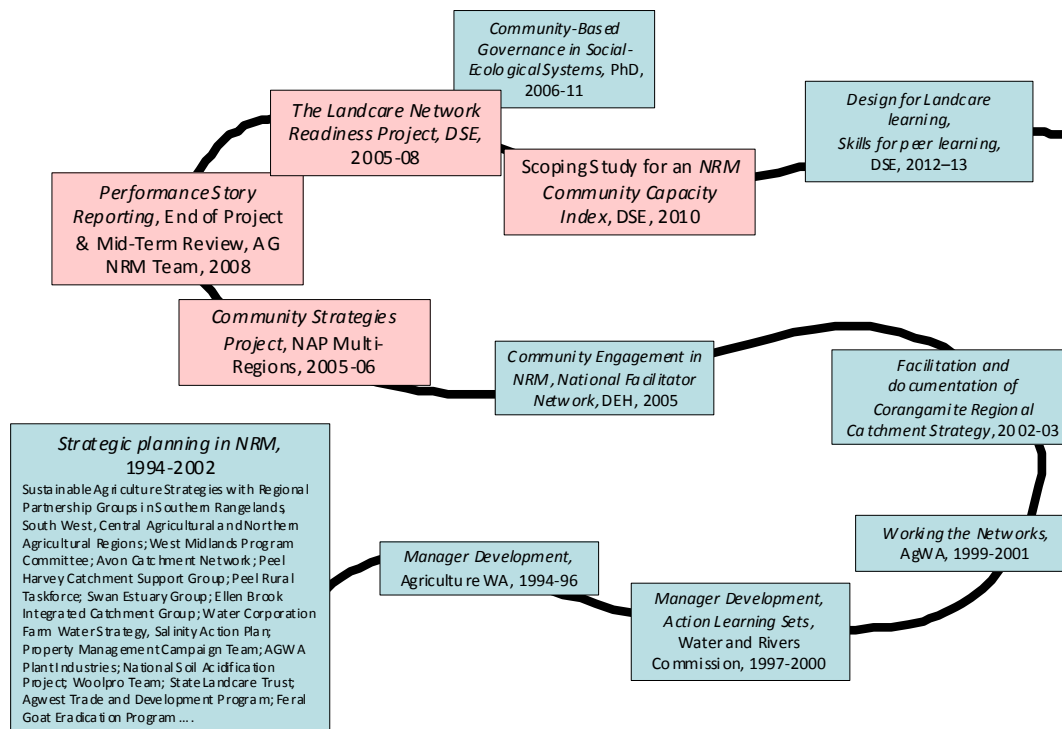


# Measuring the social in NRM: Lessons learned and some suggestions

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This is a story about one practitioner's journey through the changing NRM landscape, over 20 years. I come from the tribe that believes that NRM is largely a matter not of biophysical assessments and interventions, but of social agreements about what is problematic and what will be done for the common good. In the mid 1990s, I started getting work in the agriculture and environment sectors. I facilitated strategic planning, developed managers' skills and taught engagement. In 2005, I had a run of projects measuring the social in NRM - today I'll describe what I learned, and where I believe measures fit in the larger endeavour of improving NRM.



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At first, I wasn't interested in measurement. I was focused on creating processes for collaborative decision making. Then I began to notice that the collaborative processes that worked well at service delivery and community level didn't get taken up much as you travelled up the hierarchy towards centres of power. When the assets framework arrived, I noticed that the social was treated as a given, to be called on as needed by a decision process that took most of its cues from the biophysical. And after a surge in the mid-2000s, funding for capacity building fell away because the connection to resource condition could not be demonstrated in practice.

Perhaps if we could measure the social stuff, I thought to myself, the same way ecologists measure river health, the social might have more standing, and get built into budgets, rather than being tacked on at the end. Maybe numbers would bring the dense human world out of the shadows. A project in 2005 allowed me to spend 18 months trialling measures for social

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capacity, which were then ignored by managers at regional and State levels. I was disappointed and a bit surprised.

I then spent three years developing capacity in Landcare Networks. That project became the starting point for PhD research into community-based governance, and into the way governance regimes change (and why they don't change). I now believe that transforming public governance—the way we make and implement decisions for the common good—is the *fastest* way to improve NRM outcomes, and the *best* way to strengthen the place of the social in NRM.

