

A Framework and Toolkit to Work towards Whole-of-Community Engagement

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Abstract

Australian natural resource management agencies are increasingly recognising the centrality of people and placing more emphasis on engaging stakeholders and communities. The project reported in this paper examined this trend in the context of the Murray-Darling Basin, and the recognised need to engage communities and foster community ownership of water reform and other natural resource management decisions. Examining community engagement literature and making comparisons with current practices familiar to Murray-Darling Basin stakeholders and their agencies, suggested that many stakeholders explicitly recognise only a small range of approaches and often think about community engagement in a very fragmented way. Also, it is evident that specialist community engagement practitioners tend to use language and concepts foreign to government, community members, and experts from other disciplines.

We have applied the 'toolkit' metaphor to develop what we hope is a user-friendly guide to engagement tools and techniques that incorporates principles, criteria and ratings, and provides references to further information. The toolkit tries to bridge some of the gaps between specialist knowledge and everyday practice in community engagement. Each tool is related to the decision-making cycle, which provides a systemic framework and shows how different tools and techniques may have logical relationships to particular decision-making stages. We also discuss examples of applying this approach to work towards more inclusive community engagement in natural resource management decision processes. In concluding, we advocate applying a more systematic, structured and informed approach to community engagement as outlined in the toolkit.

Keywords

Engagement tools and techniques, toolkit, decision-making cycle, natural resource management, Murray-Darling Basin

Introduction

This paper describes an approach used and toolkit for community engagement developed as part of project commissioned by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC). The MDBC is an autonomous government organisation forming the executive arm of the Murray-Darling

Basin Ministerial Council (which includes ministers from all the relevant state and territory jurisdictions in the Basin, plus the Australian Government). The MDBC is responsible for:

- managing the River Murray and the Menindee Lakes system of the lower Darling River
- advising the Ministerial Council on matters related to the use of the water, land and other environmental resources of the Murray-Darling Basin.

In particular, the MDBC's Community Advisory Committee (CAC), which reports to the Murray-Darling Basin Ministerial Council, has recognised the social dimensions of natural resource management in the Basin, the need to improve communication and consultation practices between stakeholder groups, and to encourage a wider range of stakeholders to become engaged in discussion, debate and decision-making.

The conviction on which these more consultative practices are based is that only by developing a shared vision, sense of direction and purpose among communities, experts and government can resource management practices can be improved in the interests of present communities and future generations. 'Top-down' processes in which government sees its role as being purely directive, have not succeeded. Expert advice has often gone unheeded by either community or government. Participatory approaches that include the full range of stakeholders and the full suite of stakeholder knowledge systems have a real ability to shape and help implement change. It is on this kind of basis that this project was commissioned by the MDBC.

The project's objectives were to:

- develop principles for best practice engagement processes — **principles**
- describe the range of communication methods and processes that can be used, their respective advantages and disadvantages, and provide guidance on which ones to use in particular circumstances — **toolkit**
- identify impediments to adoption of best practice engagement processes and what is needed to overcome them — **impediments and opportunities**
- develop performance indicators for uptake and use of best practice engagement processes — **performance indicators**.

This paper focusses on the second of these objectives, the development of a toolkit, and also describes information gathered about the engagement practices being used by stakeholders in the Murray-Darling Basin, and how these practices compared with the range of possible practices described in the literature. The end product of this aspect of the project was the toolkit, *Towards whole of community engagement: a practical toolkit* (Aslin and Brown 2004).

Research perspectives

In the project, the researchers attempted to adopt a systemic perspective towards stakeholder engagement in the Murray-Darling Basin. This perspective assumes that all stakeholders in governing and using natural resources (whether from international interest groups; national, regional or local government; community and community groups; or experts from professional organisations) are potential participants in the decision-making process, and that more inclusive engagement practices are desirable for a range of reasons. It assumes that recognising the differences in degrees and forms of responsibility and accountability of different stakeholder groups, and the distinctive knowledge bases of community, experts and government are an integral part of successful engagement processes. Achieving more inclusive engagement practices in the Murray-Darling Basin requires an interactive decision-making and implementation process involving as many people with an interest in the region's natural resource management issues as possible. The social, economic and ecological significance of the region means that public and private interest crosses:

- all scales of responsibility and interests (local community, local government, regional governance, state government, national government and international interests)
- all phases of the decision-making cycle (describing, designing, doing and developing — Figure 1).

