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Reflections on integrated research from community engagement in peatland restoration

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Community engagement and integrated research are key approaches to solving complex socio-ecological challenges. This paper describes the experience of bringing together a team of natural and social scientists from Australia and Indonesia in the 'Gambut Kita' (translated as 'Our Peat') project. Gambut Kita aims to produce new knowledge and support efforts to successfully, and equitably, restore Indonesia's tropical peatlands and ensure that livelihoods can be maintained on restored (rewetted) landscapes. The paper focuses on experiences of using community engagement for integrated research. It discusses three community engagement approaches used in the project—resilience, adaptation pathways and transformation approach (RAPTA), participatory rural appraisal (PRA), and community-led analysis and planning (CLAP). It also describes the qualitative analysis of 14 interviews with the project team of lessons learned in community engagement for integrated research. 'Criteria for success' from the literature on international development projects is used to assess progress. The findings highlight the specific complexities of working across countries and cultures. Successful community engagement is not so much about the 'tool' but about the trust, agency, and support to change. The tools do, however, have different strengths. PRA and CLAP can build deep community understanding and relationships. RAPTA has strengths in framing visions and pathways to the future, systems thinking, anticipatory learning, and taking a cross-scale systems view which is required to solve many of the problems manifesting at local or community scales. Similarly, success in integrated research is not just about individuals, but structures (e.g. explicit process) and infrastructure (e.g. access to technology). These findings suggest that integrated research needs special considerations in terms of design, and these relate across scales to individual researchers as well as teams, leaders and organisations. Integrated research projects need careful, inclusive, iterative management with a lot of interaction to learn from each other, build a common vision, achieve clarity of roles, and share emerging findings.

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