The role of leadership in navigating change and driving transformation in environmental governance – a case study from Solomon Islands

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Abstract

The current failure to systematically achieve sustainable provision of benefits from social-ecological systems is identified as a crisis of governance. Governance transformation, which aims to radically change the way social and environmental problems are understood and addressed, is therefore urgent and necessary. The emergent literature in sustainability science is converging around a core set of factors that foster transformation, with leaders and entrepreneurs often identified as the main instigators of radical change. However, leadership studies in this context tend to focus on one or two key charismatic people without considering the complex landscape of leadership. To address this gap we present a comprehensive empirical study that critically examines the processes and practices of leadership in the implementation of integrated conservation and development. We use the Coral Triangle Initiative (CTI) in Solomon Islands as a case-study. The CTI recognizes that effective governance of coastal environments is important for sustainable provision of marine ecosystem services for food security, local livelihoods and national economies. It is an emerging example of potential transformation in environmental governance at a large scale. We use a novel approach that combines discourse analysis, social network analysis and actor network theory to understand which actors are influencing the structures, processes and outcomes of integrated conservation and development at national and provincial scales. Our results illustrate leadership functions outside of formal management processes and traditional positions of power, and reveals how leadership can legitimately block or undermine certain trajectories of change. Integrated conservation and development requires deliberative processes to balance competing objectives, and in this context we find that the direction of leadership practice and subsequent outcomes result from interaction and negotiation between a number of leaders alongside non-human actors (e.g., policy, cultural beliefs, ideals, natural assets). This is one of the first studies in the resilience sciences to critically examine and unpack leadership. Our novel analytical approach and findings will inform a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in large-scale environmental governance programmes that propose the challenging tasks of reconciling conservation and development, and transforming governance.

This presentation is stand-alone but complements that submitted by Louisa Evans∗ in which we outline how leadership is currently conceptualised in resilience science and offer an alternative framework which expands the notion of leadership as person and position to encompass

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leadership processes and practices. This empirical study tests a novel methodology for understanding leadership as culturally-embedded, socially-constructed and contested.

* Evans et al., Deconstructing leadership: the people and processes driving change

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