These phases can also be related to the knowledge bases that are needed for each: principles need to be applied to describing the current situation for a particular place or issue; plans designed and put into practice; and the outcomes evaluated and developed into improvements for the next cycle. On this basis, the cycle requires four knowledge bases: **principles** to guide the decision-making process; **place**-based knowledge related to the process and decisions; the possibilities and **potential** for change; and how to put the change into effect — **practices**. These are put together with the action components: describe, design, do and decide, to make up the decision-making cycle. This cycle and its different variants are referred to by terms like the 'action research cycle', 'experience into action cycle', 'policy cycle', 'adaptive management cycle', and 'project management cycle'. The 'developing' phase of the cycle, as used here, refers both to the initial phase of the first decision-making cycle in which principles are developed to guide the rest of the process, and to the monitoring and evaluating phase at the end of the first and subsequent cycles in which outcomes of previous decisions are reviewed and the process refined to improve the next cycle (Brown 1996, 1997, 1999, WSROC 2000).

This cycle is related to experiential learning principles (Kolb et al. 1974, Kolb 1984) in which adult learning is characterised as a form of personal inquiry into real world problems. The four steps of the experiential learning cycle and their parallels in the cycle described here are: concrete experience (describing); observation and reflection (designing); active experimentation (doing); and abstract conceptualisation (developing). Kolb's ideas strongly

influenced the field of action research and the concept of the learning organisation (Senge 1994). A key concept in these fields is that many professions tend to concentrate on one or more steps in the cycle but not all. However, unless the cycle is completed, experiential learning does not occur and the inquiry is incomplete. We suggest that similar considerations apply to community engagement processes — unless communities and individuals are engaged right around the decision-making cycle, their opportunities to contribute to outcomes, and the learning opportunities for them and their organisations are not realised.

