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# Re-defining co-management to facilitate small-scale fisheries reform: An illustration from northwest Mexico

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## ABSTRACT

Small-scale fisheries face a suite of multi-level challenges, making the reliance on centralized governance approaches and self-governance alone unlikely to lead to long enduring solutions. Although co-management has been long proposed as a promising institutional arrangement, co-management can take many forms; thus, not any type of co-management will be effective for the suite of challenges facing small-scale fisheries today. This paper argues for moving beyond traditional conceptualizations of co-management, to 'multi-level co-management,' in order to explicitly emphasize the principles of power devolution based on subsidiarity, cooperative partnerships, democratic participatory involvement, polycentricity, and governance networks. The experience of Northwest Mexico is used to illustrate the potential, opportunities, and barriers in achieving multi-level co-management in an effort to contribute to the constructive dialogue developing around the world, and in the region, on small-scale fisheries governance reform.

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## 1. Introduction

Over 50 million men and women are directly employed by global fisheries and the vast majority are characterized as “small-scale” or artisanal [1–3]. Small-scale fisheries (SSF) function outside of highly specialized industrial fleets and exploit multiple fisheries using a diversity of gear types. Despite the fact that SSF are a critical source of livelihoods 20% of the world's fishers earn less than one dollar per day [4] and many of the world's marine ecosystems, including nearshore coastal ecosystems, are declining due to overfishing [5,6]. SSF managers and practitioners are constantly faced with governance challenges given multi-faceted and sometimes conflicting objectives such as economic efficiency, livelihood and food security, and ecological sustainability. As a result certain policy prescriptions can cause simultaneous successes and failures [7], and policies implemented without proper consideration of local institutional and ecological context, and the linkages across these system components, may result in unintended consequences [8]. Furthermore fisheries agencies in developing countries often lack the monetary, personnel, and political resources for adequate implementation and enforcement [1,9], pointing to the inadequacy

of centralized approaches to SSF governance and to the need of more involvement of local stakeholders.

Increasingly co-management, “a hybrid regime combining centralized and decentralized, state and community institutions” [10], is promoted as a viable governance alternative capable of addressing the shortcomings associated with governing from a single institutional level alone [10–12]. However, co-management as a general broadly defined term is not sufficiently insightful to guide policy-making. This paper argues for moving beyond traditional conceptualizations of co-management, to “multi-level co-management,” in order to explicitly emphasize the principles of power devolution [13], cooperative partnerships [14], democratic participatory involvement [15], polycentricity [16], governance networks [17], and subsidiarity (Table 1) [15]. Given small-scale fisheries' history of marginalization and alienation from policy processes, this paper argues for a particular form of co-management that can better attend to important barriers for achieving more productive social and ecological governance outcomes.

Co-management can manifest in various ways, and its complexities are sometimes ignored [17]. Instead of existing as an exact blueprint prescription, scholars have suggested co-management as a continuous spectrum of governance arrangements from almost entirely state governance to almost entirely user group governance [14,18]. Furthermore co-management arrangements often constitute more than just a state–community relationship, and neither the state nor communities are homogeneous structures [17]. Increasingly it is conceptualized as a governance network with

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**Table 1**  
Key concepts of multi-level co-management.

Cooperative partnership	Users and government are equal partners [14]
Devolution of governance power	Legislative transfer of authority from national to local governments [13]
Principle of subsidiarity	Suggests that decisions affecting interests should be made at lowest levels of organization with functional institutions [15,21]
Democratic participatory involvement	All those affected should be involved in a deliberative decision-making process [15,67]
Polycentricity	Multiple centers of decision-making, at different levels function in a coherent manner with consistent and predictable patterns of interacting behavior [16]
Co-management as a network	Web of agreements and relations linking public sector to private sector, with explicit acknowledgement of heterogeneity within each sector [17]

**Table 2**  
A pathway towards multi-level co-management in small-scale fisheries including the theoretical framework and related concepts adapted from Berkes [23], and suggestions for bridging theory to practice in the case of Mexican small-scale fisheries and elsewhere.

