

A ThinkTank For Capacity Learnings: Motivating Continued Engagement For Long-Term Natural Resource Management

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Abstract

Investment in community engagement and social capacity building through natural resource management agencies at the federal, state and regional level is based on the premise that this will:

- reduce the likelihood of conflict and instability in relationships amongst stakeholders through improved decision-making
- bring more people on board for the longer-term natural resource management effort
- foster community cohesion.

However, any attempt to marry social and biophysical elements of the triple bottom line brings together quite different disciplines and values. Program managers and practitioners face contention over definitions, targets and accountability.

This was true of the National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality funded Social Capacity Building Project. The project had a multi-layered ambition to engage catchment managers in furthering their strategic requirements to engage with communities. The Victorian Catchment Management Authorities initially took a guarded interest in the project, with strong perceptions that the project would provide prescriptive and unrealistic strategies and frameworks, inappropriate to local realities.

Through engaging these stakeholders in a program of shared learning, ThinkTank for Capacity Learnings, the project provided considerable motivation to continue developing relationships and trust across community and different levels of government. It demonstrates that successful stakeholder and community engagement, and capacity building cannot be achieved through single positions or single agencies.

This paper focuses on issues raised in the evaluation of the ThinkTank to show the limits and potentials of community engagement in the policy environment of natural resource management.

Introduction

The National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality (NAP) funded a Social Capacity Building Project in Victoria, which ran from 2002–2005. It was put in place to enhance approaches to capacity building by the Victorian Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs). Approaches to investment in social and community capacity building by natural resource management (NRM) agencies at the federal, state and regional level are predominantly instrumental (Dibden and Cheshire 2005, p. 220). In the case of salinity,

investment in social capacity building has direct interests in bringing more people on board for the longer-term NRM effort, in fostering community awareness and cohesion and enhancing decision-making processes, and in increasing accountability. This is important to sustain progress, and reduce the likelihood of conflict and instability in relationships amongst stakeholders in long-term NRM for salinity reduction. Programs in this area seek beneficial outcomes for salinity affected regions, yet are notoriously short-term in their funding arrangements, and could be seen as ad hoc and expedient (Dibden and Cheshire 2004, p. 221).

Those with interests in beneficial outcomes from the Social Capacity Building Project were the Australian and Victorian governments (NAP, DSE and the Bi-lateral Joint Steering Committee), Regional (CMAs) and ultimately local 'community'. Along with these multiple interests went multiple senses of 'interest', including financial investment, share in the ownership of the project, definition of areas of focus, and concern with project direction.

The key stakeholders were the NAP-funded and other Victorian CMAs. During the life of the project, the CMAs invested significantly in the project through staff time and travel, critical feedback, trust and hospitality. The project's outcome was intended to benefit *their* stakeholders — 'communities' in local settings affected by salinity — who must be seen as having something to gain from a project like this, despite the fact that their own interest and investment in project oriented from the 'top down' was necessarily limited. The project was situated in and part funded by the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) in the (then) Social Engagement Team and the Catchment Strategies branch. This organisational and financial investment brought the project into the broader arena of DSE catchment planning processes such as the Regional Catchment Strategy process, and broader DSE community engagement strategies. As a NAP initiative, the project was bound to the delivery of agreed milestones.

This paper describes a program of shared learning, 'ThinkTank for Capacity Learnings', which provided considerable motivation amongst stakeholders to continue developing relationships and trust across different levels of government. It also focuses on issues raised in the evaluation, to show the limits and potentials of community engagement in the policy environment of this NAP project.

Working with capacity building

In the current environment of 'service delivery' on the basis of capital investment, competitiveness and reduced costs, the notion of social and community capacity building is prevalent in policy in relation to health, international development, the community sector and also to NRM. In NRM, landcare is an icon of the kind of networks of informal relationships which Coleman and Putnam emphasise in their definition of social capacity. Landcare is strongly characterised by trust, mutual obligation and regular socialising in the face of the decline of other rural interest groups. However, landcare can not be seen as a strategic approach to the complex and multiple problems which arise for communities in the face of irrigation and dryland salinity.

