

Transformation for Resilient Landscapes and Communities Partnership

Overview of Partnership

Resource Sheet No 1 (RS 1)

A Case for Change

Many regional communities in Australia are facing intractable natural resource management (NRM) and sustainability problems. These are often termed 'wicked' problems because they are not governed by simple cause and effect relationships and have no final solutions. They are the product of on-going interactions between people and nature (called social-ecological linkages), which continually change over time. Attempts to manage intractable problems often involve unintended consequences.

Tackling these wicked problems needs to take into account the complex cross scale linkages and underlying social and economic drivers that influence change. It should also focus on the role of the community and its capacity to proactively manage change, which is constant and inevitable and from time to time uncomfortably surprising (RS 2).

What we propose

We propose that new approaches and different thinking are required to address intractable problems in NRM. Our research partnership set out to explore how to better equip communities in rural Australia, which depend on the natural resource base for their livelihoods, to respond to intractable problems. The focus of the partnership has been on developing community capacity to undertake deep systemic change (called transformative action) to influence the direction of change towards sustainability.

Research Propositions:

1. The concepts of Resilience Thinking (RS 3), Collective Learning (RS 4) and Adaptive Governance (RS 5) would be useful
2. The capacity to initiate transformational change would assist communities with their intractable problems (RS 6)
3. Cross scale linkages above and below the regional scale are important and need attention
4. NRM organisations should take a leadership role to assist regional communities in instigating change and supporting innovation.

How can communities benefit from a new approach?

Many regional communities are experiencing forced transformations from both expected and unexpected changes to industry viability, policies and priorities, population and climate variability.

Responses to NRM problems often follow accepted norms or practices (we refer to this as business as usual) rather than exploring the situation more deeply before taking action. Examples of 'exploring more deeply' include: challenging all of the assumptions behind decisions on a plan of action and more closely scrutinising longer term impacts for possible unintended consequences.

Governance arrangements are the key to building community capacity. These arrangements should provide communities with the information, power, resources and flexibility to take collective action at the most appropriate scale. They should also support communities to understand that these complex problems essentially can't be solved but can be improved. Intractable problems therefore require governance for change and innovation. However, current NRM governance in Australia is still primarily governance for stability not for ongoing change and is full of mixed messages.

Expected on-ground contributions:

1. Improved frameworks for understanding and managing multi-scale social-ecological linkages
2. More supportive governance and institutions for innovation
3. Improved planning approaches and change strategies for tackling intractable problems
4. Enhanced transformative capacity in NRM and communities.

Case Studies

This Partnership worked with regional leaders who recognised regional problems needed different thinking. Our intent was to integrate the study into the way their organisation does business, rather than as a separate project running in parallel. The case studies represented a mix of regional issues at different scales:

NSW Murray: a region facing top down transformations driven by access changes to forestry and irrigation resources, a 7 year drought, a contracting economy, small towns in decline with impacts on community life.

Cape York: Three decades of governments, developers, environmentalists and others with strong and influential ideas on the Cape's future with little regard to local residents' visions. This has created deep divisions within Cape York leading to high levels of uncertainty around future regional development.

Far North Qld: Major challenges to the economic base (floods, cyclones, terms of trade, live cattle

export decision, tourism downturn), interest in building community capacity to impacts on landscape and livelihood from natural disasters, tensions around plans to develop northern Australia conservation and Indigenous agendas.

Study Outcomes

- Governance transformations have occurred in all case study regions. New practice models of adaptive governance have emerged that support transformative action. They are at the forefront of both adaptive governance and adaptive planning.
- The concepts of resilience, collective learning and adaptive governance have been useful to our partners as well as relevant and applicable to NRM in general.
- Integrating these concepts has led to a new approach to NRM planning (RS 8 & 9) using social-ecological systems (SES) (RS 7) as planning units. The Wet Tropics and Cape York models are well advanced in this approach. Farmers in particular find an SES planning approach makes more sense to them.
- A Resilience Planning Community of Practice (RPCoP) has now been established as an Australian-based network of regional practitioners, academics and agency staff applying resilience-based, SES approaches to natural resource planning and management. The website is at (www.rpcop.org.au).
- Regional NRM organisations do not get adequate support to take a leadership role or make rapid progress with a change agenda. Changes to current arrangements are required. Improvements in seven key areas identified through our case studies have national applicability; as described further in this series of reports and resource sheets.

Further Information

Partnership Study Resource Material:

www.ausresilience.com.au/research/transformation

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