<b>Communicative action:</b> Reaching a shared understanding and vision through a locally-controlled, deliberative process	Involve all stakeholders, particularly marginalized interests like illegal fishers Create a space for multiple narratives at the table Pay explicit attention to power dynamics so powerful interests do not capture the process Through social learning achieve a shared understanding among all interests
<b>Self-organization:</b> Developing relationships and the emergence of networks and organization	Creation and support of vertical and horizontal networks Leverage existing latent networks of cooperative federations Leverage histories of corporatist and cooperative culture
<b>Collective action:</b> Creating new rules-in-use or institution building, in addition to capacity building for those involved in shared governance	Institution and capacity building at local and federal levels of governance emphasizing simultaneous government commitment and local accountability Creation and reinforcement of enabling conditions to 1) legitimize the right to organize at the local level and 2) providing assistance and services to support local institutions Principle of subsidiarity to guide devolution of governance power Devolution of power to local levels contingent upon functional institutions, accountability and transparency Leverage support from policy communities for capacity and institution building Co-production of knowledge to guide iterative process and facilitate social learning

varying interactions among the state, communities, NGOs and other public interests, as well as companies and private interests [17,19]. And finally, co-management does not necessarily imply “government” as sometimes interactions are amongst informal levels of governance [17].

Regardless of the exact governance arrangement, co-management almost always implies that some governance tasks (i.e. decision-making, enforcement, monitoring, conflict-resolution) are decentralized to non-state actors. Decentralization processes can take many forms [13], each suitable for different contexts [15] and subsequently producing disparate outcomes. For instance, deconcentration involves the transfer of authority from the national government departments to regional and field offices of national government. Delegation implies the passing of some authority to local officials while the central government still has power to overturn local decisions. The legislative transfer of authority from national to local governments is characterized as devolution. And finally, privatization involves the transfer of responsibility to non-governmental organizations, community associations and private entities [13]. Based on the principles of democracy and subsidiarity, scholars have suggested that different governance powers and rights should be decentralized (or not), so that all affected interests are involved in decision making, and that these decisions are made at the lowest levels of organization, respectively [15,20,21]. While community participation has been found to be an important institutional criterion in fisheries co-management [20], decentralization and participatory involvement are not necessarily synonymous [15].

When governance power is effectively *devolved* to user groups or other interested parties, creating cooperative partnerships and participatory involvement, co-management may resemble V. Ostrom and colleagues' [16] definition of a polycentric system, in which multiple centers of decision-making at different levels function in a coherent manner with consistent and predictable patterns of interacting behavior [16]. Proponents of nested

polycentric systems have argued that a nested governance system is more likely to support sustainability and resilience of the resource it governs when decision-making is not centralized. Under this perspective a nested polycentric system can be superior to other governance regimes by potentiating the advantages of centralized and fully self-governing regimes. On the one hand, through the involvement of resource users, local knowledge can inform the design of diverse context-specific rules. On the other hand, larger organizations (including but not limited to government) can enhance local capacity to deal with non-contributors or local corruption, share and invest in information, and coordinate cross-boundary problems [22].

In principle, co-management is an attractive alternative when state control or self-governance alone is not sufficient for resource governance. But fostering cross-scale coordination and a redistribution of power from the government to local collective and/or private stakeholders can be extremely difficult [23], especially given histories of mistrust between the state and fishers [11]. State agencies are often recalcitrant and unwilling to give up political power [12,13] for diverse reasons, including abdication of their responsibility to represent society's interests as a whole. Similar to other governance configurations, co-management can result in unintended consequences - often the usurpation of political power by private or special interests [10]. Berkes [23] succinctly summarizes these important gaps between theory and practice of decentralization, and suggests a pathway forward in light of these challenges, combining communicative action, self-organization, and collective action in a dynamic, iterative process (Table 2).

The purpose of this paper is to outline the potential and barriers to developing multi-level co-management processes as part of small-scale fisheries reform. These arguments are illustrated through the experience of Northwest Mexico small-scale fisheries. First the paper provides an overview of small-scale fisheries in northwest Mexico (i.e., Baja California and the Gulf of California)

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