Whilst community development has a long history of conceptual development and empirical evidence supporting its practice (McQueen-Thomson and Ziguras 2002, p. 37), this cannot be said for social or community capacity building. Thus stakeholders in the Social Capacity Building Project expressed a fundamental problem with 'the nature of the beast', making regular complaints that terminology and concepts were poorly defined and understood, and that this made setting targets and reporting on them to government agencies problematic. At the same time, those nominated to carry out projects with a 'capacity building' agenda, were often unprepared for the necessity of combining strategic planning with grassroots community activity (Best 2004, p. 15). These problems contributed to poor morale, uncertainty and the sense of being trapped in circular definitions and arguments. Thus interest in the project was guarded, with strong perceptions that the NAP project would not be able to offer anything other than prescriptive and unrealistic strategies and frameworks, inappropriate to local realities.

Guiding approach

Needless to say it was important for the Social Capacity Building Project to recognise that the capacity building idea does not sit well with those from biophysical disciplines, or with policy influencers who have a taste for hard data and quantitative assessment of evidence. A goal such as having fewer foxes in the forests is one which can be achieved according to frameworks, recognised indicators and regular monitoring. Foxes, baits and bounties are terms that are readily understood. Capacity building's interests in soft capabilities such as confidence, trust and leadership, and soft technologies such as group processes are prone to be seen as amorphous and a waste of time. Further, its outcomes are likely to strongly intermeshed, for example between skills acquisition, motivation and leadership, are extremely difficult to measure in the short term.

It was also necessary for the project to proceed on the basis that however unsatisfactory, the current channel of funding to community-related interests in NRM is through capacity building. The fact that capacity building does not have a strong base of specific empirical evidence in the NRM field is disempowering for its advocates. However, the CMAs are by necessity involved in collaborative activities through the statutory framework surrounding them. For example, they develop Regional Catchment Strategies, and come together regularly over Regional Catchment Investment Processes. This background stood them in good stead to appreciate successes in community-related endeavours in their 'peer' catchments, and to learn from others' experiences.

One of the project's initial engagement strategies had been a survey of CMA needs, and there had been clear consensus on their interest in shared learning. The literature on capacity building as it relates to international development puts considerable focus on the learning aspect (Dibden and Cheshire 2005, p. 221; ECDPM 2004). A shared learning approach appeared to be a workable strategy for the project to adopt, geared towards adaptation and change. It would be able to take into account the multiple interests referred to above, and be to the benefit of all parties.

Method: the ThinkTanks

The title ThinkTank for Capacity Learning was chosen to legitimise the knowledge and interests of those who felt that capacity strategies would be foisted on them, and to emphasise the learning approach. This was a method of showing rather than telling. It was a method of allowing ambivalence and uncertainty rather than imposing prescription (ECDPM 2004, p. 20). It was a method in which the regions came to town to showcase strategies, and head office went regional (to Bendigo) to take up new learnings.

There are significant gaps in resources for capacity building (West 2004, p. 18). The ThinkTank method stood to create resilient networks of people who could resource each other, provide material for a website with relevant documentation drawing on real life experience, and to generate trust in the project as an advisory service.

The ThinkTank comprised six forums with themes such as community working groups, evaluation, mentoring and succession and partnerships (see <<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/thinktank>> for fact sheets on the forums). A practitioner forum brought together people from a wide variety of NRM agencies, including DSE, DPI, CMAs, Parks Victoria, Murray Darling Basin Commission and the federal Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH), as well as various non-government organisations. The final forum, intended to draw together the threads of the ThinkTank drew similar representation, as well as people from the Department for Victorian Communities.

The ThinkTank strategy was guided by a working group comprising membership from DSE, CMA, DEH and Community Volunteers Australia (CVA). The practitioner forum and final forum were developed in collaboration with La Trobe University's Centre for Sustainable Regional Futures, again with the intention of putting the focus on the learning aspect. The strategy attracted the interest of a number of researchers in the 'capacity building and NRM' area.

Dibden and Cheshire express concern that capacity building fails to be taken up over realistic timeframes, and that it is often 'applied as a quick ... remedy ... through ... motivational events (2005, p. 221). This could certainly be said of the ThinkTanks. Firstly they were put on in a time frame which did not allow them to seriously show results. At the same time, the project genuinely did aspire to motivate those involved, many of whom were discouraged. It did this by attempting to meet collaborative process criteria such as those outlined by Connick and Innes (2003), for example including representatives of relevant interests (policy, on-ground implementation, DPI, DSE and other agencies and community), being driven by a practical purpose shared in the group, being engaging to participants as they learned and interacted and encouraging challenges to assumptions (Connick and Innes 2003, p. 180).

