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**THE HIDDEN PAST AND FUTURE TRAJECTORIES:
A CASE STUDY FROM ACEH, INDONESIA**

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1. INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABILITY


The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) provide a set of umbrella indicators for well-being such as:

- employment rates
- incidence of poverty level incomes
- incidence and mortality rates from disease
- proportion of forested land area
- proportion of species protected or threatened.

These indicators focus on 'rates' and 'proportions'

STRUCTURE OF PRESENTATION

1. Assessing social-ecological systems
2. The past of social-ecological systems
3. Invisible qualities of life stories
4. Life stories as sites of change
5. Summary: Ethnography and sustainability



House in Aceh Besar

1. INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABILITY

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) notes the importance of connections between human and ecological well-being in assessing sustainability:

Factors such as freedom of choice, security, and health, will require a *new generation of models*

Modelling some of these factors will need to take account of the past from which they emerge

1. INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability theory now focuses on adaptation, resilience and transformability of a social-ecological system (SES):

Adaptability: the collective capacity of the human actors in the system to manage resilience

Transformability: the capacity to create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social conditions make the existing system untenable

Adaptive governance: a process of creating adaptability and transformability in SESs (Walker et al).

The assessment of SESs for adaptability and transformability is the focus of this paper

1. ASSESSING SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

Quantitative: socioeconomic conditions (MDG)	Qualitative: social capital (MA)	Temporal: The past	Capacities: adaptability transformability
employment	cultural identity	social/political/ economic changes	Collective capacity of the human actors in the system to manage resilience
death	leadership	biophysical changes	
health care	freedom of choice	historical events	Capacity to create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social conditions make the existing system untenable
food	security	life experiences	
literacy	enterprise		
forested land area	optimism		
protected species	trust		
	vision		

2. THE PAST OF SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

Quantitative socioeconomic conditions:

- employment rates
- death rates
- health care coverage
- per capita food consumption
- proportion of forested land area
- proportion of protected species

The past

- social changes over time
- environmental changes ('shifting baselines')
- historical events
- life experiences

Qualitative social capital

- cultural identity
- leadership
- freedom of expression
- sense of enterprise
- confidence
- trust
- vision

Capacities: adaptability, transformability

Human capacity in the face of change to create sustainable conditions

2. LIFE STORY ETHNOGRAPHIES IN ACEH

Map of Indonesia

Map of Aceh

From Robert Critch, Digital Atlas of Indonesia 2010, NIAS Press

I spent six months in the Aceh Besar district of Aceh and interviewed 25 old people in rural areas about their life stories

2. HIDDEN IMPACTS OF THE PAST

Cultural and symbolic losses in changing landscapes are undervalued (Adger)

Invisible losses (Turner et al)

- cultural and lifestyle losses
- loss of identity
- loss of influence and 'order in the world'
- opportunity losses (through focus on past injustice)

River, Aceh Besar

These are hidden historical factors in sustainability of SESs

2. LIFE STORY ETHNOGRAPHIES IN ACEH

These life story ethnographies of the old are history 'from the inside': not about events but about the experience of events

- The experience of chronic conflict, from Dutch colonialism to the 30 year GAM-military conflict which ended in 2005
- Experiencing prolonged periods of hunger and poverty
- Inability to attend school because of school closures, the disappearance of teachers
- Living through natural disaster

'History from the inside' has particular qualities

2. FINDING OUT ABOUT THE PAST

History provides an explanatory narrative about past events

Ethnography seeks to find out about how people live, in their own words:

- to understand a way of life from the 'inside'

An ethnography of the past may seek life stories:

- to understand the past from the 'inside'

An ethnography of the past within living memory seeks the life stories of the old

The old can tell us 'what it was like' in a way history cannot

3. QUALITIES OF LIFE STORIES: 'RECENTNESS'

Life stories *grade the past* according to significance:

- Particular events in the past have pre-eminence because they enabled survival, for example the advent of irrigation
- Some events are remembered more strongly eg occurrences during the WWII occupation by the Japanese, regardless of how recently they occurred

In life stories, some events have a 'recentness' which is not chronological or historical

3. 'RECENTNESS' AND THE FUTURE



The 'recentness' of events in life stories influences the future:

- Expectations and hopes for future generations rest on the importance of particular events in the past – irrigation to end hunger, peace to end war
- Hopes and expectations depend on priorities in the present or the immediate past
- Hopes for the future in Aceh are therefore focused on peace, sufficient food and a livelihood

These hopes and expectations are part of the current 'bearing' of an SES: a vector of its future

3. QUALITIES OF LIFE STORIES: 'ACCRETIVENESS'



Ibu A-h (74)

No...I think it never stops. After one war, came another war. During my whole life, I think I experienced five wars...that I remember you know. First is the Dutch, and then the Japanese, the DI/TII, the PKI [communism], after PKI was the Cumbok war...uh...I don't remember which one happened first, the Cumbok war or the PKI. After that...hmm...the GAM [Free Aceh Movement]...

