Engaging Faith-Based Communities for Rural Coastal Resilience: Lessons from Collaborative Learning on the Eastern Shore

Christine D. Miller Hesed[1], Elizabeth Van Dolah[1], and Michael Paolisso[1]
[1]University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA, cmillerh@umd.edu

Introduction

In the United States, rural coastal lands are home to nearly 9.5 million people and are culturally and ecologically diverse[1]. They are also particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change[2]. While these areas have less infrastructure at risk to climate change, their ecosystems and socio-economic and cultural wellbeing nevertheless face substantial risks[3,4,5].

It is imperative that these rural areas are not overlooked in adaptation programming and policy-making to enhance the resilience of broader social-ecological systems; however, engaging rural communities in adaptation discussions is challenging. The absence of municipal governments particularly limits channels of communication and resource distribution to these areas.

Churches may offer a structure to improve these channels. Churches are: 1) widely distributed in rural coastal areas; 2) used by a diverse network of residents, including the privileged and disadvantaged; 3) intimately familiar with community needs and local environmental changes; and 4) highly trusted social entities.

We hypothesized that rural coastal resilience to climate change could be enhanced by creating opportunities for government officials (e.g. managers, planners, technical service providers, decision-makers) to interact with rural churches through collaborative learning (CL), a process that enables everyone to teach and learn from each other (Fig.1).
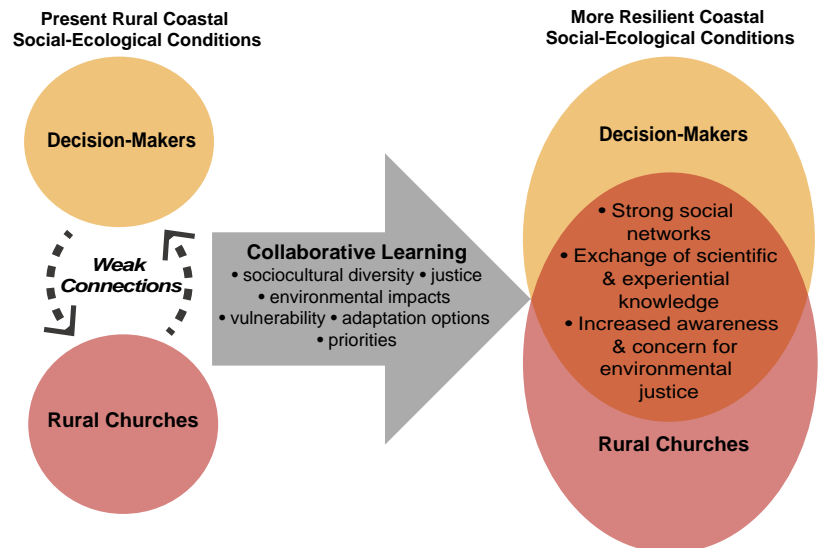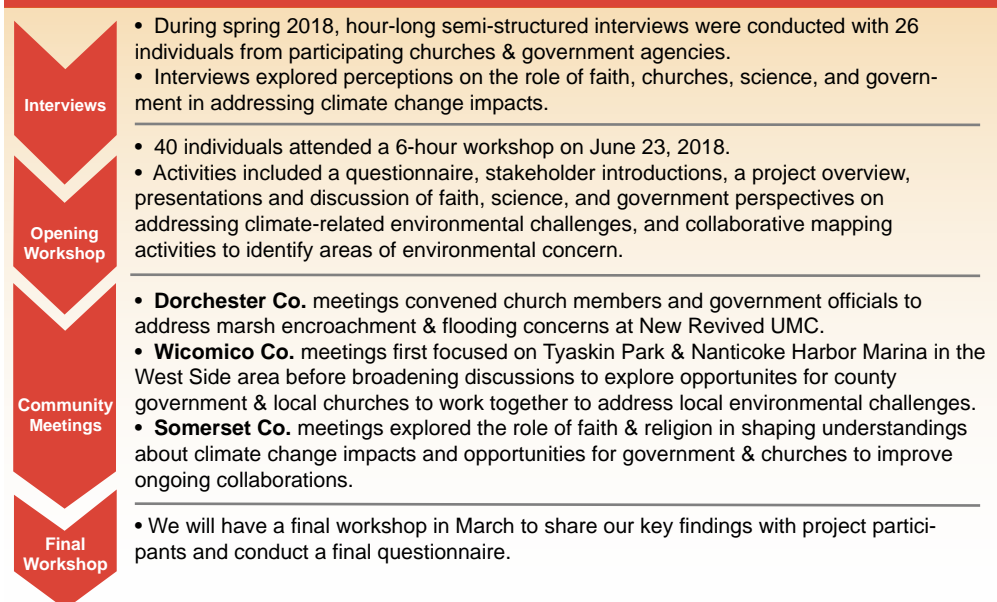
Figure 1. Conceptual Map of Research Approach

Present Rural Coastal Social-Ecological Conditions — Decision-Makers — *Weak Connections* — Rural Churches

Collaborative Learning
• sociocultural diversity • justice
• environmental impacts
• vulnerability • adaptation options
• priorities

More Resilient Coastal Social-Ecological Conditions — Decision-Makers
• Strong social networks
• Exchange of scientific & experiential knowledge
• Increased awareness & concern for environmental justice
Rural Churches

Figure 2. Sequence of Activities for Collaborative Learning

Interviews
• During spring 2018, hour-long semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 individuals from participating churches & government agencies.
• Interviews explored perceptions on the role of faith, churches, science, and government in addressing climate change impacts.

