

Paper 3

From individual innovation to collective action: empowering the grassroots innovative actors of the la Campana-Peñuelas biosphere (Chile) in order to foster socio-ecological resilience

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The goal of this action-research was to identify and empower the grassroots innovative actors of la Campana-Peñuelas biosphere reserve (central Chile). The objective of this empowerment process was to create a capacity of collective action among these actors to enable them to access the management board of the biosphere reserve and to foster sustainable local development. From a theoretical perspective, we investigate how the different concepts of empowerment, collective agency, collective capability and collective action can be related within the framework of Human Development and Capability Approach. From an empirical perspective, we first conducted a qualitative survey to identify the grassroots innovative actors.

We identified 22 genuinely innovative actors through the survey we conducted. These actors were not, in the terms of the capability approach, free to “do” and to “be” what they value i.e. to implement sustainable lifestyles. Indeed, they suffered several barriers, including an absence of support from conventional institutions, competition with conventional agribusiness and mass tourism forms, lack of visibility, lack of organization, lack of participation in decision making about sustainable development in local and regional policies. In brief, although they are inventing tomorrow’s sustainable lifestyles by adapting themselves to global change, their work receives little attention, and they are neither organized nor empowered. Consequently, we invited the 22 actors to a workshop which aimed to foster the emergence of a collective identity through “sustainable innovation” and through the collective identification of problems that limit the group’s agency.

The major outcome of the workshop was the creation of a non-profit organization, called *Acción Biosfera*, by some of the participants. The process of creating *Acción Biosfera* was then analysed to examine the new collective capabilities gained by these actors. We conclude that it is possible to foster collective action among innovative actors by focusing on building collective identity among them and by enhancing their collective agency thus shifting them from a collection of individuals to an autonomous group. The creation of *Acción Biosfera* demonstrated the success of this process. In conclusion, we argue that *Acción Biosfera* is an example of an organization that aims to foster a truly bottom-up development process and to build socio-ecological resilience of the biosphere reserve territory at the local level.

Keywords: collective agency, collective capability, collective action, empowerment, socio-ecological resilience