

Sharing Lessons from the Engaged and Lessons from the Engagers — A Case Study

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Abstract

Planning staff from the Department of Natural Resources and Mines¹ participated with 23 volunteer committees in a participatory statutory planning and community engagement exercise to provide advice and recommendations to the Queensland Government between 2000 and 2003. This paper reviews impacts and lessons from a case study of the community engagement process implemented in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions. The review of the features and outcomes of the process, including the style and approach implemented, provides useful insights into the impacts and lessons for the parties involved. Feedback from members of the committees is used directly to indicate lessons from the experience. The paper uses frameworks for community engagement and tools that assist the critical thinking, reflection and deliberative planning for community engagement processes to recommend five key characteristics to improve performance in participatory processes for natural resource management.

Keywords

Consensus, lessons, engagement, planning, participatory

Introduction

Between 2000 and 2003 a team of planning staff from the Department of Natural Resources and Mines designed and implemented a community engagement process with the help of a large group of community volunteers.

The process evolved from the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* (VMA) requirement to develop a regional plan containing advice and recommendations to the Queensland government on sustainable vegetation management. The VMA required the Minister for Natural Resources and Mines to prepare Regional Vegetation Management Plans (RVMPs) to reflect the specific and localised differences for native vegetation management across Queensland. The minister approved the recommendation to achieve this task by undertaking a consultation process-involving peak statewide and regional stakeholders through the formation and participation of community based Regional Vegetation Management Committees (RVMCs).

RVMCs were established under a terms of reference to provide advice and recommendations to the Queensland Government on a range of matters including statutory outcomes for vegetation management and voluntary outcomes, including local guidelines, for tree clearing, sustainable land management and local best practice. RVMCs were also required to:

[#] The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and are not necessarily the views of the Department of Natural Resources and Mines or the Queensland government or any organisation with which they are associated.

¹ Titled the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy at the time of the case study.

- report on the development and implementation of consultation and communication strategies involved in the process
- report on the delivery of incentives and other assistance programs for the delivery of sustainable vegetation management outcomes in their specific region
- report on strategies for review, monitoring and evaluation of regional guidelines
- identify priorities for research.

Regional vegetation management planning was a significant challenge in terms of complexity of issues to be addressed, the scale of the consultation process and the short timelines for outcomes. Twenty-three community-based RVMCs, each with between 12 and 15 members, operated concurrently across neighbouring regions in Queensland between 2000 and 2003. All RVMCs completed draft Regional Vegetation Management Plans (RVMPs) containing local guidelines, advice and recommendations to the Queensland Government within the timelines required. The cost of the process to the Queensland Government and community in real dollar terms, effort and time was considerable.

This paper reviews features of the regional vegetation management planning exercise in two regions within Queensland, the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions. It presents information on the lessons and outcomes from the engagement process from both the community involved and the government planning staff and suggests strategies to improve future engagement processes for natural resource management.

An overview of features and planning for the case study

Planning and the process

Preliminary thinking and planning for the process began with an extensive series of face-to-face discussions with key government and community stakeholders within the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions seeking advice and feedback on previous participation activities. Reviews were undertaken of independent evaluations of previous engagement processes for natural resource management (NRM) and practical lessons were sought from government staff who were involved in the vegetation management program in New South Wales. To test assumptions and early planning for the process, a series of discussions were held with key community leaders and stakeholders.

These activities helped to identify a series of important themes that the engagement process needed to address:

- Focus on communication and networking to ensure success. It is critical to enable the capacity and knowledge of the broader community of the options under consideration and impacts of future outcomes from the process to develop at similar rates as committee members. Otherwise when the final recommendations are released for comment or implementation those directly or indirectly impacted may have little understanding of the issues involved, the options discussed and the sense of 'crafted' recommendations made. If not achieved, it can result in committee members being publicly attacked, having to defend their involvement and at times, choosing to disassociate from the process.

- Support and resource this communication ‘working’ role. The demands on collaborative involvement across all forms of government programs continue to increase and traditionally expectations of effectively performing the communication and networking required to fulfil responsibilities of participants is not resourced adequately.
- Avoid duplication of inappropriately established engagement activities. Select and recruit participants using a skills/knowledge/abilities based approach and don’t rely completely on a ‘representative’-based model. However, support and strengthen existing structures/networks/community alliances and resist creating new infrastructures if suitable structures already exist.
- Address the significant trust/credibility issues that surround natural resource management planning and government engagement/decision-making processes. Address issues where programs had run successfully but had little impact or influence on decision-making or where programs had ‘the goal posts moved’ part way through the engagement process — effectively disengaging and disempowering participants and the community.
- Be outcomes-based (a link to credibility) with firm protocols and direction — not just a process for discussions and seeking comments on government options.

Table 1. Examples of the community engagement, landscape and policy environment for the RVMP process

Wide Bay Burnett and South east Queensland Regions	Rest of Queensland
More than 70% of the state’s population occupying 3% of the state’s area	Remaining 30% of the state’s population scattered across remaining 97% of the state
A long history of development and resource use, a very diverse and largely cleared landscape	Large areas of the state still undergoing resource development involving clearing for agriculture and other land uses. Large areas of uncleared landscape.
Little or no previous experience in tree clearing policy	Other regions previously involved in preparation of tree clearing guidelines for leasehold land
Freehold land covering about 75% of the area	Leasehold or other forms of state land tenure occupying 70% of the area
A strong involvement from local government in natural resource management. Some possessing their own local regulations for tree clearing.	Local governments less capable in being a significant financial and political stakeholder in natural resource management — especially in western regions
Critical issues of population growth, ongoing urban sprawl, and infrastructure development in a region with documented outstanding biodiversity values	Critical issues of ongoing rural land and community development and survival. Little, if any, documents on biodiversity values in large areas of the state.

The location, context and complexity of the process environment

The pre-planning phase of the RVMP process also indicated the project’s operating environment in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions was unique and complex compared to other regions in

Queensland across a range of issues. For example, some of the characteristics of the community engagement, landscape and policy environment are indicated in Table 1.

