

# Transformation for Resilient Landscapes and Communities Partnership

## Why should regional communities think about change and new futures?

Resource Sheet No 2 (RS 2)

The vast majority of Australians reside in the capital cities and those who live in regional areas are generally there because of deliberate choices. These choices are likely linked to the region's natural resources and the reasons people are strongly attached to 'their place'. The identity of a region is often defined by livelihoods such as 'a farming district', 'a mining town' or 'a fishing port'. Because people and place are so inter-linked then change to a region is not always welcome.

### Over run by change

The world we live in is becoming more connected and complex and so changes looming on the horizon and 'shocks' to the system tend to be more frequent and significant. Existing approaches to managing change are not progressing towards regional sustainability. Nor are they leading to the type of communities in which people had envisaged they would live.

Changes in a region can be rapid causing 'boom' conditions or slow and incremental, which in some cases leads to 'ghost towns'. In other situations change may be significant and sudden causing a 'shock' across the region. For example, the ban on live cattle exports to Indonesia in 2011 was a shock to Northern Australia. Most cattle suppliers and associated businesses were confronted with the impacts of significant and immediate change.

### Imposed changes on NSW Murray, Cape York and Far North Qld study regions 2011-2014

- Policy change reduces partner's funding by 70%
- Changes to forest policy reduces access for timber industry
- Irrigation water reduced by 7 year drought
- The Basin Plan's cuts to irrigation water
- Ban on live cattle exports to Indonesia
- Cyclones destroy crops and wet tropics habitat for the second time in 5 years
- Wild Rivers declaration imposes restrictions on several Cape York rivers
- Draft Cape York Regional Plan designates how land can be used across Cape York
- Policy changes cuts NRM funding to organisations and programs

### 'Wicked' or intractable problems

Many regional communities, whose livelihoods are dependent on natural resources, have experienced uncertainty about the future when there has been substantial changes to the availability or access to those resources. These communities are also continually challenged by issues such as the declining terms of trade in traditional industries like agriculture, expansion of open cut coal mining and coal seam gas operations, unfavourable population changes,

loss of essential services, as well as impacts from severe weather events.

These persistent and largely intractable challenges (or wicked problems) come from the complex relationships between people and the natural environment, across different scales. They are difficult to deal with because they:

- Have high degrees of complexity and uncertainty and low possibilities of control
- Do not operate on simple cause and effect relationships
- Are difficult to articulate and scope
- Are often deeply embedded in our social system
- Have no final solution; intervention just changes the problem.

Attempts to manage intractable problems often have limited success and but can also lead to unintended consequences. Solutions tend to be based on accepted or historical practices, adopt an incremental approach and/or are expert driven. There is little opportunity for the introduction of new ideas and new ways of thinking..

Intractable problems need to be unpacked so that complexity is better understood. Assumptions about solutions need to be made more explicit and more time should be taken to consider longer term consequences. Regional communities should take the lead in NRM problems, developing and steering locally endorsed actions based on community knowledge and aspirations.

## Case study change agendas

Our Partnership champions were confronted by change and were willing to explore transformation.

Partners in the NSW Murray Region wanted to explore new collaboration opportunities to assist local communities to transform to fit into a landscape with less water. Significant changes were being foreshadowed to irrigation water allocations through the Basin Plan. The region was in decline from a seven-year drought, which was impacting on community life.

In Cape York the focus has been on transforming 'the way NRM is done on the Cape', including Indigenous governance arrangements to ensure the right people speak for any major decisions that affect Indigenous land. For decades the direction of the Cape's future has been primarily influenced by interests from outside the region with little regard to local residents' visions. This has led to divisions, poor co-ordination and piecemeal resource policy, creating uncertainty around the future for regional development.

A Far North Qld multi-regional case study brought together the four NRM Boards for the region for the first time. The aim was to take the first collective step to explore a set of common issues, which had been resistant to change, that they considered could be more effectively addressed collaboratively at a multi-regional rather than individual-region scale. Several issues were identified, all with social, economic and ecological dimensions. These were encompassed by four change agendas of: New Agriculture, Conservation economy, Traditional Owner Business and Climate Change Futures.

## Case study lessons

It is clear that leadership is the key to driving change from within a region and managing forced change from outside. Regional champions have consistently redesigned their organisation's governance arrangements as the first step for transformation.

The case study lessons come from a diversity of landscape issues and partner experiences; these are documented in the study resource material.

## Further Information

*Partnership Study Resource Material:*  
[www.ausresilience.com.au/research/transformation](http://www.ausresilience.com.au/research/transformation)

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