Building Collaborative Governance and Community Resilience under Socio-spatial Rural Disparities and Environmental Challenges

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Abstract: Recent literature on socio-ecological and community resilience from sociologists, geographers, and anthropologists (among others) highlights social inequalities and disparities with particular focus on rural/urban dichotomies. While academics, practitioners, and governments suggest building different types of collaborative efforts and governance as adaptive responses to increasing environmental changes created by human development and/or climate change, these initiatives sometimes ignore and/or omit social and spatial inequalities in specific rural settings.

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Drawing on existing gaps and building on these bodies of literature, this article identifies and highlights different strategies and practices that can be considered by practitioners and/or scholars dealing with environmental challenges in specific localities, with special attention to the empowerment of marginalized groups. Conclusive remarks emphasize that building successful collaborative governance implies addressing local inequalities and empowering disadvantaged groups as well as overcoming spatial limitations to mobilize locally available resources to make rural communities more resilient.

Introduction

Socio-ecological and community resilience have recently gained the attention of multiple disciplines due to the worldwide increment of environmental challenges and disturbances created by both anthropogenic (i.e. human development) and natural phenomena (i.e. climate change) (Wilson, 2012; Brown, 2014; Cretney, 2014; Thompson, 2019a). The concept of community resilience has become universally popular and used, as well as its diverse and multiple interpretations and indicators (see Wilson, 2012; Bergamini et al., 2013; Berkes & Ross, 2013), by both practitioners and scholars working with communities. How communities are socially capable of responding to environmental challenges is one of the main aspects of resilience. The sociopolitical capacity of communities to organize and collectively discuss and mobilize resources for adaptation to environmental risks and problems is a critical area explored by the resilience literature. Collaboration and collective actions through spaces for decision-making has become a critical aspect to consider and explore, by recognizing and acknowledging existing inequalities,

disparities, and heterogeneity of communities and their residents. Building collaborative governance implies creating and strengthening inclusive spaces for discussion and participation in local matters, such as environmental challenges. The analysis of relations of power within collaborative governance in communities is critical, because, rural communities' residents may feel marginalized and/or exploited by unequal or unfair relations with actors from outside such as the market and/or the State (see Scott, 1998; Ashwood, 2018a, 2018b; Kelly & Lobao 2018; Leap & Thompson, 2018; May, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018; Carolan, 2019; Thompson, 2019a).

This article aims to link recent bodies of literature from sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers (among others) highlighting that inequalities and disparities not only are important within communities but also under unequal spatial distribution of resources, especially in rural contexts. We recognize there are multiple aspects of community resilience that can be considered or measured (see Wilson, 2012; Bergamini et al., 2013; Berkes & Ross, 2013), but we aim to contribute to ongoing discussions and debates on community resilience by proposing strategies and practices that contemplate critical aspects of inequalities, power, and disparities within and outside communities, especially in rural settings. First, the article conceptualizes community resilience and highlights the importance and main characteristics of collaborative governance. Secondly, we analyze and stress salient aspects of inequalities, disparities, power, and heterogeneity on building collaborative governance for community resilience. After analyzing existing literature and critical aspects of these themes, we propose strategic steps that can be considered by practitioners and scholars working on building community resilience through collaborative governance, addressing local inequalities and the empowerment of disadvantaged groups as well as overcoming spatial inequalities and barriers to successfully mobilize resources for community mitigation and/or adaptation to environmental challenges.