Nomination and recruitment of RVMCs

Invitations for nomination and membership of the committees was invited from key state-wide, regional and local stakeholder sectors based on the terms of reference for the task, the principles and approaches for the process and a proposed set of skills/abilities and knowledge required for the task. In recognition that state and regional stakeholder organisations and industry sectors may not represent the views of grass roots community and in some cases, membership as a proportion of the community can be a particularly low percentage, a number of positions were held over for 'community representatives'. An independent panel made up of community leaders reviewed applications for these 'community representative' positions and recommended the successful applicants.

Detail on the type and quantity of resources to support the individuals in the role as RVMC members was outlined in the invitations for membership. This included financial support and addressed the issue of sitting fees (which were not provided for the duration of the process). Five RVMCs were established in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions, each having 15 members.

The Queensland Conservation Council (QCC), as the peak state-wide environmental sector representative, made it clear from the start of the program that it would not be supporting the RVMC process by formally providing nominations for membership on the RVMCs. Responses indicated that this position was based on QCC's appraisal that the proposed consensus decision-making approach would not address issues concerning the equity of representation (majority of membership of RVMCs were from rural landholder interests) and participation in the regional process would not achieve the body's environmental aspirations for vegetation management in Queensland. However, QCC did not prevent regional conservation stakeholder groups participating in the RVMP program if an individual member wished to be involved.

In contrast to the position of QCC, the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ) gave a commitment at state and regional levels to provide suitable membership on all RVMCs where local WPSQ members were available. Personal approaches were made to local and regional conservation groups to participate in the RVMP engagement process in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions, which resulted in the appointment of ten members with specific skills in environmental advocacy on the five RVMCs.

Negotiation of protocols

A key strategy adopted in the process was to negotiate agreement in the first workshop to a series of protocols as a baseline for the process and behaviour involving all participants. This was instrumental in attempting to achieve a safe and respectful environment that acknowledged and respected diversity as well as clearly defining the framework and mechanics of the process. Examples included:

- Behavioural protocols — to provide a guide to effective behavioural participation and promote a safe and respectful environment, in a transparent way

- Operating protocols — to provide a clear, transparent and agreed framework for operating procedures including strategies to deal with situations where the integrity of the process is compromised
- Protocols outlining the approach for decision-making — providing a clear working definition for consensus and the steps required to craft consensus outcomes
- Communication strategies outlining actions to ensure high order outcomes were achieved
- Documenting the statutory framework, terms of reference for RVMCs, expectations and obligations of participants plus levels of influence and power in relation to the task at hand.

Roles of RVMC members and roles of government planning staff

The roles and responsibilities of committee members, government planning staff and technical advisory groups were also openly negotiated in open discussion and agreed to in the first workshop of the process. (The role of government was outlined in the terms of reference and level of influence protocol document.)

Decision-making and conflict

Committee members recognised that decision-making and dealing with conflict were potentially the most difficult parts of the process and potential barriers to achieving the task at hand. While recognising it can be a healthy part of an engagement process, a potential source of creativity and contribute to constructive relationships, all participants recognised that the strategies adopted for decision-making and conflict resolution would be instrumental in determining whether in fact consensus outcomes could be achieved in a workable manner and manage personal distress for all involved. A modified decision-making process was adopted following guidelines provided by the Alternative Dispute Resolutions Branch, Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney General (2000). The working definition of consensus was:

“The decision is made upon a basis of majority opinion but the crucial extra ingredient that everyone will support the action taken” (Harris 2001).

Innovation and continuous improvement

During the initial planning of the RVMP program the South East Queensland Regional Vegetation Management Team (SEQ RVMP Team or ‘government planning team’) undertook skill development training in practical tools and processes to build capacity for the community engagement rigours of the process. Professional advice and ongoing mentoring was sought from the Continuous Improvement and Innovation Team (CI&I) within the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries. The training featured focussed action for impact on performance (Clark and Timms 2000) and embedded a continuous improvement and innovation approach for the duration of the engagement process.

This investment in skills and knowledge proved critical to the style and approach of the engagement process and enabled the government planning team to have the confidence that the process, practices and tools utilised represented current best practice collaborative involvement models.

The ongoing coaching and trouble shooting undertaken with the CI&I Team provided rigour to the project management of the engagement process and encouraged a deliberative investment into the ongoing thinking and reviewing for each stage. Joint evaluations and reviews of the process were conducted with the committee members to improve the design and implementation of activities. This included joint feedback

sessions, joint planning meetings and formal individual or group evaluation activities. This helped to build a team approach to the task at hand and helped foster relationships, rapport, trust and mutual respect. It also encouraged better community and sector alliances, and supported capacity development for RVMC members.

The importance of communication

As indicated, communication and networking were identified as keys to achieving high order outcomes. As a result, a strong emphasis was placed on the communication role/responsibility of all participants in the process. A contact database of over 750 people was used to distribute information in one form or another. Different strategies were also developed to engage primary, secondary and tertiary stakeholders in the process. The government team adopted a working philosophy of 'anywhere, anytime with anyone' for communication activities. Activities included public forums, quarterly newsletters and meeting reports, media releases and newsletter articles. Several committee members provided their own written reports to their networks after each meeting.

A key activity was nicknamed the 'come and view days'. These field days were conducted by committee members to field test options for tree clearing recommendations on a host property and to seek comment/feedback from their peers, neighbours and wider community. Evaluations indicated these were amongst the most successful communication activities adopted during the RVMP process and were instrumental in testing the levels of likely acceptance of tree clearing recommendations in terms of what 'costs' the community was 'willing to bear' — that is, in terms of balancing social vs. environmental vs. economic needs for more sustainable environmental outcomes.

Outputs and outcomes from the RVMP process

In terms of milestones and outputs, three draft Regional Vegetation Management Plans, each greater than 150 pages, were compiled by the five RVMCs in under two and a half years in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions. All activities were achieved within the budget and timeframes established by a ministerially approved Work Plan (Harris 2000). Each of the five RVMCs met for two days every eight to ten weeks over a two and a half year period to compile each comprehensive document of recommendations and advice on tree clearing and vegetation management at local and regional scales for the Queensland Government. It has been estimated that the community volunteers in the Wide Bay Burnett and Southeast Queensland regions provided approximately \$400,000 of in kind contributions to the community engagement process over the two and a half year period of the program.

