Promoting Change by Strengthening a National Community of Practice: Experiences of a Partnership with Canadian Biosphere Reserves

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Abstract

Because of the complexity and uncertainty associated with efforts to achieve sustainability and transformational change, researchers have called for approaches that support deliberation, dialogue and systematic learning through reflection, evaluation and feedback among multiple participants. Much related research has focused on smaller-scale case studies, yet achieving transformative change suggests the need for more broad-based initiatives. Furthermore, while general principles of success such as shared vision, trust building and incentives have been articulated, specific actions and factors supporting these principles remain elusive. The purpose of this paper, then, is to identify specific actions and factors that support a community of practice designed to instill collective learning strategies across a multilevel, multi-partner network and to use these actions and factors to assess the efforts of a network of UNESCO biosphere reserve (BR) practitioners, academic researchers, and government representatives.

UNESCO BRs are geographic areas and civil society organizations of local residents, government representatives, and researchers who seek to learn about and take action to make transformational change to advance sustainability. Academics and practitioners refer to BRs as "living laboratories" and as "sites of excellence" for their efforts facilitate dialogue between practitioners and researchers, and encourage learning through deliberation, networking and experimentation. Canada is home to 16 BRs. However, because of uneven and limited funding, large geographic distances and socio-cultural differences between sites, and a lack of experience with collective learning strategies, Canadian BRs have tended to work alone, thereby restricting their potential to achieve sustainability through transformative change and to enhance their resilience through collective action.

Using a methodology of participatory action research, we participated in and assessed the first 30 months of a national partnership involving 16 Canadian BR practitioners, academic researchers, and government representatives. During this period, practitioners identified, assessed, shared, and promoted their good practices according to three themes: sustainable tourism, ecosystem services and land management, and education for sustainable development. We provide results drawn from the specific outputs of the partnership, three national workshops, two sets of questionnaires, interviews with participants, and detailed field notes.

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Our inductive assessment of the partnership and comparison of results with corresponding literature revealed 12 key factors and 7 action steps necessary to support a community of practice. Using these factors and action steps to describe and analyze the partnership, we reveal that factors such as shared priority determination, time, money, facilitation, and appreciative framing were well supported. However, issues have emerged such as the need for structured evaluation at the local level and incentives for on-going participation at all levels. Our findings provide concrete steps to support general principles of collective learning and address the call for improved documentation of learning processes so as to better understand the influence of social interactions and power relations in the pursuit of sustainability and resilience across multiple scales.

**Keywords:** collective action, learning, participation, partnership, sustainability, shared learning, stakeholder engagement, transformation, biosphere reserves