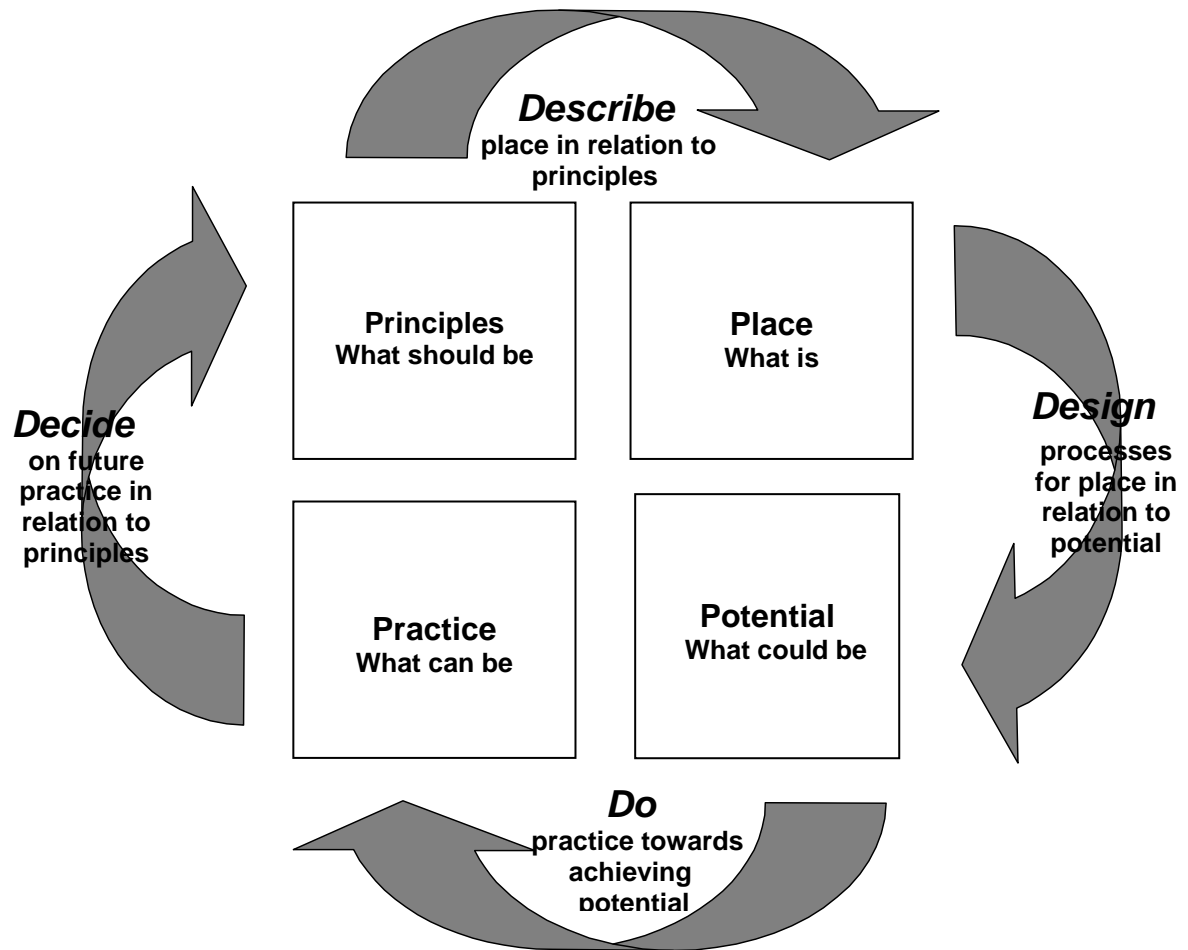


Figure 1. The decision-making cycle (modified from Brown 1997)

Differences in the nature and extent of responsibility among the different interest groups, at different scales and related to different phases of the decision-making cycle, make up a complex system that can be simplified and summarised in the form of four distinctive knowledge bases or cultures that are typically involved in natural resource management decisions (Figure 2):

- Local knowledge (local lived experience, place-based knowledge)

- Specialised knowledge (expert knowledge and interpretations, scientific disciplines)
- Strategic knowledge (functioning of governance systems, planning, administration and management)
- Holistic knowledge (shared purposes and ways of synthesising, working across cultures and other knowledge systems).

Active collaboration between people from the four knowledge cultures is seen as vital to achieving successful engagement in regional decision-making, and goes far beyond the consultation needed for immediate purposes to the need for a pattern of long-term alliances among people from the different cultures and their organisations. Research into integrative decision-making has identified the social barriers that can develop between people representing the different cultures, as each culture tends to use different language, concepts and communication methods; rely on different sources and kinds of evidence; and develops different social or professional networks (Brown et al. 2001, <<http://www.uws.edu.au/rimc/>>).

Putting these frameworks together (decision-making cycle and knowledge cultures) means that collaborative and engaged decision-making requires that people from different organisational sectors and knowledge cultures need to be engaged around the cycle. They need to be able to develop shared ground and a feeling of ownership of outcomes. This responds to the fact that in the Australian system of governance, levels of scale mean separated decision-making systems, jurisdictional boundaries that cut across ecosystems and social systems, and political and ideological positions separating players representing different jurisdictions. In western knowledge systems, biophysical, social and economic issues are often referred to different sets of experts for advice and to different departments for decisions. Fragmentation inhibits collaborative decision-making and synthesising or integrating of ideas.