Resilience and collaborative governance

Not all the challenges and disturbances communities experience are negative (Wilson, 2012). They may represent unstable situations which imply decisive changes that are necessary and inevitable (Lerch, 2017), but they may not necessarily represent negative consequences for communities (Wilson, 2012). Rather than considering the way communities return to an original state or ideal equilibrium, as some scholars proposed for social and ecological systems (see Holling, 1973; Wilson, 2012; Walker & Salt, 2017), nowadays, both practitioners and researchers are considering resilience as how social and ecological aspects of communities are reorganized or rearranged in response to challenges, disruptions, or changes (Adger, 2000; Wilson, 2012; Lerch, 2017; Thompson, 2019a). Community resilience is currently and generally understood as communities' capability and/or ability to cope with challenges and disturbances and to sustain economic, social, and environmental functions, identities, and structures that comprise them, without reducing the wellbeing of local residents and/or institutions (Adger, 2000; Folke, 2006; Berkes & Ross, 2013; Wilson, 2012; Lerch, 2017; Walker & Salt, 2017; Leap & Thompson, 2018; Thompson, 2019a). Community resilience is the process by which communities seek specific outcomes under expected or experienced socio-ecological disturbances or changes, which can be either good or bad (Cretney, 2014; Walker & Salt, 2017). Community resilience can be preventive (i.e. by reducing vulnerability) or reactive (i.e. adapting after disturbances have been experiences) (Wilson, 2012).

The capability of communities to cope with and adapt to challenges or disturbances depends, in great part, on their governance characteristics (i.e. actors involved and the nature of decision-making processes at local level). Social studies on resilience have recently focused on the importance of sociopolitical aspects of communities (Wilson, 2012), giving special attention to governance characteristics on how communities adapt to environmental challenges created by climate change or development (see Adger, Lorenzi, & O'Brien, 2009; Thompson,

2019a, 2019b). During recent decades, different aspects of governance have been explored and considered by both practitioners and scholars to analyze community resilience or how communities respond to disturbances. Consequently, a myriad number of studies have explored the role of communities' social capital, multi-level and network governance, collaborative governance, and the creation of assemblages to deal with challenges and disturbances, among other topics (see Adger, 2000; Adger et al., 2009; Forney, Rosin, & Campbell, 2018; Thompson, 2019a). Although the existing literature on community resilience and governance differ by disciplines, methods, and approaches, a salient commonality is the importance of collaboration at the community level to address unexpected changes and challenges. Collaborative governance has become an important aspect of community resilience. However, collaborative efforts cannot ignore its complex and dissimilar characteristics, drawn and influenced by relations of power within and outside communities, and the un-equal opportunities they create for local residents to participate. As Wilson (2012) and Thompson (2019a) point out, more work is needed on these aspects of community resilience and governance.

The inclusion of participatory and collaborative tools into the community adaptive process needs to recognize the diversity of community participants, power dynamics, and the intersectionality of different identities and characteristics (Healey, 2006; Leap, 2018). A collaborative adaptive planning process using local knowledge is likely to provide effective alternatives for communities and contribute to the community becoming more adaptive and resilient over time (Innes & Booher, 2010). In order to build consensus and shared ideas in a collaborative adaptive and planning process, the process should provide opportunities for all participants to express and integrate ideas into the decision-making process (Innes & Booher, 2010). Collaborative processes are likely to produce effective change empowering individual

and collective learning (Innes & Booher, 2010), but unequal existing relations of power must be acknowledged by participants. Thus, as an attempt to explore and deconstruct aspects of power in collaborative governance to build community resilience, we propose the following guiding questions: Who do and do not participate in decision-making processes to build community resilience? How do specific actors from within and/or outside communities influence local decisions to mobilize locally available resources? How are community decisions made? These questions guide this article, acknowledging and critically analyzing the importance and exceptionality of specific rural settings and how unequal relations of power vary by different historic, geographic, socioeconomic, cultural, and political characteristics that define each community and its residents. The analysis of how relations of power influence community responses to disruptions or challenges, implies to carefully focus on intersecting inequalities (Leap, 2018), local injustices, and (non)participation of marginalized and unrepresented groups in local decision-making processes, as well as on rural communities' views and relations with outside groups and institutions—under unequal territories and rural/urban landscapes (Lobao, 2004; Harvey, 2006; Kelly & Lobao, 2018).

