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Capacity Building Investments: Accounting for the Diverse Views of Stakeholders

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Abstract

This paper presents empirical evidence for guiding the development and implementation of policies and programs, especially those of governments, which aim to build capacities of regional NRM bodies and their governing Boards, individually and collectively. It focuses on 22 specific capacity building measures drawn from the sectors of health (internationally) and risk and emergency management (primarily in Australia). These measures span the human, social, institutional and economic dimensions of capacity building. A discussion paper and feedback form were used to elicit the perspectives of regional, policy/research and Indigenous interest groups about applying these measures to enhance the effectiveness of regional NRM Boards across Australia. The work highlights the differences between interest groups in terms of their preferences and levels of support for particular measures, and emphasises the need to understand and account for these differences when developing and implementing policies and programs.

Background

Diverse approaches to aspects of planning, implementation and reporting in relation to the management of natural resources have emerged in Australia. This is in large part a consequence of constitutional power over natural resource management (NRM) primarily resting at the level of the eight states and territories (Brown 2006). A regional approach to NRM has progressively emerged through intervention by the Australian Government in the form of tied grants and associated bilateral agreements with state/territory governments (Paton et al. 2004).

Fifty-six regional NRM bodies are now formally designated (ACIL Tasman 2005), each with a governing Board whose membership is drawn particularly from the farming community. While these organisations vary in the extent to which they are community-initiated (ie, grassroots or bottom-up), they have subsequently been moulded, homogenised and professionalised to deliver (top-down) programs on behalf of governments, especially at federal level (Dore et al. 2003; Peters 2006). A number of investigations have confirmed the so-called 'regional model' as the preferred approach to NRM delivery (Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group 2006; Keogh et al. 2006; Sinclair Knight Merz 2006); however, there are some notable detractors (ITS Global 2006b).

Under two major national NRM programs, the Natural Heritage Trust Extension (NHT2) and National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAP), NRM bodies were charged with developing and implementing regional plans and investment strategies (Commonwealth of Australia 1997a; 1997b; Council of Australian Governments 2000). These national programs are the focus of the research discussed in this paper. It is

important to note that the functions of NRM bodies in many cases are not limited to NHT2 and NAP delivery. Their interests tend to reflect their diverse histories, as well as their relationships with and capacities of their local communities and respective state/territory governments. Table 1 provides an overview of the 56 regional NRM bodies to highlight some of these differences (both within and between jurisdictions), in terms of corporate form, number of employees, number of Board members, and the duration of Board appointments (Table 1).

Table 1: Synopsis of Australia’s 56 designated regional NRM organisations (data from Robins and Dovers, 2007)

	No.	Form	Staff	Board	Terms
ACT	1	advisory body	none	6	3
NSW	13	statutory authorities	30-75	Up to 7	Up to 3
NT	1	incorporated association	6	6	Up to 2
QLD	14	8 limited companies; 5 incorporated associations; 1 advisory body	5-53	6-18	Regional determined
SA	8	body corporates	6-75	Up to 9	Up to 3
TAS	3	incorporated associations or body corporates	5-12	Up to 15	Not specified
VIC	10	statutory authorities	mod-large	6-9	Up to 4
WA	6	incorporated associations	15-30	12-20	2-3

Research Scope and Approach

The research presented in this paper pays particular attention to building the capacities of community-based Boards, individually and collectively. While many analyses have focused on the nature of regionalism in Australia (eg Dore et al. 2003; Ewing 2003; Morrison 2004), little critical attention has been paid to the governing Boards (eg Whelan and Oliver 2005) as an integral part of the institutional model.

The research presented here spans human, social, institutional and economic dimensions of capacity. Table 2 shows the conceptual model used in the research to engage with various stakeholder groups in a dialogue about capacity building. Its characterisation of capacity in plain-English terms (ie trust, relationships, finances, knowledge and the like) demystified ‘capacity building’ and enabled broad ranging discussions. The research did not set out to make normative statements about the form or functions of regional NRM bodies and their governing Boards, but rather to describe or characterise the existing system and explore ways of working with that diversity to build capacity.

Table 2: A conceptual framework for capacity building used to inform stakeholder consultations

Human Capital	Social Capital		Institutional Capital	Economic Capital
	Cognitive (social norms)	Structural (networks)		
Knowledge Skills Experience	Trust and reciprocity Values, attitudes and behaviour Commitment Motivation Sense of place	Networks Relationships	Governance arrangements	Infrastructure Financial resources

(Modified from: Moore, S. A., R. C. Severn, and R. Millar (2006), A conceptual model of community capacity for biodiversity conservation outcomes. *Geographical Research*, 44, 361-371)

The research identified 22 measures (or tangible mechanisms) that could be used to build the capacity of regional NRM organisations and their governing Boards (Table 3). These measures arose from an examination of the literatures of NRM, health and risk and emergency management. Dovers (2005) argues that NRM shares similarities as a field of policy and management with 'cognate sectors', such as health and emergency management, and therefore offers scope for comparison and lesson-drawing.

