Who counts resilience and whose resilience counts? Applying the RA workbook along the contested Amazonian frontier

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Abstract

The Brazilian Amazon frontier is a complex social-ecological system, the management of which affects diverse groups of social actors whose values and interests shape decision making, policies and outcomes. Such management requires leaders who can both understand the ecological foundations for economic development and navigate the complex socio-political dynamics that shape this region. To prepare emerging leaders for this challenge, the Amazon Conservation Leadership Initiative of the University of Florida applied the Resilience Assessment (RA) Workbook for Practitioners to test its applicability as a tool for collaborative management. This paper offers reflections on the utility of the RA workbook as a tool for bridging multiple stakeholders’ knowledge, identities, power and interests in collaborative social-ecological management. Twenty-three professionals from universities, government agencies, the private sector, and social movement organizations attended a two-year Specialization Course in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. Using the RA workbook, these course participants analyzed three livelihood sub-systems within the municipality of Cotriguaçu: large cattle ranching & timber management, small-holder family agriculture, and indigenous lands. By engaging with each other in teams and with community members in multiple formats, participants produced resilience assessments and scenario exercises for each livelihood sub-system.

To explore the pluralistic aspects associated with collaborative management, we intentionally selected course participants from diverse disciplines and professional backgrounds. Furthermore, the course pedagogy integrated theories and approaches from applied development studies, anthropology and adult education. However, the inclusive and participatory nature of the course was not well aligned with the workbook’s prescriptive methodology, which hindered the operationalization of the RA. Course participants objected to the tool, contesting

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its over emphasis of ecological services in comparison to social values. Tensions emerged during the early stages of defining attributes for each livelihood sub-system, a process that was perceived as normative because goal setting reflects individual values of what should be protected (whose resilience counts?). Course participants identified the need for greater consideration of issues such as identity, framing, and competing stakeholder agendas. Furthermore, participants expressed skepticism about expert-led analyses that fail to clearly define mechanisms for co-construction or local ownership of the RA products (who counts resilience?).

These empirical results demonstrate the limitations of applying the RA methodology to resource management in the Amazon without greater consideration of process, power imbalances, governance, and the plurality of stakeholder agendas. They also caution against embarking on multi-stakeholder facilitated processes in regions dominated by historical legacies of oppression, weak institutions, and limited governance. This experience points to the critical need for a preliminary phase of situating the assessment by engaging stakeholders and defining management objectives. We present recommendations for adapting the methodology as part of a social learning process that focuses on building understanding among actors through dialogue and reflection, rather than on delineating "the answer" in terms of an absolute characterization of resilience as a tool for management.

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