Resilience in governance for sustainable development systems: research agenda and initial findings

Valerie Sheppard

Abstract

Change is good, particularly if the response to it assists in building the resilience and sustainability of socio-ecological systems (SES). Folke (2003) notes that because of the constancy of change, our efforts should be placed on building the capacity of communities to adapt to change and help them live with, shape and manage its effects. Understanding the factors that shape the capacity of communities to positively respond to and manage change may help them build the kind of resilience that leads to greater long-term sustainability. This paper describes such adaptive capacity shaping forces in the context of how they are perceived to be affecting the resilience and subsequent sustainability-focused governance system in Whistler, British Columbia (BC), Canada. Since the late 1990s this purpose-built resort community has been on a self-described journey toward success and sustainability. To guide it on this journey, the community worked collaboratively to develop a unique system of governance for sustainable development (GFSD). Within this system, sustainability policy is embedded into public policy, providing a clear sustainability vision and priority areas for action. Over its existence, the GFSD system has experienced a variety of shocks (i.e. 9-11, SARS, 2008 global financial crisis) and stressors (i.e. climate change, changing demographics and key markets, a rising Canadian dollar, and the hosting of the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games) that have challenged its focus and opportunities. The most recent of these was a significant shift in the community’s political leadership. This shift in leadership was brought on by previous politicians’ commitments to GFSD priorities that were perceived to have not addressed challenges emanating from the ongoing global and regional economic slowdown. While Whistler’s GFSD system has demonstrated an ongoing resilience and ability to live with and respond to external shocks and stressors, it is the ways in which it has built and sustained its adaptive capacity and subsequent resilience that have kept it on its journey toward success and sustainability. This paper describes those factors that have played leading roles in building the community’s governance resilience, and uses examples associated with different shocks and stressors encountered along its journey to demonstrate how these resilience-building factors have been nurtured and employed. The findings of this research may be of value to the countless communities across BC and beyond that also seek to proactively shape change and manage their resilience.

Keywords: community resilience, adaptability, governance for sustainable development, shocks and stressors.

*Speaker