Towards a PRESENCE learning network for restoring ecosystem services

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Three years ago Wageningen University & Research centre (WUR), R3G, Gamtoos Irrigation Board (implementers) and EarthCollective (NGO) initiated a South-North collaboration to support the Subtropical Thicket Restoration program (STRP) from the Department of Water Affairs (DWA), South Africa. The program is assessing the most cost-efficient way to restore degraded land and landscapes, while enabling employment and skills development in rural communities and evaluating the potential for generating income via the carbon market. In 2007 the above mentioned collaboration was granted with seed funding from WUR-INREF and DWA to indentify key implementation research gaps, exchange knowledge & experience on different restoration themes (e.g. ecology: ecosystem functioning & biophysical processes; ecosystem goods, services & evaluation; stakeholders, livelihoods & social assessment: policy, institutions & governance; financing, payments & reward mechanisms and remote sensing & GIS). During this workshop a brainstorm session was held looking at different frameworks to mainstream restoration of ecosystem services and natural capital (Cowling et al. 2007; Zylstra, Verschuuren & Shrestha 2005; Ecosystem Approach). Special attention was given to integrate those frameworks into an overarching one, resulting in the development of the Transdisciplinary Assessment and Implementation Framework (TAIF). TAIF has been developed as a means to provide strategic coordination and integration of the many disciplines and processes involved in science as well as the practical approaches needed to achieve successful mainstraiming of restoration. TAIF is, therefore, a framework that provides a conceptual ‘space’ for all stakeholders involved (scientists, implementers, etc.) to determine what research, actions and contributions are required to effect restoration. TAIF is intended to support strategic analysis, planning and negotiation to aid effective transdisciplinary research and stakeholder communication. Whilst it is represented as a step-by-step linear framework we recognize that in reality many elements of the framework will need to be considered simultaneously. Flexibility and adaptability are critical. Initially the idea was after the workshop to develop a south-north research program looking at Participatory Restoration of Ecosystem SErvices & Natural Capital in the Eastern Cape (PRESENCE). During its two-years of existence, PRESENCE has found itself evolving from a dedicated research-implementation programme for restoration toward an active learning network with multiple restoration objectives. However, such a transition does not automatically happen overnight and mechanisms need to be in place to ensure continued effectiveness and multi-stakeholder engagement over time and space.

The objective of this presentation is to contribute to the further discussion about the need, the important building blocks and the role of the net broker/facilitator in and of a learning network by sharing our experience of implementing the TAIF framework.
and assessing its current performance in relation to comparable structural dimensions, characteristics and criteria of such networks. The study focused primarily in the transdisciplinary initiative: PRESENCE in the Baviaanskloof (integrated catchment restoration) with the support of multiple partners. The process has involved area identification (e.g. hydro/ecological processes, stakeholder willingness, institutional capacity) and understanding perceptions and values of ecosystem/landscape services. PRESENCE in the Baviaanskloof is now in an early implementation phase which includes analysis of opportunities/constraints and strategy development. Planned restoration activities for 2010 include: reforestation with native vegetation (CO2 capture); recreating wetlands (increase base flow); erosion mitigation; and creating effective communication and education strategies for implementing an incentives scheme (e.g. PES) for ecosystem management. Collectively, such actions should continue to build social-ecological resilience to anticipated climatic changes.

The study found that PRESENCE network is well rated with respect to performance on leadership, trust and facilitation. However, a number of shortcomings were also identified such as participation and level of engagement across the various target groups/scales. Furthermore, a number of key challenges, opportunities and recommendations have been identified. This body of work is not only highly relevant to the future evolution of PRESENCE and its role in guiding and sharing experiences related to restoration in the Eastern Cape but also with respect to the growing global attention being given to the value of action research and learning networks in the field of conservation and restoration of landscapes.