

Opportunities and challenges for mainstreaming ecosystem services in development planning: perspectives from a landscape level

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Abstract

Despite much progress in ecosystem services research, a gap still appears to exist between this research and the implementation of landscape management and development activities on the ground, especially within a developing country context. If ecosystem service science is to be operationalised and used by decision-makers directing local development, an in-depth understanding of the implementation context for landscape planning and management, and of the opportunities and challenges for ecosystem services in this context are needed. Very little is known about these opportunities and constraints, largely because of the absence of methods to explore the complexity of the landscape planning, management and implementation context and the possibilities of integrating scientific information into these processes within a real-world setting. This study aims to address this need for information and methods, by focusing on a region in South Africa with a long history of ecosystem service research and stakeholder engagement, and testing a social science approach to explore opportunities and challenges for integrating ecosystem services in landscape planning processes and policies. Our methodological approach recognises the importance of social processes and legitimacy in decision-making, emphasizing the need to engage with the potential end-users of ecosystem service research in order to ensure the relevance of the research. While we discovered challenges for mainstreaming ecosystem service at a local level, we also found strong opportunities in the multi-sectoral planning processes driving development and in how the concept of ecosystem services is framed and aligned with development priorities, especially those relating to disaster risk reduction.