In an illustration of the ownership and pride for their work, each committee chose to travel and meet with the Minister for Natural Resources and Mines and other senior government representatives to personally present and discuss the key aspects of their advice and recommendations from their respective draft plans. Members of the five RVMCs were also invited by the state government to participate in a joint workshop with the Ministerial Advisory Council — Vegetation Management in July 2003, which included planning a series of keynote addresses and practical field demonstrations to illustrate complex practical issues for local and regional vegetation management.

The University of Queensland indicates that the community engagement style and approach designed and implemented by the government planning staff has been promoted as world's best practice and is likely to be a world-wide innovation (Clark 2003). The value as a role model for the Queensland Government for community engagement and partnerships is documented in a nomination of the government planning team by the community of South East Queensland for an Award for Excellence in 2002 (Gittins et al. 2002).

A legislative amendment in 2004

On 21 May 2004, the Queensland Government made a series of legislative amendments to the *Vegetation Management Act 1999*, which was the legislative framework for the regional vegetation management planning process. Changes to the laws impacting on tree clearing in Queensland were part of an election commitment by the incumbent state government to phase out broadscale clearing of remnant vegetation by December 2006. This had a significant impact on the engagement process.

The new vegetation management laws in Queensland had several key components that impacted on the vegetation management program in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions including:

- removing the framework for the existence and roles for the 23 RVMCs established across Queensland and the Ministerial Advisory Committee — Vegetation Management
- the phase-out of broadscale clearing of remnant vegetation by 2006 under a ballot process
- the incorporation of tree clearing provisions from several pieces of legislation into a single piece of legislation, helping to simplify Queensland tree clearing laws
- the ability to create greater certainty for landholders for management practices
- the provision of a \$150 million financial package over five years to assist landholders whose viability was adversely affected by these changes.

The draft Regional Vegetation Management Plans compiled by the RVMCs across Queensland were one of the information sources used to inform the government prior to the legislative amendments. Information and recommendations contained in the draft RVMPs for non-legislative vegetation management practices, including local and regional best management practices and targets for environmental condition, have been used to inform the development of other regional and local planning processes.

Impacts and lessons for committee members

Part 1 — Engagement process

The effort applied to accountability, governance and continuous improvement has provided a comprehensive source of data on the impacts and lessons from RVMC members involved with the engagement process. Comments from feedback captured during the process and testimonials from RVMC members provide insight into the lessons and impacts for participants.

For example, members of the RVMCs initially found the task of compiling local and regional advice and recommendations on vegetation management using an engagement process involving a large multi-sector membership a somewhat illogical, difficult and challenging task. For example:

“The task of the Committee was complex and difficult: masses of information, legislation and technical detail to come to terms with; development of working relationships amongst a diverse group of people with often conflicting points of view and from three distinct parts of South East Queensland – and ultimately production of a document that hopefully all members could live with.”²

“At the outset the diversity of views, opposing perspectives and differing levels of expertise of the participants made one wonder if this was merely a waste of time and effort.”³

“Even though I have participated in a variety of committees, I found the Vegetation Management group a difficult and challenging task not only for the participants but also our SEQ RVMP Team. Major early challenges included the following:

- We were all mostly strangers and the group dynamics had to be developed
- We were unfamiliar with the task, our roles/responsibilities
- The views and positions of our fellow members differed on the subject creating doubt of achieving acceptable — negotiated outcomes
- We all brought varying levels of knowledge to the working group—a level playing field had to be established with minimal impact on the process
- There was mistrust, suspicion, and lack of faith and acceptance of the government legislation.”⁴

Feedback also indicates that the role of the protocols for the process and terms of reference for the task at hand had a significant impact on the process.

The discussion on protocols and terms of reference “Helped negotiate roles and responsibilities for all members in the process including protocols for behaviour and process. This established the benchmark for participation/relationships and accountability. This in turn established the foundation of excellent group dynamics by fostering a comfortable-safe environment — encouraging everyone to participate without fear or favour and built trust and mutual respect” (Gittins et al. 2002).

“The quality of the resulting plan has been achieved due to the protocols and processes which were drawn up by the whole Committee. These procedural guidelines provided a mechanism to keep the process moving toward consensus outcomes from diverse and sometimes competing broader interests. They also provided a pathway for the flow of useful information to and from the broader community.”⁵

Evaluations and behaviour at workshops with the RVMCs clearly indicated that while the protocols for decision-making provided a structure and helped ensure equity for all members, some individual members found it difficult to adhere to the decision-making process and desired to have more influence on outcomes. In particular, some members found the process very confronting — and negotiating for consensus outcomes

² Community representative, Nambour, North Coast RVMC.

³ Conservation representatives, South Coast and North Coast RVMCs.

⁴ Farmer, Kilcoy, Brisbane Valley RVMC.

⁵ Farmer, Gundiah, Coastal Wide Bay RVMC.

in principle compromised their own personal opinions and at times, may have not aligned with a position held by a peak body at the state level with which they were also aligned. As a result, a small number of non-consensus outcomes were recorded in the draft RVMPs. Some environmental advocates who were also members of the RVMCs actively sought to influence the decision-making processes of government on tree clearing matters by exercising their democratic rights outside the RVMC process.

Feedback on weaknesses and threats of the engagement process included (after Harris 2003):

- no compensation for member's time and payment for replacement labour at businesses
- undermining of group consensus positions by members whose sectors sought to achieve more restrictive development and pressure greater environmental outcomes
- compromised environmental consideration due to self-interests
- principled positions by members who were not economically impacted by recommendations
- process was pressured by timeframes and consensus model
- process was limited by too many up-front non-negotiable issues by government
- individuals not committed to the consensus process and guidelines — a lack of trust in integrity of other members leading to breakdown between members and the process
- various sector views and positions being continually challenged
- RVMC members not sticking together even after reaching consensus during the consultation of their work.