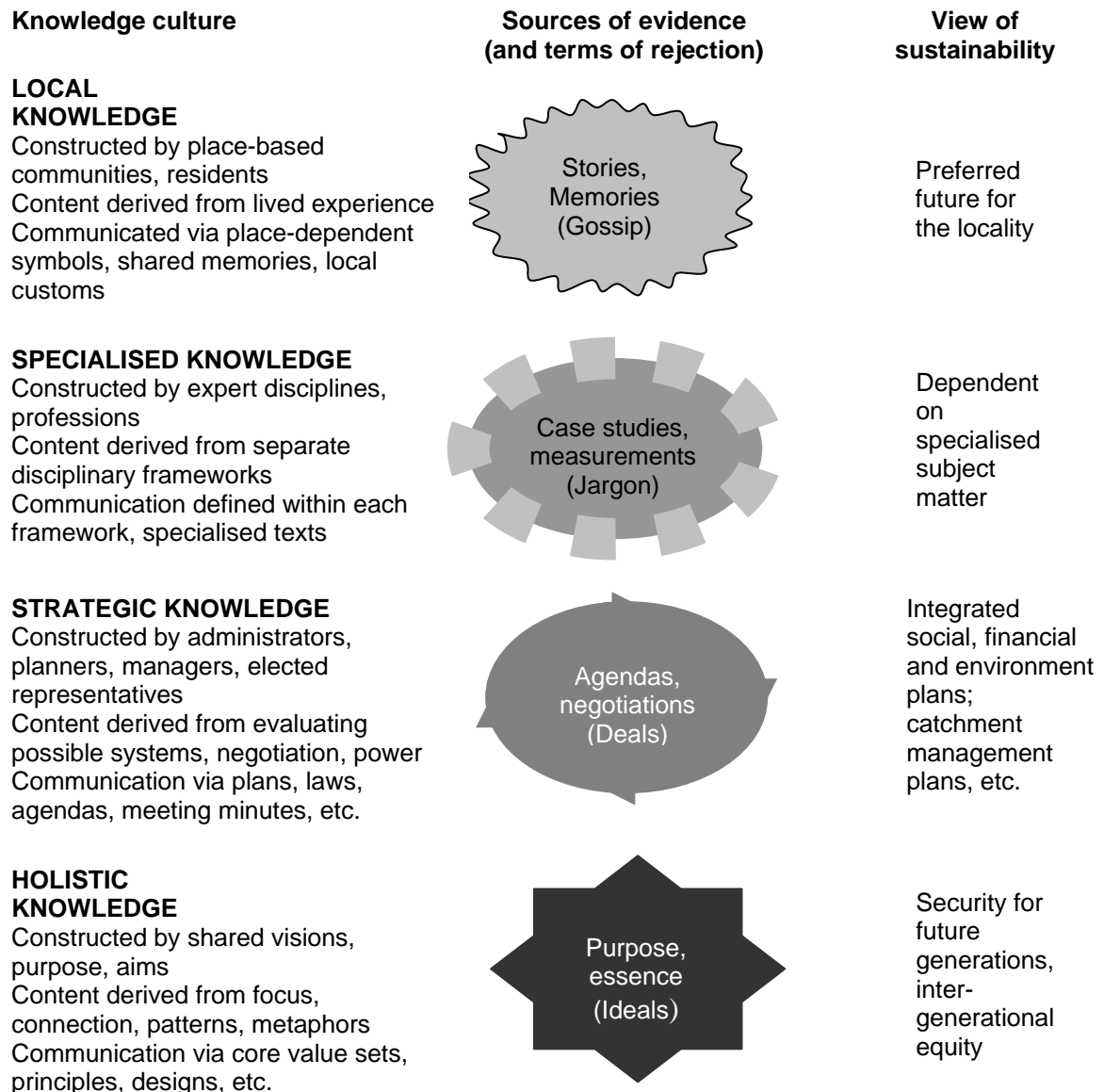


Figure 2. Knowledge cultures, typical sources of evidence relied upon, and views of sustainable nature resource management

Interviews with Murray-Darling Basin stakeholders

As part of the project, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or by telephone with 'key informants', who were purposively chosen on the basis of an initial stakeholder analysis and by using professional networks (Aslin and Brown 2002). The interviewees were distributed across sectors and interest groups as follows:

- Government (MDBC staff and commissioners, local government) — 12
- Specialists (expert advisers on biodiversity, water, ecology, etc.) — 6
- Community (CAC, community organisations, Indigenous interests) — 12.