Opening Workshop
• 40 individuals attended a 6-hour workshop on June 23, 2018.
• Activities included a questionnaire, stakeholder introductions, a project overview, presentations and discussion of faith, science, and government perspectives on addressing climate-related environmental challenges, and collaborative mapping activities to identify areas of environmental concern.

Community Meetings
• **Dorchester Co.** meetings convened church members and government officials to address marsh encroachment & flooding concerns at New Revived UMC.
• **Wicomico Co.** meetings first focused on Tyaskin Park & Nanticoke Harbor Marina in the West Side area before broadening discussions to explore opportunites for county government & local churches to work together to address local environmental challenges.
• **Somerset Co.** meetings explored the role of faith & religion in shaping understandings about climate change impacts and opportunities for government & churches to improve ongoing collaborations.

Final Workshop
• We will have a final workshop in March to share our key findings with project participants and conduct a final questionnaire.

Methods:

• Recruited members from 12 rural churches in Dorchester, Wicomico and Somerset counties, MD. These included 11 United Methodist Churches (UMC) - including 5 African American churches - and 1 Independent.
• Recruited members from the Wicomico Interfaith Partners and government officials from Dorchester, Wicomico, and Somerset Counties, and the State of Maryland.
• Hosted CL activities through workshops and community meetings in each county.
• Used qualitative/quantitative methods to assess how CL enhances networks between churches and government (Fig. 2), and shifts in cultural knowledge of participants (results forthcoming).

References: [1]Johnson (2012) Carsey Schl Schlars' Reposit, Paper 159; [2]Hales et al (2014) 3rd Natl Clim Assess, US Globl Chge Rsrch Prog; [3]Colgan (2004) Natl Govnrs Assoc; [4]Kapucu et al. (2013) RRHCP 4:215-233; [5]Scavia et al (2002) Estuaries 25:149-164

Deal Island Peninsula Project

Benefits of Collaborative Learning between Churches and Government

1) Improves Knowledge of Resources, Needs, and Concerns
Participant church members better understand the forms of adaptive assistance that county governments can offer, as well as the financial and regulatory constraints that limit government responses. Similarly, government officials better appreciate locals' intimate knowledge of environmental changes and concerns.

2) Increases Trust and Expands Social Networks
Prior to this project, church members and government officials acknowledged little engagement with each other and sometimes indicated distrust of the other. Following CL activities, participants expressed interest in continuing collaborations to address environmental challenges. Churches facilitate effective outreach to rural areas by allowing the local community to meet on their terms and in a trusted space.

3) Engages Diverse and Hard-to-Reach Stakeholders
Churches are attended by people of various races and socio-economic circumstances. By engaging with churches, government officials can hear the concerns and perspectives of those in demographic groups that are often hard to reach. This helps to facilitate programs and policies that better support these groups.

4) Eases Discussions on Difficult and Contentious Topics
Because of the trust and rapport developed through CL between churches and government, previously impossible conversations about climate change, sea-level rise, and even human relocation become possible.

5) Creates New Pathways toward Interventions and Actions
While the CL process does not immediately yield tangible outcomes, it can lead to concrete interventions and actions. As church members and government officials begin to work together, misconceptions are dispelled and new solutions are found that are able to meet both community and government goals.

6) Empowers Stakeholders to Actively Shape their Future
CL with churches creates a comfortable space for local stakeholders to learn and share their concerns about climate change in meaningful ways. This empowers those most vulnerable to coastal climate changes to engage in and shape adaptation planning discussions to meet local social-ecological needs.

Challenges of Collaborative Learning between Churches and Government

1) Progress Takes Time and Effort
It takes time and persistence to build rapport with participants and organize CL activities. The pace of progress toward action is slow. For church members, the time it takes to get permits and receive funding is discouraging. For government officials, it takes considerable time to build relationships with rural communities.

2) Navigating Social Hierarchies is Difficult
In United Methodist Churches, pastors are assigned by a district superintendent and may not be well acquainted with local circumstances. While appropriate to contact a church's pastor initially, church members often have more intimate knowledge of their community and should be engaged in discussions early on. Ask the pastor to recommend church members who might want to engage with government efforts.

3) Barriers of Language and Specialized Terms
Both government officials and church members at times struggled to understand each other. Religious language, acronyms, and/or scientific and technical terms create confusion for those who are unfamiliar with them. As participants became more comfortable with each other, they would more often ask questions when something was unclear; however, specialized terminology caused frustration early in the project.

4) Identifying Common Goals Can Be Difficult
Church members are generally focused on the immediate needs of their community, while government officials focus on longer-term planning for the county and/or state. These different perspectives and priorities can make it difficult to identify common goals. In particular, environmental goals (e.g. marsh migration) are often at odds with community goals (e.g. protecting private property from marsh encroachment).

5) Climate Change is a New and Challenging Issue
Climate change is a relatively new issue for everyone. Maryland's Eastern Shore is on the frontlines of coastal climate change impacts, and government officials have relatively little precedent on which to build their adaptation policies and programs. Similarly, rural churches here have not traditionally engaged with environmental challenges, and are working to better define their role in helping their communities respond.

6) Institutional Barriers
The institutionalized separation of church & state means that government officials have little experience engaging with churches, and often struggle to connect with them and foster meaningful action. Likewise, Many rural churches as institutions are struggling, and have limited capacity to engage with secular issues that may draw resources away from their core mission of saving souls and spreading God's word.