

Catalysing Community Learning Through Dialogue: a Beloi (East Timor) case study

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Beloi, a community of 350 inhabitants, is located in Atauro Island, 30km north of Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste. The community depends mainly on coral reef linked fisheries resources for their livelihood.

High fishing pressure in the reefs, associated to some destructive practices, contributes to the reduction of the fish stocks in the vicinity of Beloi. This problem will be aggravated in the future through population growth linked to the incipient tourism industry. Therefore, options for managing food security, income generation and cultural aspects into the longer term should be further investigated in order to foster an environmentally-economically-culturally sustainable future.

Community issues (cultural, social, economic and ecological) cannot be understood in isolation. They are a web of interlinked concerns that require, ideally, an holistic or integrative perspective through which to design appropriate management settings. Therefore, processes that can catalyse, facilitate and support a systematic community involved learning process in relation to the proactive management of these complex reef-community challenges are needed.

Learning processes that empower communities towards a shared understanding of the problems/issues at hand would seem to be an appropriate response to this kind of real world ecological economic complexity. Through a collaborative learning process, the prospects for facilitating shared understandings in relation to the issues at hand would seem to be maximised. This kind of practice would integrate the intimate systems of understanding of the local village community with the scientific knowledge of researchers and the political/policy realities of prevailing government administration.

The organisational learning framework, upon which our methodology is based, offers a dynamic systems learning community of practice setting wherein all stakeholders are able to systematically explore the understandings and perspectives of others in a controlled dialogue process. Understandings of prevailing and potential concerns are emergent and more thoroughly shared than is the case for more 'top down learning processes'. Ownership of ensuing solutions and a level of empathy necessary to support their implementation and delivery are likely to be higher.

In this paper, we argue that through adaptive learning processes, where communities are engaged in conversations, all interested stakeholders are able to develop shared understandings of their system and these understandings will help them identify and articulate current issues and opportunities, directions for change and sometimes innovative ideas about pathways through which to realise long term ecological-economic-cultural sustainability.