Holists, by their very nature, may not be able to be identified beforehand based on their current sectoral affiliations but can be identified on the basis of their responses to the questions asked. They can exist within any sector.

In this paper, we report the responses to only one of the interview questions, which asked interviewees ‘What consultation practices do you consider to be typical of your State and/or organisation?’ The specific practices, tools or techniques mentioned are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee responses to the question ‘What consultation practices do you consider to be typical of your State and/or organisation?’

Response category	Examples of responses
Locally or regionally-developed practices	Local people design own processes, meetings designed by locals Targeted consultation with key stakeholders Community meetings (organised by local government) Put out flyers [and] seek attendance at meetings Use locally based committees Shift from technocratic to more participatory, more community driven approach, more regionalised Talk to local people, work from someone we know; ask about key influencers; talk to colleagues informally
Centralised practices	More whole-of-government approach, centrally driven, targeted, strategic
Use of formal committees (purpose designed)	Advisory/steering committees with formal appointment process Formal structure of committees with elected representatives Formal committees with government and community representatives Some areas have formal committees and expert input Have a senate structure More emphasis on community reference panels and similar Through peak organisations or selected/nominated panels or reference groups
Focus on types of processes, tools or techniques used	Use teleconferences and face to face [methods] Have forums Use displays, stands, regular events

	<p>Larger workshops occasionally</p> <p>Give [people] lots of time to think through [issues] and consult widely</p> <p>Like to consult and be consulted early, be involved in setting terms of reference</p> <p>Release of public report, seek comments, have public meetings; release of public discussion papers</p> <p>More comprehensive consultation at state level, we might try and coordinate their processes</p> <p>Send out flyers, ask for written submissions and public meeting follow</p>
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These responses give a good idea not only of the types of practices typically used in the various organisations the interviewees represented, but also the familiar language and terms they use to describe these practices. Few people in any sectors apply the specialised terminology to be found in published literature on community engagement, and this in itself can create a barrier between everyday practice and specialist knowledge. In the very extensive international literature on community engagement practices, tools and techniques, we found a wide array of specialised terms and jargon that few people who actually design engagement processes within organisations would know or use. But the barrier is more than a language one — it is also one that reflects what is often a lack of any organising or unifying framework to apply to community engagement processes, and a lack of familiarity with relevant social science concepts.

Designing the toolkit

Two major elements of the framework for the toolkit have already been described — the decision-making cycle and the idea of knowledge cultures. By examining the literature, we developed twelve categories for the major groups of tools or techniques that can be used in engagement processes. These are really groups of processes with some major features in common, not single tools or techniques. They can be related to the different decision-making stages as follows:

Generic tools (can be applied at any stage)

1. General public involvement and participation
2. Negotiation and conflict resolution
3. Information, education and extension

Descriptive tools

4. Rapid and Participatory Rural Appraisal
5. Stakeholder analysis and social profiling

6. Survey and interview

Designing tools

7. Planning and visioning

8. Team building and leadership

Doing tools

9. Participatory Action Research

10. Deliberative democracy

Developing tools

11. Lobbying and campaigning

12. Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation.

