Sustainability transformations in marine governance in Sweden via social learning

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Dr. Angelo Jonas Imperiale and Dr. Uta Wehn describe the MISTRA C2B2 programme's unique approach to promoting sustainability transformations in Sweden's marine governance through social learning in Living Labs

The Mistra programme *Co-creating Better Blue* (C2B2) aims to transform current marine governance in Sweden towards a more participatory and data-driven approach. This approach seeks to enhance the resilience of marine social-ecological systems and achieve a sustainable blue economy in Sweden.

A tailored methodology for the co-creation of LivingLabs informs the overall C2B2 programme and is vital to achieving its desired outcomes. This methodology guides the development of three LivingLabs involving relevant blue economy sectors and actors in three marine basins in Sweden. It is based on an innovative participatory approach focussed on fostering transformative learning among the multiple C2B2 LivingLabs' stakeholders, the organisations to which they belong, and the governance setting in which they operate.

Social learning is key

Social learning broadly refers to any change in understanding that takes place in the individuals involved and their wider social units, organisations or communities of practice within society. Social learning outcomes differ in scale and depth, spanning from individual to organisational and institutional settings and from single-loop (i.e. acquisition of new knowledge and skills) to multiple-loop learning (i.e. transformative learning) and outcomes, fostering changes in attitudes, behaviours, routines, strategies, procedures, policies and norms.

In environmental governance, social learning is a crucial process for fostering transformative change in environmental governance regimes, aiming to enhance the resilience and sustainability of social-ecological systems and the sustainable management of natural resources within such systems.

Broadly, the literature discusses the enabling conditions for social learning processes to occur in environmental governance regimes. Three basic, nested and inter-level dynamics enable social learning, thus leading to adaptive environmental governance and resilience-building across multiple governance levels and social-ecological scales:

- Horizontal interactions enable social learning to occur among stakeholders, a broader constituency of (local) communities, sectors and decision-makers at the same governance level.
- Upward integrations of knowledge & learnings enable interactions and social learning among actors at multiple governance levels and facilitate the integration and scaling up of lower-level social learning outcomes and sustainability transformations across broader social-ecological scales.
- Downward regulations enable recursive social learning among actors across multiple governance levels, strengthening both horizontal interactions and upward integrations in a continuous process of collaborative problem-solving and sustainability transformation. This ultimately leads to multi-level adaptive environmental governance and co-management approaches.

To make these three social learning dynamics happen and create participatory and adaptive environmental governance and management regimes, there are four cross-cutting issues to consider:

1. Content (i.e., learning what and why?).
2. Process (i.e., learning how?).
3. Internal context (i.e., learning by whom and in which organisational setting?); and
4. External context (i.e., learning in face of which external challenges and opportunities?).

Sustainability transformation: Stakeholder participation is not enough

The scope and desired outcomes of enhancing social learning have often been associated with processes that foster public participation. However, it cannot be assumed that participatory processes inevitably lead to social learning. Indeed, social learning has often been confused with the conditions and methods that enable it to occur, with many projects claiming to be social learning projects.

Yet many rarely go beyond simply facilitating stakeholder participation, providing little or no evidence of the social learning taking place. These shortcomings are common to most research and practices concerned with public involvement, including traditional LivingLabs methods and approaches.

While LivingLabs have been widely recognised as a valuable tool that can enable meaningful multi-level stakeholder engagement, there is still a lack of research concerning the enabling dynamics and dimensions of social learning that LivingLabs could enhance and the different social learning outcomes that can be achieved in the context of LivingLabs fostering sustainable environmental governance and management.

Putting the enabling factors for social learning in place

In the Mistra C2B2 programme, the tailored LivingLabs methodology addresses these gaps and guides the design and implementation of the LivingLabs to ensure that:

1. The content, process and context-related factors that enable social learning are in place; and
2. The C2B2 LivingLabs can effectively contribute to achieving the transformative learning outcomes and changes needed to achieve a more sustainable blue economy and resilient social-ecological marine system in Sweden.

Content: Co-develop a shared vision among the LivingLabs stakeholders of the common problems and needs that should be addressed, as well as the desired outcomes to be achieved. A co-designed social learning agenda will make this shared vision operational in terms of:

1. The specific LivingLabs activities to be implemented to realise this vision and
2. The specific transformative learning outcomes that need to be reached at the individual, organisational and governance levels to accomplish such a vision fully.

Process: Ground all LivingLabs activities in transdisciplinary knowledge co-production processes and negotiation, and fully embed inclusiveness as a key leading principle informing the design and implementation of all C2B2 LivingLabs-related activities.

Context: Ensure that the LivingLabs carefully reflect local needs and desires to create tangible local value for all stakeholders, concrete incentives for overcoming typical motivational barriers, and structure and support to foster active participation.

In sum, the C2B2 LivingLabs methodology combines the strengths of LivingLabs as recently applied to sustainable environmental governance and urban and spatial planning, with a deeper understanding of operational aspects of social learning. By focussing on enhancing transformative learning within and across the three C2B2 LivingLabs, the Mistra C2B2 programme will drive sustainability transformations in ocean governance and management, thus contributing to achieving a more participatory and adaptive marine spatial planning and sustainable blue economy in Sweden.

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