Ibu S-p (65)

After the war, we feel the war for around three years, and after that, ehmm...we feel safe for two years...ehm...no, one year of peace, then the chaos happened again. Three times of war, we feel not good again, we feel not safe going to the field, even our parents, they are chasing after the man - our father, chased by the military

3. 'RECENTNESS' AND THE FUTURE



Bapak A-d (68)

They must live better, it's peace now. They didn't experience the hard life, now everything is easier, going to the farm is easy, looking for money is easy

Ibu A-w (90)

Yes, of course, unlike in the past, life was harsh. The youngsters now, I pray to God that they must live better; they must not feel what we've been through in the past.

Ibu R-h (65)

Of course I remember, let's say, that I have lived in a hard situation, I hope that...uhm...my children and my grand children don't suffer the same.

3. QUALITIES OF LIFE STORIES: 'ACCRETIVENESS'



Bapak D-a (71)

After the Japanese left, we started to work in the field, planting the rice...It was before we have this irrigation... In that time, the life was very difficult too, especially for the farmers.

So, in 1951 to 1953, the [Darul Islam] war was happening. During this DI/TII war, the villagers also lived in difficulties

In 1953, I had just entered the fifth grade of elementary school. After that, many of the schools were closed during that DI/TII; many of the teachers were taken by them, and some of the teachers also ran away to Banda Aceh

Yeah. So, we were quitting school.

3. QUALITIES OF LIFE STORIES: 'ACCRETIVENESS'



Life stories of old people in Aceh also reveal:

- How events in history are cumulative in the lives of individuals living today
- How chronic trauma or prolonged periods of hunger can produce depression or ill health in the present (Good et al)

This accretive quality of the past has an impact on the current conditions of an SES

3. 'ACCRETIVENESS' AND THE FUTURE



This accretiveness of the past makes itself known in the present:

- It can result in precariousness
- Like indigenous people's invisible losses, it may cause another intervention to be 'devastating'
- It may be one of Adger's 'hidden limits to adaptation'

Accretiveness can bring an SES close to a threshold of irremediable change

3. INVISIBLE QUALITIES OF LIFE STORIES

Non-chronological 'recentness' and accretiveness of experience are invisible:

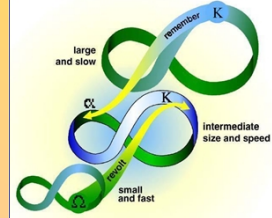
- They are invisible in 'march of progress' histories
- They are invisible in scientific explanations of the past
- Some impacts may be measurable, but their trajectory into the future (expectations or precariousness) is hidden in life stories

Life story ethnography reveals factors in the future of an SES

4. LIFE STORIES AS SITES OF CHANGE

Change in history and science relies on a conception of influences across a hierarchy of scale, spatial and temporal

- Larger or global is often seen as more powerful or 'irresistible' than smaller or local (spatial scales)
- In Gunderson and Holling's 'panarchy' change at small scales can also trigger change at bigger scales (temporal and spatial scales)



From Folke 2006 (based on Gunderson and Holling 2002)

3. INVISIBLE QUALITIES OF LIFE STORIES

Quantitative: socioeconomic conditions	Qualitative: social capital	Temporal: the past	Capacities: adaptability transformability
employment death health care food consumption literacy forested land area protected species	cultural identity leadership freedom of choice sense of security enterprise optimism confidence trust vision	social/political/ economic changes biophysical changes historical events life experience: accretiveness and 'recentness'	Collective capacity of the human actors in the system to manage resilience Capacity to create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social conditions make the existing system untenable

4. LIFE STORIES AS SITES OF CHANGE

However social sites are 'where things actually happen' (Marston)

- These sites of interaction can be the focus of assessments of sustainability or future change
- Discussions about 'globalization', 'development', 'climate change' can centre on what it means within the social site
- Consideration of how change will occur can be done at the place 'where things actually happen'

A social site recognizes interaction rather than scale

4. LIFE STORIES AS SITES OF CHANGE

A life story weaves history and global events into the experience of an individual over a lifetime

A lifetime as the focus of events offers a different way of connecting the past with what happens in the future

'A life' is a different kind of 'site' of change, temporally and spatially

4. LIFE STORIES AS SITES OF CHANGE

As with social sites, focusing on 'a life' produces a different story about the past and future from scientific discourse and explanations offered by history

This focus gives a different significance to past events and may even suggest different requirements for sustainability in the future

'A life' as recollected in a life story, becomes the site of 'what happened' and 'what might happen'

5. SUMMARY: ETHNOGRAPHY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The past is important in assessing sustainability

- Life stories add to history texts, scientific records and causal explanations by revealing 'what it was like'
- This is not simply added 'detail' or 'local colour'. The temporal qualities of experience and the way it is remembered, such as accretiveness and 'recentness', have significant impacts on current conditions and the trajectory of a social-ecological system
- An ethnography of the past may challenge the very definitions of sustainability, adaptability and transformability

THANK YOU 

New mangrove after
the 2004 tsunami,
Aceh Besar