A small number of the environmentally-based members on the RVMCs aligned to regional and state conservation councils prepared minority reports addressing concerns with particular consensus positions in the draft RVMPs and submitted these to the Queensland Government indicating their lack of support for these particular matters.

Results from evaluations also showed members appreciated innovative and flexible approaches during the process and enjoyed experiencing new tools and techniques.

“I must admit I was a bit concerned at the first meeting — especially sticking pieces of paper all over a fish — but it was a fun activity that indicated just how large the task is going to be and also how close we are as a group with our thinking on the components for the task. It was quite amazing how it brought the group together even though, at first glance, we appear such a diverse group.”⁶

“I'm not a cricket fan, I don't even understand that game, but innovative ideas such as the wicket keeper have ensured that no suggestions and ideas were lost in the process.”⁷

Information captured from the participants also indicates that the process has significantly contributed to skill and capacity development and committee members are applying their knowledge and experience in other engagement processes.

⁶ Farmer, Calliope, Coastal Wide Bay RVMC.

⁷ Farmer, Blenheim, Brisbane Valley RVMC.

“As I move onto other groups I must admit that I have used my experience on this group as a base for other groups on how they are functioning. The consensus format that was developed was a leading example of how to operate with a diverse group.”⁸

Feedback also indicates that many of the challenges and concerns, including credibility, of government engagement processes were addressed by the RVMP process and for some, it represented a ‘winner’ or benchmark for future community engagement programs:

“Without doubt this process, in which we were privileged to participate, is one of the better if not the best. Obviously many factors lead us to this conclusion. The design, implementation, the protocols developed and the participative approach had a major influence. However the encouragement of group processes leading to consensus views and the vast majority of participants gaining mutual respect and developing and maintaining relationships contributed greatly to the overall process. Added to these influences was the accessibility to the team, their preparedness to listen to constructive criticism and then jointly review the process seeking a strategy of continuous improvement and innovation within the process made this a winner.”⁹

“Your community engagement program is one that is characterised by trust in the RVMP process and, in turn, has led to better-informed outcomes for vegetation management in Queensland. The achievements in your community engagement program are significant for all stakeholders. The process you implemented represents a benchmark when evaluating the effectiveness of community engagement programs undertaken by other government agencies in the future.”¹⁰

Part 2 — Post-legislative amendments

The release of amendments to the *Vegetation Management Act 1999* in May 2004 had a significant impact on the role of the draft RVMP document and the committee members themselves. The election commitments of the state government required new components to the legislative framework, which in turn required significant changes to the legislative baseline for the RVMP program. For RVMC members this meant that the boundaries or ‘goal posts’ for the tasks requested by their terms of reference had significantly changed, effectively meaning their advice and recommendations contained in the draft RVMPs and obtained by a consensus-participatory process were prepared under a different terms of reference and a different set of rules.

The recommendations and advice contained in the draft RVMP's was used to inform several components of the new legislative framework including:

- regional codes to assess tree-clearing applications for various clearing practices
- strategies to provide certainty to landholders including property planning for the management of regrowth and increasing the term of clearing permits

⁸ Farmer, Kilcoy, Brisbane Valley RVMC.

⁹ Conservation representatives, South Coast and North Coast RVMCs.

¹⁰ Chair, Ministerial Advisory Committee — Vegetation Management.

- the provision of financial support for landholders adversely affected by the new legislative framework post May 2004
- the simplification of tree clearing requirements from several Acts into one legislative framework.

However, RVMC members found it difficult to identify where and how the information in the draft RVMPs had been used in the new legislative framework. For example, the Regional Codes were required to be drafted in a legal framework, using a lawyer's language, which met requirements for assessment codes administered under the *Integrated Planning Act 1997*. These codes had to be legally robust and defensible by legislative appeals processes. While this redrafting was completed with attention to the intent of the advice and recommendations from the relative parts of the draft RVMPs, it was also required to comply with an overall new state framework as part of the state government election commitment. This meant a new, more stringent legislative baseline determined the acceptance or rejection of local and regional best practice outcomes from the draft plans. It also had the effect of adopting new performance-based outcomes from other regions in Queensland over the recommended local and regional approaches in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland. The language and structure of the advice and recommendations contained in the draft Plan's was altered to an extent that committee members could not recognise their work.

The largest component of the draft RVMP documents included non-statutory recommendations to achieve best practice land management at local and regional scales. As this information cannot be adopted in a statutory framework it has only been used to inform other regional and local natural resource management planning activities.

The RVMPs had also consistently provided recommendations and advice at a local and regional scale for the provision and administration of a range of incentives strategies, including financial assistance, to landholders adversely affected by the tree clearing provisions of the previous legislative framework. The provision of \$150 million financial package as part of the election commitments was in recognition of the impacts of the legislation on landholders and informed by the draft RVMPs. However, the critical variation in the provision of direct financial assistance was that only landholders who were adversely affected by the new statewide legislative amendments post May 2004 would be eligible. In effect this meant recommendations in the draft RVMPs to support the adoption of local and regional best management practices were no longer relevant and could not be applied by the state under the new framework.

Committee members experienced a large range of emotions including frustration, anger and confusion over these changes to the vegetation management planning program. The protocols and terms of reference for the process were clear with regards to the level of influence and power in the process — that is, the treatment of information, advice and final decision-making lay with the government. But even acknowledging this could not replace feelings of anger and frustration resulting from the significant investment and ownership by the community in a local and regional process that would contribute a relatively small percentage of what, in the end, was a more stringent state framework. A state framework that had many components not aligned to the features of the regional landscape and on the whole, resulting from election commitments.

The regional vegetation management plans had been compiled as a local and regional document relevant to one particular region of Queensland. In many cases, decisions and recommendations by committee members were intrinsically linked and reliant on other recommendations and outcomes being included and adopted. The engagement and consensus process had ensured that the committees had balanced the local economic, environmental, social, wider community and regional scale aspects of complex resource management issues. For this reason, they represented a 'complete and balanced package of recommendations and outcomes for sustainable landscape management' where single components could not stand-alone from the rest of the 'package'.

RVMC members had recognised that two of the largest threats to the process and their work included the *political process*; and that "the Queensland government will just pick the eyes out of what we present" without recognising it represents a package with most sections reliant on outcomes from others (Harris 2003).