Unequal Capabilities and Spatial Divides
Studies from multiple disciplines on socio-ecological and community resilience (see e.g. Cote & Nightingale, 2012; Cretney, 2014; Fabinyi, Evans, & Foale, 2014; Ingalls & Stedman, 2016; Leap, 2018; May, 2018; Thompson, 2016; Atallah, Bacigalupe, & Repetto, 2019; Thompson, 2019a) address the importance of social and spatial inequalities, power, and heterogeneities, stressing how multiple worldviews, values and opinions, politics, skillsets, knowledge/s, and resources can contribute to community resilience. This large body of literature highlights critical aspects of community resilience when some groups and/or individuals are not included in decision-making processes and/or local adaptive responses. Furthermore, the use of a critical approach to the

different opportunities that local individuals, groups, and/or institutions have (Atallah et al., 2019) in participating in collective governance, is critical for the success of community responses to environmental disturbances and challenges (Thompson, 2019a).

Local collaborative governance implies collective agency or the capacity of groups or individuals to collectively decide and mobilize locally available resources or community capitals (Flora & Flora, 2013; Thompson, 2019a, 2019b). Community empowerment for adaption to challenges and disruptions (Thompson, 2016) is an important aspect of collaborative governance at local level. A large body of literature on community development, rural development, and food justice and sovereignty stress the significance of inequalities and community empowerment to make changes at the local level, with special attention to the inclusion of historically marginalized groups (e.g. women, peasants, migrant farmers and farmworkers, black residents, etc.) (see Chambers 1983, 1994; Allen, 2007, 2010; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Mares & Alkon, 2011). Equal opportunities for local actors to participate in collaborative governance to address community matters implies the empowerment of individuals, groups, and/or institutions that have been historically marginalized in specific settings; otherwise, local responses to address disturbances and challenges may create and/or reproduce unequal relations of power or socioeconomic, racial, and gender inequalities (among others). Acknowledging the importance of intersectionality to explore inequalities in rural contexts, it is also important to identify struggles and challenges of marginalized rural residents who may be represented as members of dominant groups (Leap, 2018; Carolan, 2019).

Analyzing and discussing alternatives for rural development, Robert Chambers used the phrase "putting the last first" (Chambers, 1983). We draw on Chambers' (1983, 1994) and other scholars' ideas of empowering local marginalized groups in rural contexts, but critically acknowledging that rural communities (as unique socio-ecological systems) are immersed in unequal relations of power with outside actors

(i.e. individuals, groups, governmental institutions) who influence local availability of resources and decisions to address challenges and disturbances (Thompson, 2016; May, 2018; Thompson, 2019a).

Literature from rural sociologists, geographers, and anthropologists (among others) address socio-spatial inequalities with particular focus on rural/urban dichotomies and how local perceptions among rural residents, access to resources, and local decisions' capabilities about community matters are influenced by communities' relationships with outside actors and/or uneven development promoted by the State and/or the market (see Scott, 1998; Ashwood, 2018a, 2018b; Kelly & Lobao, 2018; Leap & Thompson, 2018; May, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018; Carolan, 2019; Thompson, 2019a, 2019b). A good number of studies have shown that uneven development has had different consequences on places and populations (see Lobao, 2004; Harvey, 2006; Bell, 2016; Kelly & Lobao, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018) impacting communities' capabilities to respond to environmental challenges created either by development or nature. Nowadays, rural communities in particular experience multiple challenges caused and/or exacerbated by their exploitation, lack of resources, fewer opportunities and people, and dependency on outside institutions from both the market and the State (see Thompson, 2016; Ashwood, 2018a, 2018b; Wuthnow, 2018; Peters, 2019; Thompson, 2019a). The current realities of many rural communities trapped in unequal geographic landscapes that often benefit the allocation of capitals and resources in metropolitan areas cannot be ignored by practitioners working on community resilience or development. Therefore, local and socio-spatial inequalities are equally important.

By reviewing theoretical concepts and proposing ideas and practices, this article aims to reconcile existing gaps between bodies of literature stressing community resilience, collaborative governance, and both internal and external inequalities and disparities, especially in rural contexts. Drawing on existing gaps and existing bodies of literature, this article aims to identify

and highlight strategies and practices that can be considered by different stakeholders dealing with environmental challenges in specific localities, with special attention to the involvement of marginalized groups in local collaborative governance to build community resilience.

