem dynamics, institutional entrepreneurship can produce changes that are destructive to the Earth’s ecosystems [33]. It may also promote major transformations without improving societies’ capacity to learn from, respond to, and manage environmental feedbacks. For example, a systemic shift to biofuels might slow down climate change but lead to destructive land-use change and biodiversity loss [34]. Another example is the so-called Green Revolution in Asia, supported by USAID since the 1960s, which produced dramatic increases in crop yields but displaced millions of small landowners and irreversibly damaged fragile ecosystems in the process [35]. Institution building with the aim to increase human wellbeing may therefore lead to further ecological degradation, regime shifts, and lock-in traps in social-ecological systems. This emphasizes the need to provide societal development in collaboration with the biosphere [6,7]. For this to happen institution building needs to integrate ecological knowledge and sensitize policy making to the complexity of human–environment interactions.

3. The Coral Triangle Initiative

The Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security (CTI) is an intergovernmental agreement between Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste to implement transformational actions to ensure the flow of benefits from marine and coastal ecosystems for present and future generations (Fig. 1). The importance of such an initiative was first highlighted by President Yudhoyono of Indonesia in March 2006 when country leaders from around the world gathered at COP-8 in Brazil to address global biodiversity conservation [36]. The year after in August, President Yudhoyono proposed to his five neighboring countries to initiate the CTI (ibid). He also took measures to mobilize support for the CTI from the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).¹ As the Coral Triangle countries and

¹ Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the US are among APEC’s 21 member economies.

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