Feedback received on the impacts of this situation, particularly on the rural RVMC members involved with the RVMP engagement exercise include:

- frustration in the lack of consideration of what was well considered, logical and practical information appropriate for the region
- erosion of personal and professional credibility in terms of community standing
- assertions of personal character and abilities by association with the process
- frustration and disappointment in lack of influence and value placed on their work
- cynicism and mistrust in government consultation processes.

It must be said that these impacts are not as evident in conservation representatives and sectors who chose to exercise their rights and influence the decision-making processes of government by means other than their involvement in the engagement process.

Feedback from the process indicates that the engagement process had been robust and rigorous in technique, and had clearly built a strong level of relationship between members, ownership and pride in the work developed by the committees. But indicators that the planning and design of the process were not well aligned to the context and scale of the situation, and that the power characteristics of the task had not been understood, are clearly evident.

Impacts and lessons for government planning staff

The SEQ RVMP Team responsible for the planning and delivery of the engagement process involved a team of four planning staff, a geographic information system (GIS)/information and data specialist and dedicated administration assistance. All members of the team developed a strong level of pride in the achievements of what was a very challenging and personally demanding program, with measures of success being evidenced by the feedback and comments received from committee members.

Evaluations show that significant capacity development occurred throughout the duration of the process in terms of community engagement skills, facilitation tools and techniques and project planning. The skill

development activities, professional advice and coaching provided by the Continuous Improvement and Innovation team from Innovative Rural Management was a critical component of the capacity development effort for the SEQ RVMP Team.

Significant impacts and lessons were achieved with the planning and use of practical tools and techniques in the engagement process. Examples include:

- adopting a red light policy (anywhere, anytime with anyone) to support the communication responsibilities in partnership with committee members required for the process
- ‘Come and view field days’ — became a ‘litmus test’ for what level and type of environmental outcomes a community would adopt when balanced with social and economic requirements
- the use of ‘red herring tables’ — to capture issues and options that committee members sought to put forward, dealing with side issues and matters that had potential to derail the process in a constructive way
- forming cross sector sub-committees to address complex matters and develop a series of options to present to the larger committee for consideration to maintain the feeling that the process on the whole was moving forward
- the development of the ‘Five Levels of Consensus’. The practical application of the decision-making protocols indicated some difficulty in gaining a quick assessment of ‘positions’ when discussing options and finalising recommendations. This was proving to be a significant barrier in complex discussions where individual members were arriving at different points of understanding and positions at different rates. A simple decision tree was developed to test where the decision process was during the process at any one time. According to the decision-making protocols for the process — consensus was achieved if members were levels 1–4. Members who achieved level 5 were invited to follow the strategies in the protocols to address their concerns and engage the rest of the group in exploring their issues and concerns then, with further discussion, craft options to re test the consensus position. The ‘Five levels of Consensus’ is illustrated below:
 - I have great support for the decision
 - The decision is not perfect but acceptable
 - I have strong concerns; but can live with it
 - I have strong reservations; but won’t block the decision
 - I must oppose.

The SEQ RVMP Team also achieved many personal rewards with a concentrated effort to build and maintain relationships, both amongst the government team and with community members participating in the process. A conscious commitment was made to complete a personal visit with all 75 committee members within the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions prior to the commencement of the first scheduled workshop. This provided an opportunity to discuss and dispel any myths and rumours, provide supporting information for the process and to discuss issues and create some grounds of familiarity ‘over a cup of tea’. Feedback from many members indicated this was a critical first step and started the relationship and credibility building approach right from the commencement of the process.

The implementation of amendments to the legislative framework in May 2004 and associated policies also had impacts on the government planning team members involved in the engagement process. Members felt

frustration and disbelief regarding the level of importance placed on the RVMC draft Plans, frustration over the waste of peoples time and resources and the implied lack of acknowledgement of the outcomes of the engagement process. Impacts included some erosion of personal self worth and professional credibility in the community by association with the process.

Discussion

The features, impacts and lessons of the engagement process for the RVMP exercise in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions provides a significant amount of material that can be reviewed, analysed, discussed and evaluated. Importantly though, it should be used to understand the practical impacts and lessons from a large, complex community engagement exercise in order to assist with directions and recommendations for future engagement processes for natural resource management.

Since the commencement of the RVMP program in 2000 the work of a number of people in key initiatives has been instrumental in documenting the current position and future thinking for community engagement in natural resource management and the position of the Queensland Government.

In July 2003, the Community Engagement Division, Department of Premier and Cabinet published the Engaging Queenslanders series as part of the Queensland Government's Community Engagement Improvement Strategy to support the government's commitment to increase the involvement of Queenslanders in a range of government processes and deliberations (Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). These indicate that the current emphasis on community involvement in government processes in Queensland is in response to more accessible, responsive and accountable government. It is also said to correspond with an international trend towards more participatory and deliberative approaches to democratic governance. Community engagement is described as a continuum of practices, with increasing levels of engagement and influence. The Queensland Government has officially adopted the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) engagement model (Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet 2003b):

Information ↔ **Consultation** ↔ **Active participation**

—————→
Increasing level of engagement and citizen/community influence

Source: After the Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet (2003b)

The engagement process described in the case study all the practices in the 'engagement continuum' at one time or another, with a deliberative investment in terms of the style and approach of the process in the higher order of active community participation.

In their Framework for Improving Community Engagement in Land and Resources Business, the Chief Executive Officers (CEO's) Committee for Land and Resources (2002) lists the vegetation management planning process as a major activity of the Queensland government requiring engagement with the community. The CEO's Committee outlines a framework for community engagement in land and resources

business, which amongst other things, aims to increase knowledge and understand effective practice and associated risks of community engagement.

The CEO's Framework for community engagement provides a schema from which engagement activities can be designed and described in terms of their location and spread along three elements:

- The level or *purpose* [my word] of engagement
- The type of community/communities
- The position of the process in the cycle of government business.