Overcoming Disparities and Unequal Capabilities by Building Collaborative Governance and Community Resilience

Disturbances and challenges faced by communities can be either slow (e.g. environmental pollution) or sudden (e.g. natural disasters). In order for communities to respond, they need to be aware of their risks. Community acknowledgment or recognition of environmental challenges can be a consequence of collective memory or previous experiences with hazards (Messer, Shriver, & Adams, 2015), or because environmental challenges or disturbances are observed by local residents (Thompson, 2018). Local collective actions to build collaborative governance require individuals' and institutions' willingness to collaborate and discuss common threats and/or interests related to environmental challenges. Therefore, *local awareness of environmental challenges and risks* is key for communities to respond. As Masterson et al. (2014) point out, it is very important for communities to know their hazard exposure and vulnerability and to *start organizing* (as the first step) for mitigation of potential problems or recovery after disturbances have been experienced (e.g. after tornados, hurricanes, etc.). Masterson et al. (2014) state the first step could involve forming a core of team of people who would eventually address the environmental problems and would try to connect to other groups, institutions, and/or individuals. *Making connections* and informing about potential environmental risks and/or recovery and adaptation is another key aspect for building collaborative governance, which can provide new opportunities for social interaction and decision-making. The involvement of local leaders of "faith-based, civic, and voluntary institutions that are trusted in the community are important points of connection" (Masterson et al., 2014, pp. 64-

65), especially local actors working with vulnerable or marginalized groups or local residents. As we emphasized in previous sections of the article, *involvement and participation of vulnerable and historically marginalized residents and groups* is essential for the success of community mitigation and adaptation strategies. Lerch (2017) emphasizes "the power to envision the future of the community and build its resilience resides with community members" (Lerch, 2017, p. 17). *Inclusiveness in local decision-making processes* is a central aspect for building community resilience. However, it is critical for people working on community resilience to acknowledge and deconstruct aspects of politics, power, and inequalities (Cretney, 2014; Leap, 2018; Attallah et al., 2019; Thompson, 2019a) that are entailed in all structures of collaborative governance. *Knowing the community* to build community resilience (Masterson et al., 2014) by recognizing inequalities, disparities, and heterogeneities is a fundamental aspect not only to strengthen local collaboration but also to develop adaptive solutions and strategies. Knowing the community implies *acknowledging structural difficulties and barriers* that vulnerable and disadvantaged community residents and groups may experience in participating in local discussions and solutions about environmental challenges, but explicitly, giving them the chance to become active participants and local actors of change. Although recognition and acknowledgment of unequal relations of power is crucial for community resilience, especially for the empowerment of marginalized groups or individuals, discussing differences and/or barriers should be carefully managed by participants, otherwise, this process may be seen as exhausting for most participants who devote their time and work in search of solutions, especially after severe disturbances have been experienced (e.g. natural disasters).

Local solutions for building community resilience generally imply discussions about shared or common resources and how to resolve disputes by acknowledging different interests

(Thompson, 2019a). While we recognize the importance of addressing local inequalities and disparities, we also suggest that is imperative for local residents, groups, and institutions to *find a common ground* in how to deal with environmental challenges and disturbances experienced by their communities. As Mayer (2019) highlights in addressing causes and possible responses to climate change, it is very important to avoid distance and separation between individuals. Instead, it is critical for people to *build connectedness and sense of collectiveness* that could promote and facilitate compassion, empathy, and solidarity (Leap & Thompson, 2018; Mayer, 2019) among community members to solve environmental challenges that—differently—affect local residents. The conditions for the collaborative process could involve what Innes and Booher (2010) describe as DIAD (diversity, interdependency, authentic dialogue) where different stakeholders have diverse but interdependent interests. Authentic dialogue occurs when stakeholders are engaged with each other on a common mission, having equal ability to speak and to be listened to. The results of the authentic dialogue are reciprocity, relationship, learning, and creativity among the stakeholders. The outcomes of the collaborative process are the adaptations of the systems, which may include shared identities, shared meanings, innovations, and future interactions beyond the collaboration process and the actors involved (Innes & Booher, 2010; Leap & Thompson, 2018).

