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STEFAN CARPENTER

Indiana University , USA

AVOIDING DYSFUNCTION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NEED FOR SHARED FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS IN POLYCENTRIC GOVERNANCE

Abstract:

Polycentricity is an increasingly important concept in natural resource governance, and is incorporated into a wide range of governance approaches. The term “polycentricity” refers to a social system of multiple semi-autonomous decision centers having overlapping responsibilities and operating under an agreed-upon overarching set of rules. Polycentric systems hold the promise of better governance of natural resources, but their success is not guaranteed. Much remains to be learned about when and why such systems succeed or fail.

To date, the vast majority of literature studying polycentricity has focused on successful governance regimes. While this focus is useful for identifying common factors that can contribute to the success of polycentric systems, it does not facilitate an understanding of which factors undermine successful polycentric governance. Therefore, in order to fully develop our understanding of polycentricity, it is also necessary to investigate incidents of unsuccessful governance.

This paper investigates two polycentric systems in northern Namibia, both of which have experienced significant dysfunction arising out of internal conflicts between decision centers. The paper finds that, in each case, the conflict resulted from centers having ulterior motivations that caused them to make decisions that undermined collective governance efforts. The paper proposes that polycentric systems are less likely to succeed where their decision centers do not share a common foundational sense of purpose.

Keywords:

polycentricity, governance, wildlife, community-based resource management, Namibia, common-pool resource