The CEO's Framework builds on the OECD model by suggesting four different forms of engagement, each with a different primary purpose, which can be presented as a continuum ranging from lesser to greater levels of community influence over government decision-making. Each being legitimate and appropriate for different situations, each not discrete and one, or a combination of activities, can be used depending on the nature of the process, its purpose and outcomes. The four levels or *purposes* of engagement include:

- information provision — data, information and knowledge can be provided to the community and vice versa
- consultation — involves two-way communication between government and communities
- participation — processes which allow greater community input to decision-making
- partnership — and collaboration approaches provide opportunities for government and communities to share decision-making, outcomes, management for implementation and leadership.

The second element of the CEO's Framework is the context of scale of 'community'. To remove some of the confusion and assumptions associated with the term 'community' — the CEO's Framework suggests four 'types' of communities:

- Specific interest groups — such as young people and people interested in a specific issue
- Local communities — such as a rural town, people living in a specific place/watershed/suburb, etc.
- Regional communities — people in a specific place such as a river catchment, etc.
- State/national communities — place based but at a larger scale, such as all residents of Queensland, state-wide stakeholder groups such as peak industry bodies, etc.

The remaining element of the CEO's Framework is the position of the engagement process within the cycles of government business. Four categories for the cycles of government business are suggested:

- policy development
- planning
- implementation — services and infrastructure
- monitoring and review.

The CEO's Framework for community engagement in land and resources business suggests by combining and analysing these three elements (that is, level or *purpose* of engagement, type of community and cycle of government business) it is possible to improve the design of engagement approaches. However on their own, it is suggested these elements are broad and do not provide sufficient direction or stimulate enough

critical thinking for the design of complex engagement processes. For example the engagement process for the RVMP case study could be described at a local and regional scale involving all four purposes or forms of engagement (information provision, consultation, participation and partnership) at specific, local and regional contexts (specific, local, regional and state-wide stakeholder groups were all involved) and included all business cycles of government (while essentially a planning document — the draft RVMP documents contained policy development and recommendations, planning strategies, implementation strategies, monitoring and review recommendations).

Practical lessons from the case study also strongly indicate that scale is not just about community — but that people relate, think, problem solve and live in ‘places’ and that engagement processes must be relevant to the appropriate scale of context or ‘place’. The scale of the ‘place’ will vary according to the nature of the issue which in turn will influence the engagement process — for example the appropriate purpose and approach for engagement will differ depending on whether the scale or context is a square metre vs. backyard vs. neighbourhood vs. small rural town vs. catchment vs. region vs. state vs. nation, etc. The ‘place context’ for the case study was clearly the local, sub regional and regional scales and was grounded in the practical knowledge and experience of the community representatives for that ‘place’. The engagement process implemented in the case study used approaches and styles that were completely appropriate at this scale and context. But as the impacts and lessons indicate, these approaches and styles were inappropriate when the outcomes of the process were applied by the government at a state ‘context’.

Oliver and Whelan (2003) suggest that the four different forms (or *purposes*) of engagement can be stretched to as many as sixteen different forms of citizen participation if outcomes of the engagement process are considered and these are analysed to inform the type of relationship appropriate for the exercise. In their work on participatory decision-making and environmental advocacy, they suggest characteristics of the engagement exercise that influence the appropriate business relationship include the level of influence and power relationship (impacts on decision-making and implementation), the scope of the potential options (that is, limited and defined vs. many and ill-defined), the roles of citizens and government in implementation, and options/requirements for government and citizens to jointly gain better understandings of meaning systems and perceptions (social learning).

It is possible to draw some logic and conclusions about the appropriate form of engagement process for different contexts of government community engagement processes by synthesising the *purposes* of the engagement process from the CEO’s Framework (2002) with the type of relationship from the work of Oliver and Whelan (2003) as indicated in Table 2.

The basis of the RVMP case study indicates it was necessary for government to initially embark on a participatory or collaborative engagement process in order to obtain a high level of community input on recommendations and advice for local and regional vegetation management practices and guidelines for tree clearing. Government simply did not have the necessary information and local knowledge to solve the problem. That is, it was necessary for the ‘pooling’ of local community information and knowledge resources with government in order to obtain relevant information for sustainable land management for problems and issues that neither party could solve individually. However, the outcomes of the case study indicate that the

community involved (in this case the RVMCs) did not have a direct influence in the conduct and decision-making associated with the activity. If indeed the engagement process that was adopted was not aligned to the purpose and appropriate relationship — then that may be an error of the government planning staff. If however, the engagement process, purpose and relationship were appropriate for the context of the issue — then it could indicate an abuse of power and relationship in the implementation of the outcomes from the RVMP program.

Oliver and Whelan (2003) also provide two tools or decision trees to promote the reflection and deliberation on the 'context appropriateness' of natural resource management citizen participation processes. These tools can be used to promote critical thinking and analysis of both existing and planned engagement processes, and help identify potential abuses of power in government–citizen relationships. Figure 1 was designed to help government officers deliberate, reflect and choose the most appropriate engagement process for a given natural resource management issue or context by working through the responses to eight specific questions in a particular order. In a similar way, Figure 2 was designed to assist citizens to make decisions about the appropriate level of involvement and purpose in government initiated natural resource management processes by working through seven specific questions in a particular order.

Working through Figure 1 supports the discussion arising from the analysis of information in Table 2. From the information discussed in the case study it appears clear that government did not have all the information needed to solve the problem alone, the potential options are complex and varied, implementation of best practice land management actions will require the acceptance of landowners themselves, this is not likely if government makes decisions alone, stakeholders and community were willing to engage in order to solve the problem, the quality of input would be improved if there was sharing and greater understanding of knowledge and meaning systems, both parties were initially prepared to take collective action to implement best practices to solve the problem; however, government was not prepared to share power and responsibility for decision-making. This would indicate at best the appropriate citizen participation outcome for the RVMP case study was collaboration with social learning (option J) — and at worst, targeted consultation, with or without social learning (Options C, D or E).