Table 3: Summary of 22 capacity building measures identified from the sectors of health and risk emergency management

	Capacity Building Measure	Brief Description
1	Risk Standards & Guidelines	A generic framework for identifying, analyzing, assessing, treating and monitoring risk
2	Environmental Standards	Standards on aspects of environmental management systems
3	Protocols	Documents (eg bilateral agreements, MoUs) used to clarify roles, define boundaries, assign responsibilities and facilitate open communication
4	Quality or Process Improvement Methods ('Office Systems')	Improving service through breaking down the service into its component parts and focusing on improving each step in the process
5	Quality Improvement (QI) or Learning Collaboratives	Groups of practitioners from different organizations coming together to work in a structured way to improve one aspect of their service
6	Audit & Feedback	Systematic review processes for bringing about practice change through measuring improvement against criteria and the implementation of change
7	Briefings and Debriefings	Exchanges focused on developing a shared understanding of objectives and outcomes, enabling reflection, reporting on outcomes and making recommendations for the future
8	Information Centre	A national centre (modelled on Emergency Management Australia) for improving information consolidation, standardization and access
9	Best Practice Guidelines	Guidelines that specify best practice through a process of integrating, codifying and simplifying high volumes of information
10	Information & Research Compendia	A mechanism for collating and organizing information and research findings into a more accessible, usable and comprehensible form
11	Training Facility	A national facility (modelled on the Emergency Management Australia Institute) for improving training quality, consistency and access
12	Competency-based Training	Accredited courses providing national qualifications and statements of attainment delivered by Registered Training Organizations (public and private)
13	Academic Detailing	An evidence-based method of continuing education designed to change behaviour involving a trainer visiting the trainee in their own business setting for a one-on-one session
14	Exercises	Information session, walkaround, tabletop, simulation, field and future scenario planning exercises designed to improve plans and decision-making and build teams
15	Personal & Professional Development	Structured approaches to developing personal and professional skills (eg leadership programs, fellowship programs, practice-based courses)
16	Mentoring & Coaching	A relationship involving an experienced and trusted counsellor, or more senior & experienced individual, who advises a junior colleague, or where counselling is between equals (co-mentoring)
17	Local Opinion Leaders	A formal approach to using local opinion leaders to influence peers through group discussions, informal consultations, and revision of protocols, guidelines and processes
18	Case Studies & Storytelling	A mechanism (both written and oral) for capturing different perspectives, experiences, knowledges and practices to inform decision-making
19	Recognition & Service Awards	A mechanism for recognizing and rewarding service to the community and the environment through conferring an award
20	Registers	A register for recording the availability of qualified experts prepared to provide advice or other services on a volunteer basis
21	Models, DSS & GIS	Computer-based and manual methods used for prediction and the presentation of spatial data to aid decision-making processes
22	Computer-based Knowledge Exchange	Computer-based methods of sharing knowledge (eg internet broadcasting, computer-based telephony, interactive CD-ROM)

The 22 measures were published in a discussion paper (specifically focused on NRM Boards), together with a survey or feedback form, as a tool for consulting with stakeholders (Robins 2007). The survey explored which of the 22 measures stakeholders liked the most, the extent to which they supported each of the measures, and the extent to which the measures were perceived as already being implemented by regions.¹ The survey also asked respondents to identify any additional measures.

The survey was distributed to 239 individuals according to the broad categories of regional, policy/research and Indigenous stakeholders. While the research examined the views of Indigenous stakeholders, this was only investigated to a limited degree through the Indigenous Land Management Facilitator network. The results that follow are based on 111 responses, including from 39 of the 56 regions; 24 of which were from regional Chief Executive Officers. For individual jurisdictions, responses ranged from 62 to 100%.

To seek input from Board members workshops were also conducted in four case study regions: South Coast NRM (Western Australia), Southern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (CMA) (New South Wales), Burnett Mary Regional NRM (Queensland) and Mallee CMA (Victoria). Additional survey responses were received from seven other Board members, including three from Eyre Peninsula NRM Board (South Australia).

