

Transformation for Resilient Landscapes and Communities Partnership

NRM plans as change strategies

Resource Sheet 10 (RS 10)

NRM planning

There are few trained planners in NRM. Assumptions about what is meant by planning, why it is necessary and how it might be undertaken to be enduring and effective have generally remained unchallenged.

Planning is essentially:

- an abstract way of exploring courses of action and their consequences before action is taken on ground
- a form of governance of the future which can set rules, influence power distribution and decision making, and determine the stake and options that ordinary people will have into the future - therefore 'by whom', 'for whom' are important questions in planning
- an intervention into the established processes of change – therefore critical questions are *a change to what, how much change, in what direction and how soon.*

Limitations of past NRM plans

In many cases, regional scale strategic NRM plans have quickly lost currency and sat unused on the shelf. This contributes to ineffective delivery on agreed strategies and priorities, default to alternative easier methods to spend funds, alienation of communities, as well as reduced opportunities for evaluation and hence learning.

Some reasons for these limitations include:

- their fixed interval nature which creates a distracting emphasis on 'events' i.e., the mechanics of producing and evaluating plans within the parameters of arbitrary three or five year periods, irrespective of regional change
- circumstances around the evaluation 'event' (such as links to funding) tend to drive overly positive good news stories - practitioners refer to the need for 'institutional honesty' to critically review Plan impacts
- the use of a sub group or committee to develop the plan which then hands it on to the organisation at large to implement
- the many taken for granted implicit assumptions about what NRM is, what is meant by success, and how the world works
- too much focus on technical aspects and insufficient attention to the political and managerial dimensions.

The study has confirmed that a critical underlying factor is insufficient attention by leadership, communities and planners to 'change' and how it works. This includes attention to:

- change dynamics in the operating environment across multiple scales
- the notion that NRM strategic plans are in effect strategies for change

Methods for improving an understanding of change dynamics within regions and across scales include resilience assessment (RS 3), systems analysis, collective learning (RS 4) and adaptive governance (RS 5) frameworks.

This study was designed around bringing these frameworks together into a new decision making framework. This has led to a number of examples of regional NRM planning processes we refer to as 'social-ecological planning' (RS 8). These planning approaches are wider in scope, more socially and institutionally aware, link people to landscape by focusing on social-ecological relationships and are far more adaptive and collaborative than previous rational-comprehensive style processes used in previous planning rounds. There is also a shift away from the idea of managing assets, to planning for resilience in the wider social ecological systems (RS 7) in which the assets are embedded.

Need for a Planning Rethink

- Murray CMA's 2008 audit results identified deficiencies in shared vision, project risks and monitoring, community participation and engagement, adaptive management and documentation....*"The 2008 Audit was fairly damning for us in a whole lot of ways but that created a springboard for us to work on those issues"*
- Terrain NRM found their Plan very difficult to evaluate – it was too comprehensive and detailed, with too many targets without monitoring information. The Plan also had not kept pace with the institutional changes around it. *"...Transformation is moving from a plan as a document to planning as a function of the organisation..."*

Different types of change

Partner regions have been exploring with their communities the questions of *how much change*, *in what direction* and *how soon* as part of their NRM planning processes. Business as usual, slow incremental adaptation and transformation are different types of change; each of which requires different attention in planning processes. In this study we have been more interested in transformational change (RS 6) and adaptive

modes of planning to deal with uncertainty and complexity.

How can regional NRM plans be more enduring and effective?

Partner organisations have found the following tips useful:

- Treat planning as an ongoing learning and change process – this may reframe the role of regional NRM organisations and planners
- Pay more attention to governance and institutions – understanding how power, decision making, participation and their drivers work in the region and drawing on adaptive governance principles will help establish effective adaptive governance for the plan
- Planning as a change process should be planned with usefulness, coherency, context, culture and capacity in mind; plan the plan for the people who will use it (user case analysis will help)
- Uncover, make explicit and challenge assumptions and narratives – this will help with ongoing evaluation and adaptive management
- Reframe problem spaces as opportunities
- Tackle the hard questions for each opportunity like how much change, in what direction, how soon as well as who benefits and who has to live with the consequences
- Separate the bits that need to change frequently, from those that will change slowly, into web-based modules – add triggers of change
- Monitor and evaluate to test assumptions – accountability will automatically follow.

Further information

Partnership Study Resource Material

www.ausresilience.com.au/research/transformation

Partnership Study

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