Investigating an emerging network for small-scale fishery governance in the Cau Hai lagoon and what it means for social-ecological transformation

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Abstract

This study examines an emerging network of local Fishing Associations, government departments (commune, district) and non-governmental development agencies in the Cau Hai lagoon, central Vietnam. We assess the propensity for collaboration among network actors, and the extent to which this network serves as a catalyst for an apparent social-ecological transformation in the lagoon (see Armitage et al. 2011) by improving the fit between local livelihood practices and ecosystems. Semi-structured interviews with 73 actors in the network and subsequent social network analysis (SNA) reveal a core-periphery governance network, with representatives of the centralized Provincial government at the core and Fishing Associations at the periphery. Some centralization of the network was expected since Vietnam is a one-party, centrally controlled state. However, with a few notable exceptions, the pattern of network connectivity shows that 12 of the 15 Fishing Associations have weak and infrequent communication with each other or with government agents. Weak communication between Fishing Associations that are physically adjacent is problematic for coordinating activities such as patrolling for illegal fishing, as well as enforcement. The network analysis illustrates important patterns of interaction, although it does not have explanatory power regarding the causes of these problems in the Cau Hai lagoon. In-depth interviews with fishers indicate that Fishing Associations are still too poor and do not have adequate resources for better collaboration. Our investigation also found that prior to the formation of the governance network the only mechanism for local coordination of management was through customary family units – thus providing an indication of improving collaboration between fishers and government. However, our interviews also revealed that the Provincial government may be using the Fishing Associations solely as a means of gaining compliance with regulations, rather than attempting genuine collaboration with people who directly rely upon the lagoon. Thus in relation to the suspected social-ecological transformation, significant questions remain about whose interests are being met and whether recent changes will result in long-term improvement in ecosystem conditions. In terms of fit between livelihood practices and the lagoon ecosystem, the nascent governance arrangements have yielded some initial benefits (especially in relation to a reduction in overall fishing effort) that have the potential to bring momentum for an ongoing transformation.

Keywords: collaboration, social networks, governance, social, ecological transformations

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