Results

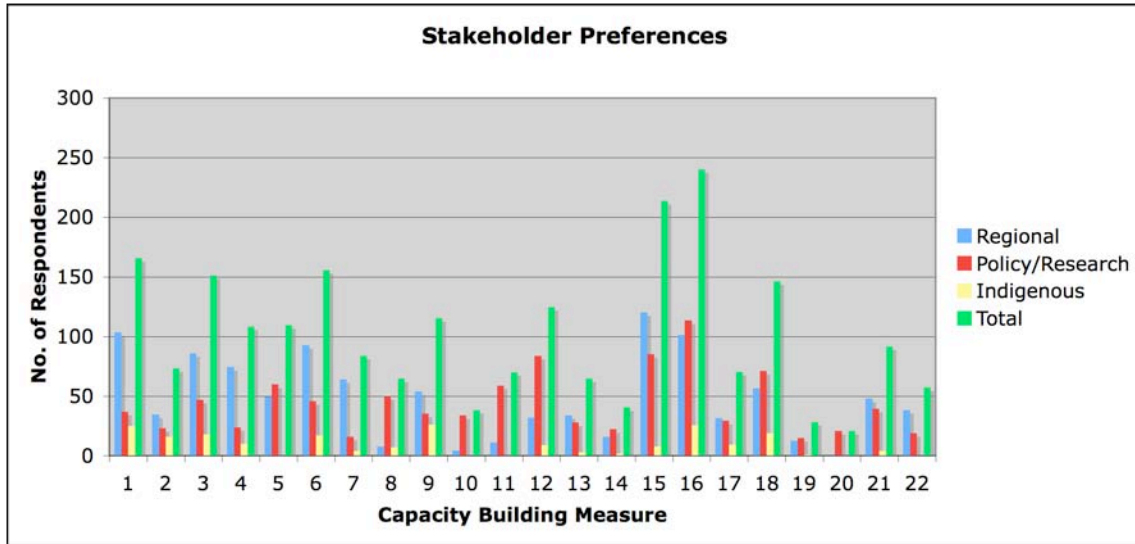
Figure 1 depicts the preferences of survey respondents for each of the 22 measures presented in the discussion paper. Respondents were asked to identify their top six measures from 6 to 1 (with 6 representing the most favoured). The numbers along the X-axis represent each of the 22 measures. This paper focuses on making some general points, rather than providing a comprehensive description of the survey results.

There are four main points to emphasise about Figure 1:

- Firstly, the most preferred measures overall (green column): Mentoring & Coaching (No. 16) and Personal & Professional (No. 15) rate most highly, followed by Risk Standards & Guidelines (No. 1), Audit & Feedback (No. 6), Protocols (No. 3) and Case Studies & Storytelling (No. 18).
- Secondly, the measures that recorded the lowest preferences: Registers (No. 20), Recognition & Service Awards (No. 19), Information & Research Compendia (No. 10) and Exercises (No. 14).
- Thirdly, it is notable that regional stakeholders (blue column) tend to favour 'standards/processes-oriented' measures (i.e. Risk Standards & Guidelines, Audit & Feedback, Protocols) more so than their policy/research counterparts (red column); while policy/research respondents tend to favour 'skills/communication-oriented' measures, i.e. Information Centre (No. 8), Information and Research Compendia (No. 10), Training Centre (No. 11), Competency-based Training (No. 12). In both instances, these findings, would seem to be counter to general thinking.
- The final point to make is where only one stakeholder group favours a particular measure, such as in the case of Briefings & Debriefings (No. 7 - favoured by regional stakeholders) and for Information Centre (No. 8 - favoured by policy/research stakeholders).

¹ Note: perceptions on implementation are not discussed in this paper

Figure 1: Weighted stakeholder preferences for the 22 measures presented in the discussion paper ($n=111$)



(Notes: Weighted preferences; $n=111$; see Table X for descriptions of the 22 measures shown on the X-axis)

Figure 2 indicates the extent to which respondents support the measures outlined in the discussion paper. The blue indicates a positive response (the sum of 'Strongly Support' and 'Support'), while the red is neutral ('Don't Know'), the yellow is negative (the sum of 'Strongly Unsupportive' and 'Don't Support') and the green is non-responses. The figure indicates that support for some measures can be high even though they did not rank highly in the previous figure of stakeholder preferences. This indicates that some measures may be perceived as 'useful' but either providing less benefit than the alternatives or perhaps only having application in limited circumstances. For example, No. 10, Information & Research Compendia, ranked low but was highly supported.

