

# Transformation for Resilient Landscapes and Communities Partnership

## Adaptive forms of governance

### Resource Sheet 5 (RS 5)

#### What is adaptive governance?

Governance describes how society shares power, makes decisions and involves ordinary people in decision making. Governance becomes adaptive governance when:

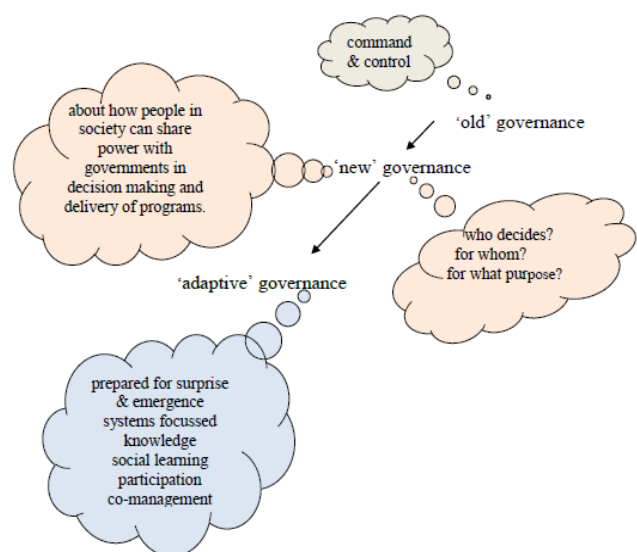
- the system is geared towards experiential learning through networks
- knowledge of systemic complexity (including social-ecological interactions) is available and accessed by those networks
- institutions (structures, rules, processes, norms) are scale sensitive and tuned into signals of change, as well as flexible enough to reorganise/adapt to changing conditions and to transform if necessary
- adaptive co-management is enabled and fostered often through the efforts of bridging organisations
- decision-makers are prepared for surprise and emergent conditions that arise from complexity and uncertainty.

Attributes of good governance such as legitimacy, participation, accountability and social justice are also necessary for adaptive governance. These attributes prevent over-reaction to changing conditions or direction by powerful interests. Planning is a subset of governance therefore adaptive governance can be assessed in practice by looking at planning approaches adopted by regions and regional NRM organisations.

#### When is it required?

Adaptive forms of governance are suited to operating environments that have high levels of uncertainty and complexity and are self-organising,

such as in NRM. Such environments create conditions in which rapid change may take place in unexpected ways with unexpected consequences. These conditions challenge institutions built on an assumption of stability.



The evolution of governance

#### Relationship with resilience and collective learning

The term adaptive governance actually comes from the resilience literature by merging existing theory on new governance in the 1980s with insights that adaptive management (the methodology of resilience) needed a stronger social dimension.

Frameworks for resilience assessment (RS 3) and those for collective learning (RS 4) can be thought of as partial models of adaptive governance. They both recognise the role of collaboration and the idea of surprise and emergence. However they differ in

their learning approaches, have roots in very different knowledge traditions, have very different assumptions about how the world works and what is real and take different positions on how change occurs.

Each of our three partner regions have transitioned to different models of adaptive governance. The variations come from their differing drivers of change and emphasis on key attributes and the way they have integrated resilience thinking and collective learning to suit regional contexts.

## The Murray 'localism' model

The drivers for change for the Murray model were a poor audit performance and the principle of 'subsidiarity' (devolution). The CMA transformed from a technically orientated delivery organisation to a more socially aware bridging organisation model to prepare for social-ecological planning (RS 8). Its links to community networks were re-established by forging new accountable co-management arrangements and engaging around managing 'local landscapes' for production and conservation. Knowledge from these community networks identified social-ecological systems (RS 7) in the region and strategies for intervention. These were then scaled up to regional scale action pathways supported by adaptive triggers for review. The CMA acknowledged it was yet to deal effectively with relationships at higher scales and with ways of opening up community discussions about innovation.

## The Cape York 'planning by doing' model

The Cape York interpretation of adaptive governance is also a form of localism born out of dissatisfaction with top down decision making. It follows the bridging organisation model orientated around 'helping communities on Cape York to help themselves' on priority issues of concern and in keeping with the *UN Rights of Indigenous Peoples* declaration. Multiple sources of knowledge including Indigenous knowledge, information feedback and learning opportunities are organised through the Cape York Atlas. Knowledge is generated through projects that have been established as spaces for

social learning on issues of direct interest to self-organising groups of landholders, traditional owners, land managers and governments. These projects provide windows of opportunity for capacity building, agency building to make system interventions, reconciliation and potentially transformative practice shifts which can be shared via the Atlas with other self-organising groups. One of the projects is exploring culturally appropriate modes of Indigenous governance.

This *planning by doing* model will build an adaptive planning system rather than a plan for an arbitrary fixed term as is the norm.

## The Wet Tropics 'knowledge broker' model

An unsustainable financial position and an insight that insufficient attention was being given to the institutional dimension of NRM were the drivers for change in the Wet Tropics. Terrain NRM transformed itself as a first step. The governance model shares the knowledge hub concept with Cape York and seeks to link networks across the region and beyond. It focuses on providing leadership for adaptation and transformation through understanding and reframing knowledge on the complex and shifting institutional arrangements and social-ecological relationships in this region of frequent natural disasters, high growth and world heritage listed conservation assets.

## Further information

**Partnership Study Resource Material:**

[www.ausresilience.com.au/research/transformation](http://www.ausresilience.com.au/research/transformation)

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