Similarly, the lessons and impacts of the RVMP case study support the outcomes derived by working through Table 2. The Queensland Conservation Council, representing the state-wide peak conservation body in Queensland, chose not to participate in the local and regional engagement process as it was likely to be less effective and/or compromise other strategies which would have potentially more impact in influencing the political decision-making process for environmental outcomes at a state and national level. This would align with Option B — reject the local and regional engagement process and seek to influence outcomes in other ways (outside the tent). However, for other stakeholders, it was appropriate to participate in the engagement process featured in the case study (Option D), as participation did not limit the options for any stakeholder group to influence or solve the problem.

Table 2. Alignment of engagement process with purpose and appropriate business relationship

Community Engagement Process	Purpose	Appropriate relationship
Information sharing/information provision	The one way sharing of information and data. Fundamental to most engagement activities. It can raise awareness of issues but cannot in itself influence decision-making.	Government fully manages the activity, implements the activity and does not need any involvement from the community. Government will only seek to inform the community on what is happening, what has happened or will happen with an activity.
Consultation	Involves two-way communication between government and communities where communities can provide feedback, views or comments to government. Activities are generally focussed on a specific issue or proposal, where government defines the issues and controls the final decisions. Structured forms include advisory committee's or representative panels that mediate community input	Government fully manages and implements the activity; however does consult with the community.
Participation	Processes that allow for greater community input to (government) decision-making. Participatory approaches may provide opportunities for communities to have a role in reviewing a series of options and providing information on a preferred option.	Government fully manages the activity; however requires the cooperation or collaboration of the community in order to implement the activity. The government and community 'pool resources' (information, money, labour, etc.) in order to solve a problem or issue neither can solve individually. The community will have a direct influence in the conduct and decision-making associated with the activity.
Partnership	Partnership or collaboration approaches provide government and communities with opportunities for shared decision-making, negotiated outcomes, joint management or service delivery and shared leadership. Partnerships could involve a negotiated sharing of roles, responsibilities and resources, through to full devolution of responsibility to communities for decisions, resources and actions	Government works with the community as partners to manage and implement the activity. Both parties collaborate — but <i>power is shared</i> based on negotiated roles and responsibilities and commitment of resources.

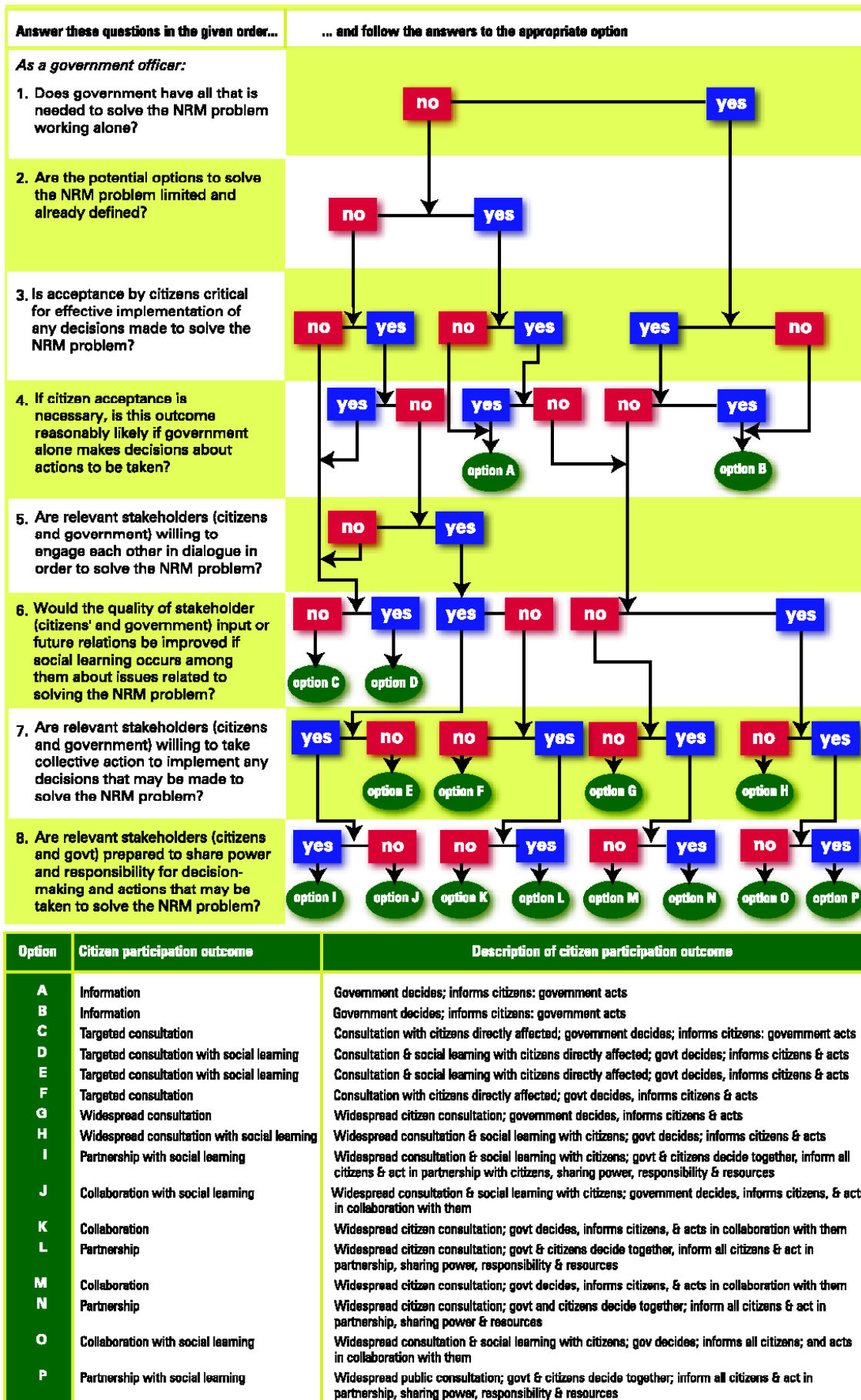


Figure 1. Citizen participation in natural resource management: government decision tree (Oliver and Whelan 2003)