Figure 2: Level of stakeholder support for the 22 measures presented in the discussion paper ($n=111$)

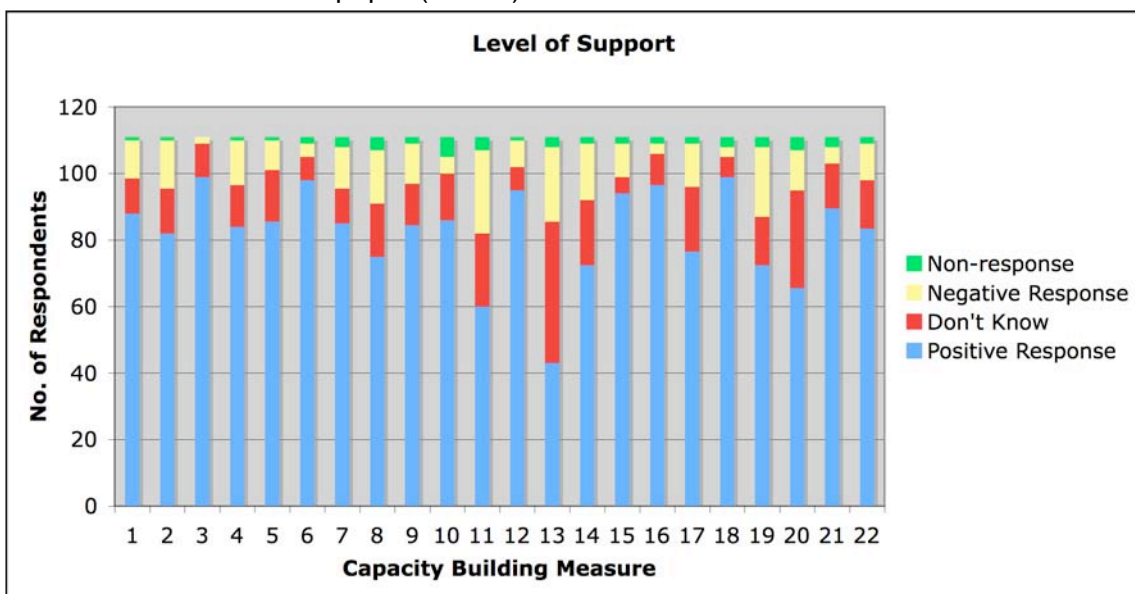


Table 4 shows the top eight preferences of Boards compared to results overall (i.e. all 111 respondents). The six most favoured measures for both survey cohorts fall within this range. The data shows good concurrence for measures, especially for Personal & Professional Development, Risk Standards & Guidelines, Audit & Feedback and Protocols.

Table 4: Comparison of survey results on preferences for specific measures

Measure	Boards (n=23) [#]	National [^] (n=111)
Personal & Professional Development	1	2
Risk Standards & Guidelines	2	3
Best Practice (Guidelines)	3	8
Environmental Standards	4	13
Audit & Feedback	5	4
Protocols	6	5
Case Studies & Storytelling	7	6
Mentoring & Coaching	8	1

Bold type denotes top six preferences of the survey cohort

[#] Seven members of Southern Rivers CMA (New South Wales) represented as n=1 (one aggregated survey response submitted)

[^] Denotes national survey results (i.e. excludes Board members)

Survey and workshop consultations also elicited suggestions for additional measures to add to the 22 presented in the discussion paper. The following seven measures were identified and are discussed further in Robins (2008):

- Recruitment, Selection & Succession
- Team & Collaborative Relationship Building
- Regional Infrastructure & Staff
- Flexible & Adaptive Resourcing Arrangements
- Legislative, Constitutional & Policy Frameworks
- Policy Decision-making Processes
- Performance Measures & Reporting

Conclusions

The research framed the measures – the 22 from the discussion paper and the additional seven arising from stakeholder consultations – within a systems diagram for capacity building. The systems diagram (see Robins 2008: 840) clusters these measures into the following eight groupings based on their primary purpose:

- Defining the organisational business
- Setting standards and expectations
- Accessing infrastructure and resources
- Strengthening structures and processes
- Underpinning effective business systems
- Developing and sustaining networks and relationships
- Growing the knowledge base, and
- Building the information base and tools

Each part of the system is inter-connected and needed for the whole system to function effectively. The framework illustrates that the absence of any individual element weakens or paralyses overall capacity even if capacity with respect to some elements is strong. For example, while state-of-the-art information bases and tools may be in place, this does not negate the need to have effective business systems or strong networks and relationships. The detailed data and information on the preferences and levels of support of major stakeholder groups presented provides good direction on selecting specific measures within the framework's eight groupings.

In summary, the framework therefore provides a practical tool to inform a more holistic and strategic approach on the part of those with an interest in or responsibility for building capacity. It can also be built upon through the addition of measures arising from the examination of further literatures.

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