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Governing resilience building in Thailand's tourism-dependent coastal communities: Conceptualising stakeholder agency in social–ecological systems

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ABSTRACT

In current scientific efforts to harness complementarity between resilience and vulnerability theory, one response is an 'epistemological shift' towards an evolutionary, learning based conception of the 'systems-actor' relation in social–ecological systems. In this paper, we contribute to this movement regarding the conception of stakeholder agency within social–ecological systems. We examine primary evidence from the governance of post-disaster recovery and disaster risk reduction efforts in Thailand's coastal tourism-dependent communities following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Through an emerging storyline from stakeholders, we construct a new framework for conceptualising stakeholder agency in social–ecological systems, which positions the notion of resilience within a conception of governance as a negotiated normative process. We conclude that if resilience theory is proposed as the preferred approach by which disaster risk reduction is framed and implemented, it needs to acknowledge much more explicitly the role of stakeholder agency and the processes through which legitimate visions of resilience are generated.

1. Introduction

1.1. Towards an 'epistemological shift' for social–ecological systems?

While originating in different disciplines, resilience and vulnerability theories are commonly propelled by an ambition to achieve more integrated and holistic perspectives of the coupled social and ecological domains so as to better address the challenges of sustainability. Resilience is often defined in terms of the ability of a system to absorb shocks, to avoid crossing a threshold into an alternate and possibly irreversible new state, and to regenerate after disturbance (Resilience Alliance, 2009). In contrast, vulnerability is increasingly seen as an inherent condition of the social–ecological system, which encompasses characteristics of exposure, susceptibility, and coping capacity that are shaped by dynamic historical processes, differential entitlements, political economy, and power relations rather than as a direct outcome of a perturbation or stress (Birkmann, 2006; Blaikie et al., 1994; Downing et al., 2006; Eakin and Luers, 2006).

It is now widely acknowledged that resilience and vulnerability approaches are complimentary in the sense that both are concerned with understanding how social–ecological systems respond to change in order to prepare populations, communities, sectors, and individuals to better cope with and adapt to shocks and longer-term change. Miller et al. (2010) argue that resilience research tends to take a systemic approach (see also Nelson et al., 2007; Olsson et al., 2006; Walker et al., 2006) that has advanced our understanding of system dynamics and interconnections, ecological thresholds, social–ecological relations, and feedback loops. Vulnerability research tends to take an actor-oriented approach, whereby the unit of interest is the 'exposure unit', i.e. how a social group or sector is able and enabled to respond to the stresses in the social–ecological systems in which it is located (see also Wisner et al., 2004; McLaughlin and Dietz, 2008).

These differences continue to motivate academic efforts that harness this complementarity to strengthen analysis that transcends equilibrium-based management approaches, linear causality, and techno-centric and centralised governance discourses, and embrace theories of complex systems and distributed participation in knowledge production and decision making (e.g. Adger, 2006; Folke, 2006; Berkes and Folke, 1998; Jäger et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2010). One particular stream of this work specifically addresses the 'systems-actor' relation, prompting a convergence towards what we in this paper refer to as an 'epistemological shift' in the way we understand social–ecological systems.

This epistemological shift is manifest in what has earlier been referred to in this journal as an evolutionary theory of vulnerability and resilience, in which resilience is built through the struggle of

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redefining boundaries in socially constructed adaptive landscapes. This view promotes a critical realist epistemology aiming at contributing to overcoming a perceived tension between 'subjectivism' and 'universalism' of more disciplinary theorising (McLaughlin and Dietz, 2008). The approach thus aims to find bridges between disparate disciplinary traditions and their fragmented positions on human agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Another manifestation of the epistemological shift is in the propositions for interpreting resilience in unstable systems as "a coupled system's capacity to learn (evolve) co-dependently" (Powell and Jiggins, 2003, p. 46). These arguments, to large extent, draw on advances in other disciplines, where the systems-actor dualism has already been overcome. This includes inspiration from sociology, such as the theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984) which integrates functionalism/structuralism with interpretive theories to yield recognition of how human agency simultaneously creates and responds to the objectified socio-ecological order. It also includes the extensive body of theory in action research traditions in agricultural innovation and natural resource management, which today is rarely acknowledged in the academic discourse on social–ecological systems (e.g. Röling and Wagemakers, 1998).