These associations between tools and decision-making stages are based on an interpretation of the kinds of functions the different tools are designed to serve or the kinds of outcomes they are typically applied to achieve. Some associations are relatively obvious, for example the use of Tool 12, Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation, to review outcomes of actions and refine plans or programs so they can be improved in the next cycle. (Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation is a potential engagement tool precisely because of its participatory nature. Many expert evaluations could not be considered participatory but are instead 'top down'.) Other associations between tools and decision-making stages are rather more subjective than this example, and cannot be considered to be too 'hard and fast'. Many of the tools can be used at several stages of the cycle but tend to have a natural association with one particular stage. Different players can be involved at different stages of particular decision-making cycles, and they, as well as whoever is designing and running the engagement process, may well decide they want to employ particular tools themselves. Perhaps they may even try to take the process back to an earlier phase if they feel they have been excluded or that earlier decisions are wrong and need to be revisited. So the simplified cycle has many possible variations and complications, and there are innumerable permutations and combinations of tools that can be used.

Putting the tools together with the decision-making cycle produces the diagram shown in Figure 3.

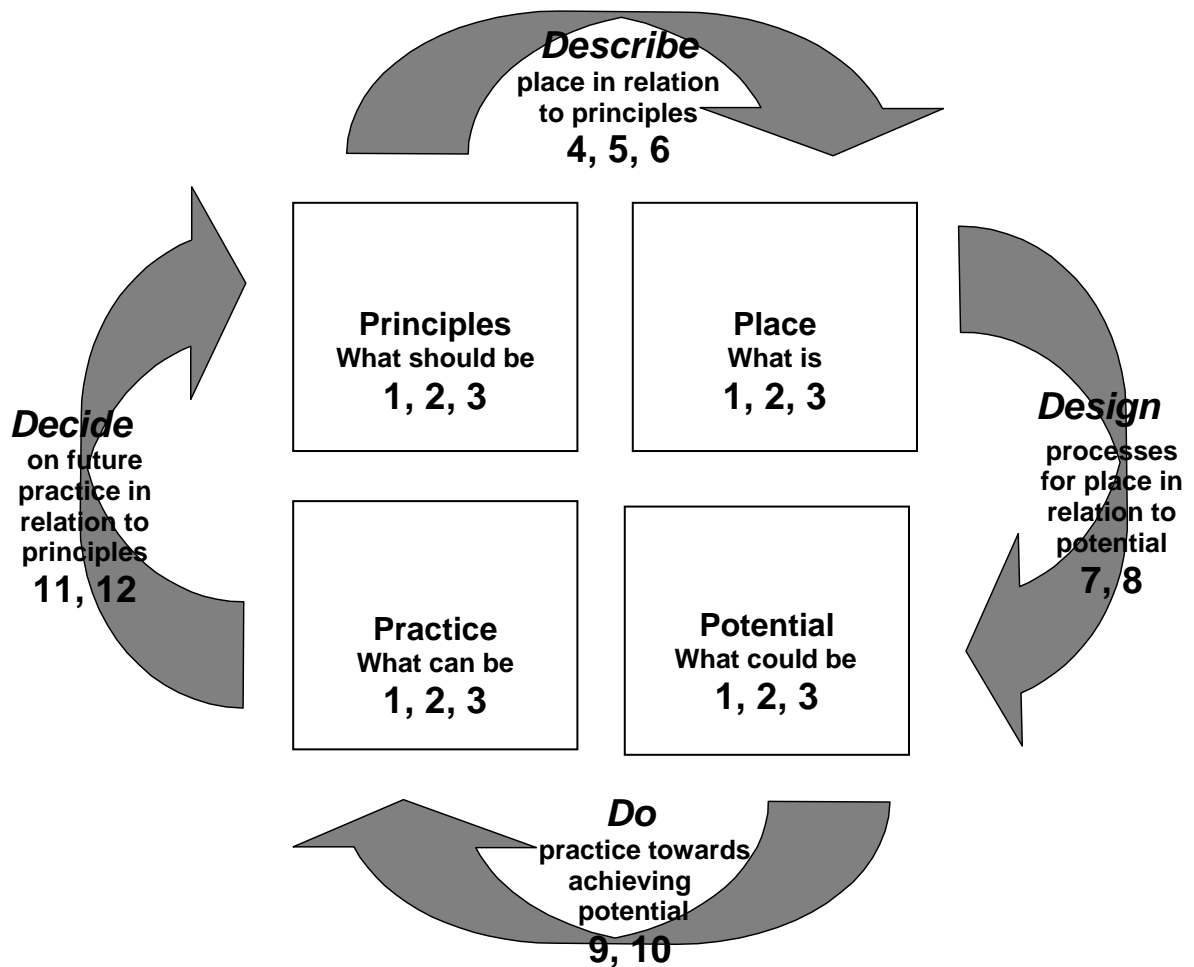


Figure 3. Tools and decision-making stages. The numbers refer to the tool numbers given in the text.

An example of applying the toolkit

The following example was included in the toolkit to demonstrate how different tools could be used at different stages of the decision-making cycle and how, in this case, a process could run by a community-based group to engage other community members and take action to improve natural resource management condition in their area.

Box 1. Example of toolkit in action: LOCAL COMMUNITY MEMBERS (modified from Aslin and Brown 2004, pp. 64-5)

The Country Women's Association (CWA) had long held its monthly meeting in the local town hall that was located on the banks of a creek that ran through a number of dairy properties before winding its way through the town. Over the years, the creek had become smellier and smellier but the low flows experienced during the drought made the smell unbearable. They decided that this was a whole-of-community concern. Members of the CWA contacted the local landcare group wanting to know what could be done about the smell. The landcare group drew upon its contacts with quality experts to identify the cause. In coordination with the local landcare group, the CWA alerted the community to the need to do something about the creek through *Information, education and extension* (Tool 3) (Phase 1 — Developing).