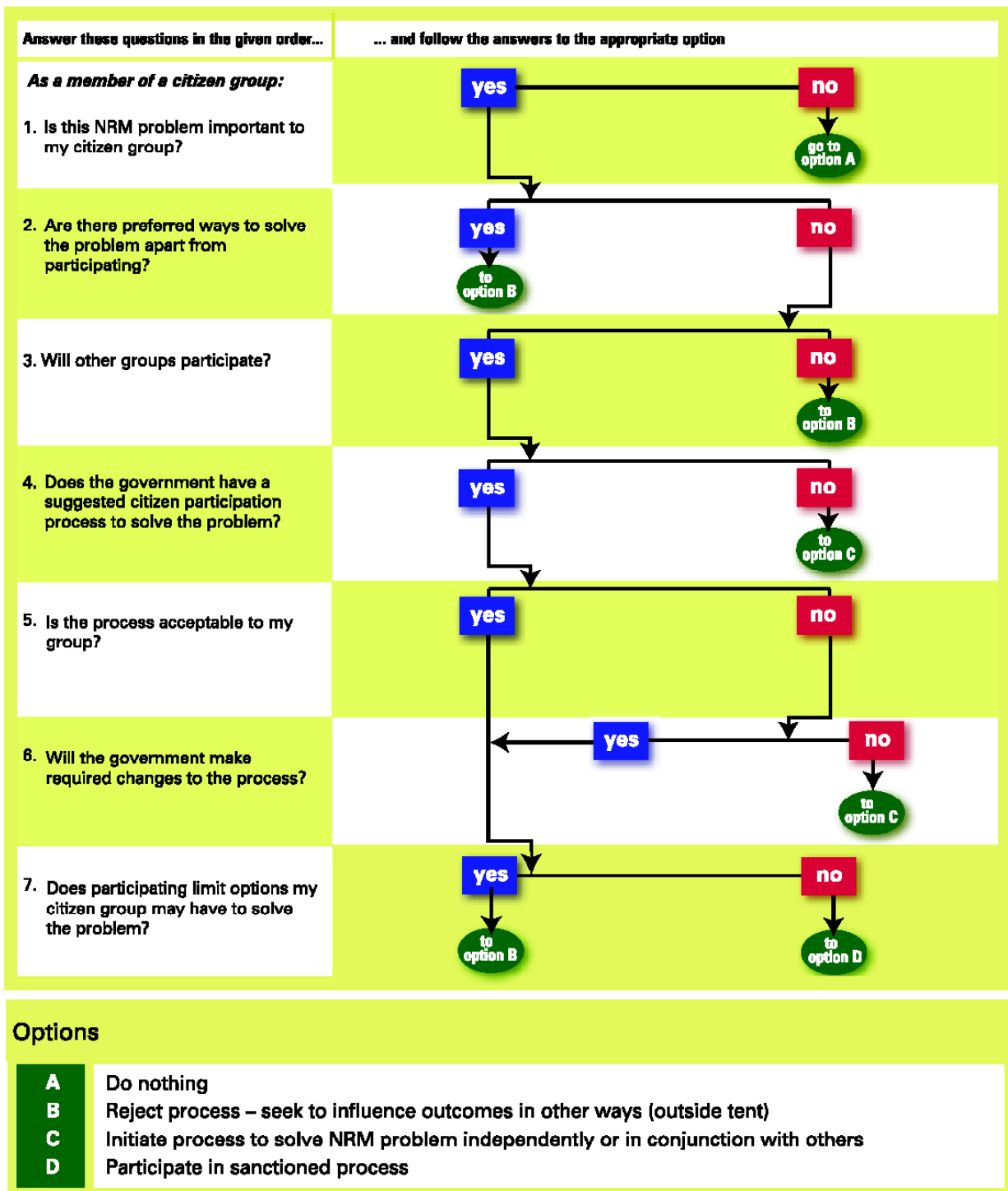


Figure 2. Community engagement in natural resource management: community decision tree (Oliver and Whelan 2003)

Conclusions

The language used by the Queensland Government indicates the principles and future directions for community engagement is to continue to strive for increasing levels of participatory engagement and for community to be involved with and influence government decision-making and outcomes. However, as indicated by the review and discussion of the RVMP case study in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions, this language, these principles and this direction is not always necessarily supported by the practice and application of outcomes from engagement processes.

There is an increasing need to apply logical, critical thinking, reflection and deliberate over key design characteristics to determine the appropriate approach and style of community engagement processes. To improve the performance of participatory approaches, planning needs to consider five key characteristics:

- Ensuring a clear, shared view of the *purpose* of the task at hand and boundaries of the exercise
- Ensuring the *form of engagement* approach aligns with the purposes to be achieved
- Ensuring the purpose of the process and form of engagement aligns with the *appropriate relationship*. Explore the willingness of all parties to engage at the appropriate level and review the power characteristics of the issue and process.
- Ensure the process adopts practices and approaches matching the features of the *context of scale and 'place'*, along with the *cycle of government business*
- Ensuring clarity on the *role of government* and level of commitment for the life of the process. This includes feedback on the final decision-making process and how information provided will be valued and used.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 from Oliver and Whelan (2003), along with Table 2 from this paper; provide tools to facilitate the reflection, deliberation and critical thinking to improve performance of community engagement practices.

The engagement environment for natural resource management in the Wide Bay Burnett and South East Queensland regions will have changed from the RVMP case study experience. With an ongoing emphasis to increase community involvement in government business and increasing participatory processes, future citizen involvement programs will need to consider that the 'engagement environment' for these regions will include:

- increased competition and demands on people's time — the pool of skilled volunteers is a scarce resource
- people will be even better informed, politically active and have even greater knowledge and skills in engagement processes
- levels of trust and credibility in government led engagement processes will have degraded significantly — hopefully not irreversibly
- some community leaders will not become involved in another government engagement process — regardless of the purpose.

Feedback and evaluation results from citizens directly involved in the RVMP engagement process indicate very positive lessons and experiences in the style and approach of the program at a local and regional scale. Practical tools and processes used during the case study are now being applied by some of the participants in other engagement processes they are involved in. However, the lessons indicate a series of critical lessons in the design and conduct of government led participatory processes including undertaking steps to ensure any adopted process aligns with the purpose/expectations, boundaries, form of engagement, context and power relationships involved.

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