One of the advantages of this movement is that it offers a promise of recognition of morality into resilience building projects and research, which today is receiving perplexingly little attention in adaptive governance literature on social–ecological systems (see also Fennell et al., 2008; Powell and Jiggins, 2003; Nadasdy, 2007). This lack of attention is argued to be partly because of a methodological 'problem of measurement', i.e. that "the capacities of individual actors or institutionalised relationships amongst them are not straightforward to assess" (Lebel et al., 2006a, p. 14). Another perceived problem is internal to the social–ecological systems paradigm, namely that resilience often remains defined as an umbrella concept for system attributes which *a priori* are deemed desirable (Klein et al., 2003). The epistemological shift proposes a conception of knowledge as more contested and co-produced than has been previously considered within mainstream resilience theory, thus placing issues of legitimacy and researcher positionality at the centre of the research endeavour (e.g. Vogel et al., 2007). Arguably, this comprises a response to the challenge of translating resilience theory into operational management concepts and mainstreaming resilience into policy and management practices (Miller et al., 2008). This shift also builds on insights from vulnerability research, which possesses a longer tradition of acknowledging different interpretations of vulnerability and the role of claims-making in governance (Bankoff, 2003; O'Brien et al., 2007).

In this paper we undertake a synthesis of narratives from stakeholders involved in the governance of post-disaster recovery and disaster risk reduction efforts in Thailand's coastal tourism-dependent communities following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. Our immediate purpose is to elicit an understanding as to why underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities to natural hazards persist in the country's tourism-dependent coastal communities, despite the introduction of strategies aimed at building resilience and a new and radically transformed formal governance regime for disaster risk reduction. We then employ these findings in a conceptualisation of stakeholder agency vis-à-vis the ambitions underlying the 'epistemological shift' in social–ecological systems theory.

1.2. Background to the case: institutionalising governance measures for resilience building through sustainable recovery and early warning system development

The high frequency and severe impacts of coastal hazards owing to a combination of climate related stresses, global environmental change, and a range of socio-economic factors – as shown during recent disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the 2009 Samoan tsunami, the 2009 Padang earthquake, the 2009 typhoon Ketsana, and the 2010 Haiti earthquake – has seen disaster risk reduction become a central theme in international governance. Over the last several decades there has been an increasing institutionalisation of disaster risk reduction measures in international policy and decision-making structures. Central to these efforts is the United Nation's International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015. 'Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters' which was adopted at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in Kobe, Japan, in January 2005 based on the insights of a review of global progress made in disaster risk reduction under the Yokohama Strategy between 1994 and 2004. The Hyogo Framework for Action emphasises the urgency of promoting community participation in disaster risk reduction, policies, networking, and strategic management of volunteer resources, roles and responsibilities (UN/ISDR, 2005). The World Conference on Disaster Reduction also saw the launch of the International Early Warning Programme and the formation of the Intergovernmental Coordination Group. The United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission received a mandate from the international community at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction to coordinate the establishment of the Indian Ocean Tsunami Early Warning System. As a member country of the Indian Ocean Tsunami Early Warning System, Thailand has been in the process of developing its own national early warning system since 2005. A current Memorandum of Agreement between the Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency, the National Disaster Warning Centre and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the United States of America for Technical Cooperation in Effective Tsunami System Analysis and Early Warning is in place until 2011.

These international, regional, and national institutional changes are motivated by an expectation that such governance initiatives will stimulate national and sub-national actions aimed at reducing vulnerability and increasing the resilience of communities to multiple risks while creating co-benefits for natural resource management and livelihoods improvement. However, the lessons from several decades of coastal disasters provide ample evidence that resilience building measures during recovery, disaster preparedness, and early warning system development, rarely address the underlying causes of vulnerability and trajectories of social inequality in disaster prone societies (e.g. Bankoff, 2003; Ingram et al., 2006; Larsen et al., 2009). Similar to many other disasters, new disaster risk reduction initiatives and policies introduced in the wake of the 2004 tsunami have caused controversy in many coastal communities with new strategies and policies spurring tensions, conflicts and increasing disparities between social groups. A key example has been in Sri Lanka, where contested coastal buffer zone policies have supported forced resettlement or eviction from prior, legal or de facto, property with subsequent negative consequences for livelihoods in the wake of post-tsunami uncertainty in property rights (Lebel et al., 2006b; Amnesty International, 2006; Cohen, 2007). In coastal Thai tourism-dependent communities, new planning guidelines and building codes for hotels were introduced but a lack of financial and human capacity to enforce new regulations coupled with widespread corruption and nepotism amongst government officials have resulted in failed implementation and many 'planning exemptions' (Calgaro et al., 2009a; Cohen, 2007).

Contestations over natural resource use in the tsunami affected countries around the Indian Ocean have been further exacerbated in the last several decades by increasing development in highly exposed coastal environments such as flat and low-lying land,