Evaluation

Since the Social Capacity Building Project's mission was to enhance capacity amongst stakeholders, with a specific reference to encouraging the practice of evaluation, it was appropriate for the Project to evaluate its own key strategy. Additionally it hoped to demonstrate the value of evaluation documents as

products of stakeholder engagement programs and processes. It was also intended to produce continuity in a short-term funded program, with a view to the 2004–05 work of the project creating opportunities for further developments.

The evaluation too had its limits: it did not survey those from the CMAs who did not take up the strategy, it was conducted in the short term, and engaged a fairly small sample in the impact evaluation. This was mitigated to some extent by the much larger sample size of the process evaluation.

Limits and potentials

The ThinkTank evaluation identified three major limits to motivating continued engagement in the NRM policy environment which, in turn, stand to play out in communities affected by salinity. They are as follows: problems with consistency of funds and resources; the period allotted for capacity development; and hence questions about the larger policy environment for capacity building. But despite these limits, it pointed to a number of potentials in adopting a collaborative process of learning to further capacity building agendas.

Credibility for capacity building processes is most likely to arise if all players are confident of a larger policy enabling environment (Dibden and Cheshire, p. 220). Further, partnership processes set up for periods over five years, which have strong process criteria, are well funded, managed and facilitated and have good technical assistance have been identified as those with the greatest potential to lead to collaborative decision making and reduce conflict (Connick and Innes, p. 183). Those who contributed to the ThinkTank evaluation were not able to say the strategy represented value for money unless recommendations made at the final forum were progressed. Some believed that the department was given a greater appreciation of social capacity strengthening, yet wondered if findings and recommendations would be implemented. Others believed that the effect of the forums would be felt indirectly for some time to come.

Realistically, NAP had taken the decision in the first year of the project to compress the research and implementation phases of the project, and saw no reason to reconsider this, and the project was in the process of winding up at this stage. Thus it was not possible to directly progress stakeholders' interests, for example in creating better alignment between different levels of government on capacity building. The project would have been able to claim greater effectiveness if it stood to act on a comment like this: "... there is a need to continue these [for a] to provide an opportunity for agencies to share and integrate the delivery of projects... we need a more cooperative approach." The evaluation also identified the need for more policy people to take part in the learning. "I think this is crucial — Government and communities need to see examples of how partnerships work in order to be able to proceed with a level of confidence through the uncertainties they can bring", commented a ThinkTank participant.

However, feedback from the evaluation suggests that there is a hunger for exchange in this area, not only within agencies with strongly shared agendas, but between agencies, and some non-government

organisations and researchers. "You don't often get the opportunity to come into the castle, with a fortified area and have a conversation with no judgement," stated one interviewee, "to share and bounce ideas around, so that people can come to their own conclusions." The process was seen to have value for organisations and individuals, by providing the opportunity for staff to feel less isolated, to present on project successes and challenges and to take back learnings to their agencies, and in some cases make changes to plans.

Finally the multi-perspective approach to presentations was highly valued. For many policy staff, it is extremely rare to hear from a community member on the impact of Departmental initiatives. "The importance of a strong passion for the subject and being part of the community was a message I got from the presentations" stated a ThinkTank participant. Others commented that the mix of practitioners was a benefit to the ThinkTank, and that it is essential to get this mix if we are going to get capacity enhancement. Many comments in the process evaluation relayed the message that capacity building cannot be achieved through single positions or agencies.

Australia has tended to approach natural resource management problems (NRM) with a mix of strategies including social mobilisation, green planning and institutional reform (Oliver 2003). Salinity is an intractable problem with significant social dimensions, and the bi-lateral NAP includes a social mobilisation approach. Time was short, and the Social Capacity Building Project shows that people were both frustrated by uncertainty about the long-term implementation of the outcomes of the ThinkTank, and heartened by undertaking shared learning based strongly on the successes and challenges of their own experience. In summary, it is all too easy to be regarded as the keeper of a castle rather than a capacity enabler when working in a policy environment which sends out brief bursts of resources and project activity to those who must make useful progress in creating sustainable NRM outcomes.

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