There seemed to be strong local interest, so the local landcare coordinator undertook *Stakeholder analysis and social profiling* (Tool 5) (Phase 2 — Describing), seeking the advice of social scientists from the local university campus to help with this analysis. The analysis revealed some interesting information:

- Dairy farmers had retention ponds on their properties that had cost them quite a lot of money. However, some of them did not know how to manage the ponds sustainably and were disappointed that the money they had spent seemed wasted.
- Traditional Indigenous Owners said that the creek had once been home to many species of fish but that de-snagging the creek to allow for water-skiing (which no one did any more) caused the fish population to decline.

The landcare coordinator called another public meeting on the banks of the creek and specifically invited Indigenous owners. Through *Deliberative Democracy* techniques (Tool 10), the community agreed upon a shared vision for the creek (Phase 3 — Designing). The landcare coordinator applied for funding to assist the dairy farmers to improve management of their retention ponds and re-snag the river, using *Lobbying and campaigning* (Tool 11) (Phase 4 — Doing). After a considerable length of time, funding was approved and the management plan put into effect. The community is hopeful that in a few years the condition of the creek will be improved, the fish might one day return, and the whole community might adopt conservation principles (Phase 1 — Developing).

If you work in the community, you will need to engage other community members, land managers, industry, specialist advisers and government.

Phase 1: Developing principles — Tool 3

Phase 2: Describing people and place — Tool 5

Phase 3: Designing potential — Tool 10

Phase 4: Doing in action — Tool 11

Evaluating the toolkit

This phase of the project is incomplete, but we did test responses to the toolkit approach and framework at a workshop attended by a range of MDBC stakeholders (reported in detail in Aslin and Brown 2002). This evaluation and subsequent comments from stakeholders on a draft of the toolkit were incorporated into the final form. An evaluation sheet was included in the toolkit itself for readers to complete. We would appreciate further feedback to possibly help shape a revised version.

Conclusion

We suggest that this framework can and should be applied to decision-making cycles to help design community engagement processes that will help achieve collaborative decision-making, more whole of community engagement, and ownership of outcomes. By using the framework and applying a cyclical approach, emphasis is placed on the need to think more systematically about these processes; the range of tools and techniques that can be applied and at what stages, and how to maximise opportunities to learn from the process itself and improve outcomes of future decision-making cycles.

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