Collaborative governance for building community resilience not only implies the construction of local alliances and coalitions but also *building and strengthening outside relationships* with key actors who can provide or transfer important resources (e.g. scientific information, technology, etc.) for communities (Thompson, 2016, 2019a). Internal and external relationships and ties of communities, also called bonding and bridging social capitals, respectively, are equally important (Flora & Flora, 2013). Communities' outside relationships

are critical for the access to resources used for mitigation or adaptation. Therefore, it is important to critically analyze political aspects and power on how outside actors influence communities' access— or not—to outside resources that can be key for whether and how communities deal with environmental challenges and risks.

As addressed in previous sections, communities' capabilities to build resilience or to adapt to environmental disturbances and challenges is influenced by their—unequal— access and dependency on external resources (Thompson, 2016), especially in rural areas. However, the dependency on outside actors and resources can be overcome by *recognizing local strengths or actions that worked well in the past*, and *mobilizing locally available resources* or community capitals (Thompson, 2019b) through collaborative governance and alliances. David Harvey (2008) stresses the idea of the right to access and transform the natural and built environment of communities as a collective right to overcome spatial injustices or disparities created by the market and/or the State. Reclaiming natural and built environments through mobilization of locally available resources would imply seeking spatial justice (Soja, 2010) and the redistribution and access to resources by communities (Harvey, 1973). Collaborative governance not only includes local actors but also outside actors who can provide resources communities need. However, it is very important for outsiders (i.e. practitioners or scholars) to consider that local people should decide about the allocation of their resources based on their local needs and/or desires. It is important for researchers, policy makers, and practitioners from outside communities to *learn, acknowledge, and value the unique characteristics of rural settings* (Chambers, 1983, 1994; Leap & Thompson, 2018) to—together—explore how communities can reorganize and sustain their efforts to mitigate negative consequneces or adapt to environmental challenges over time.

Building community resilience

Local awareness of environmental challenges and risks

↓

Start organizing

↓

Making connections and informing local residents

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Critical aspects to be considered

Inclusiveness in local decision-making processes:
Involvement and participation of vulnerable and historically marginalized residents and groups.

Knowing the community:
Recognizing local strengths to mobilize locally available resources (community capitals).

Acknowledging structural inequalities within and outside the community

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Building connectedness and sense of collectiveness:
Through shared interests, visions, and goals for local adaptations.

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Building and strengthening outside relationships:
That facilitate access to outside resources.

Figure 1. Strategies for Building Community Resilience

Conclusions

This article recognizes the importance and critical role of inequalities, power, and disparities that may exist within communities and in relation with outside actors. We suggest key aspects and strategies to overcome communities' barriers or limitations, by building local collaborative governance and alliances within and outside communities. The diagram shown in Figure 1 illustrates the role of these aspects and strategies on the construction of collaborative governance and community resilience. Based on the analysis of existing literature and the critical aspects highlighted by this article, we believe the following strategies and practices could be contemplated and/or considered by practitioners and scholars working on community resilience especially in rural contexts:

- Create local awareness of environmental risks and problems.
- Start organizing local actors.
- Make local connections.
- Involve and promote participation of vulnerable and historically marginalized residents and groups.
- Include diverse individuals, groups, and institutions in local decision-making processes.
- Know the community.

- Acknowledge structural difficulties and barriers that differently impact local residents.
- Find a common ground and/or interests for discussions and solutions for environmental challenges and risks.
- Build connectedness and sense of collectiveness.
- Build and strengthen outside relationships.
- Recognize local strengths or actions that worked well in the past and could be replicated.
- Identify and mobilize locally available resources or community capitals.
- Learn, acknowledge, and value unique characteristics of each community.

Although we recognize that there may be other approaches and ideas that contribute to community resilience and equal opportunities for community members to develop their own strategies and solutions, we believe these strategies and practices can strengthen the creation of collaborative governance capable of reducing inequalities and disparities that internally and externally affect communities, especially in rural contexts.

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