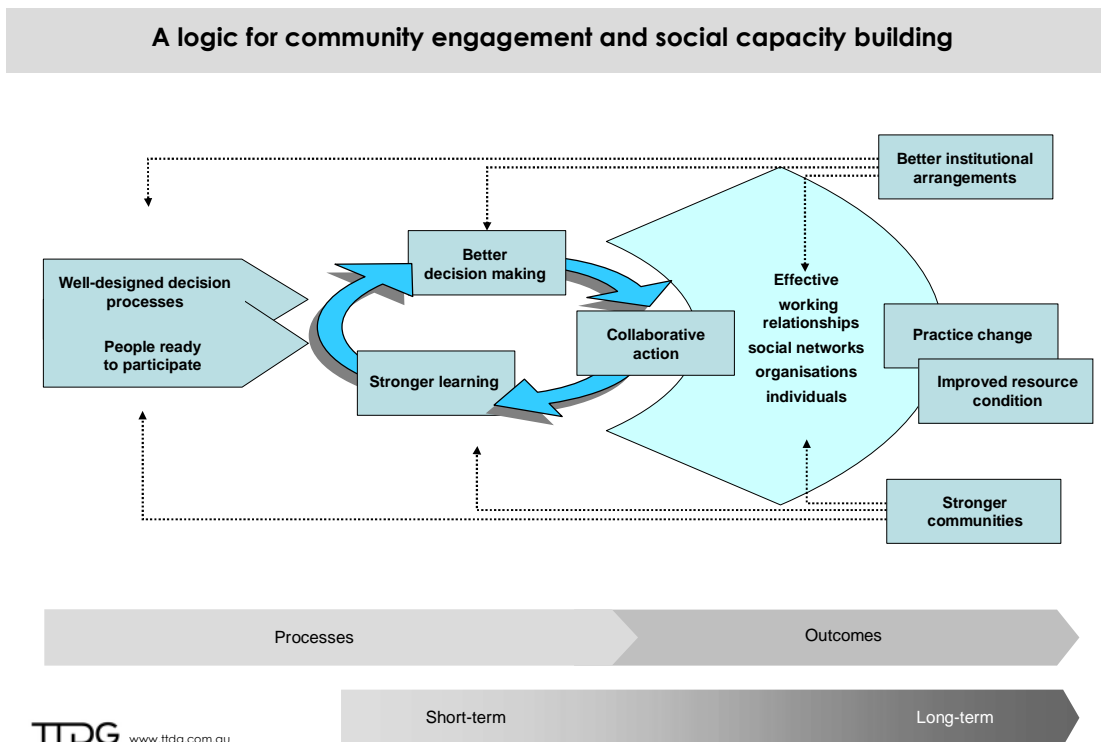
I'll say more about this in a moment, but first, what have I learnt about measuring the social? The 2005-06 *Community Strategies* project involved four Victorian CMAs. It produced guidelines for regional community strategies and trialled a methodology for setting targets for social capacity.<sup>2</sup> The focus was social capacity for NRM - the working relationships around NRM tasks, the networks within which those relationships operate, and the capacity for contribution on NRM tasks in the wider community.

*How does engagement and capacity building contribute to resources condition?*

I built a logic connecting engagement and capacity building activity to resource condition. I proposed that engagement is engagement in all NRM tasks, not just planning, and that capacity building is any activity, not just training programs, that builds up the skills, knowledge and relationships people need to make wise decisions and take action that makes a difference.

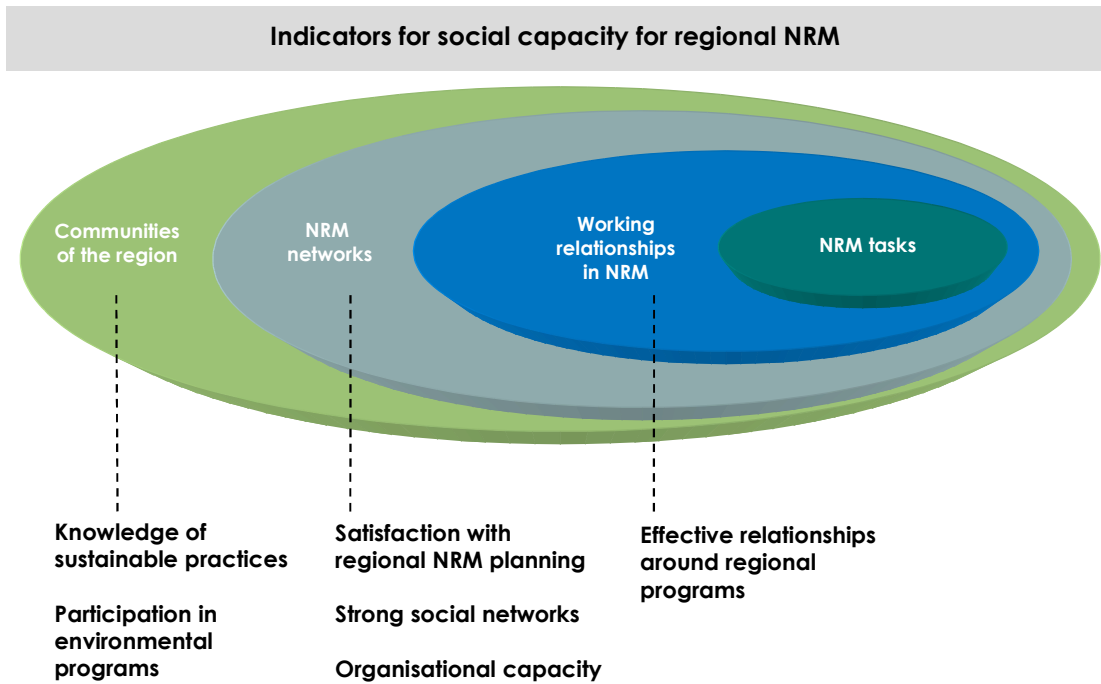
*What's a useful point at which to measure outcomes of engagement and capacity building?*

I proposed that the best place to measure outcomes and set targets for this aspect of NRM was in the working relationships around NRM tasks, first and foremost, and the networks, organisations and individuals that support and directly engage in those relationships.



<sup>2</sup> There was a lot happening in measuring the social around this time. For example, Allan Curtis had begun longitudinal measurement at regional scale of the relationship between social capital and practice change, Mark Fenton was measuring the capacity of regional NRM bodies, and a group from the National Land and Water Audit was building a framework for the social influences on practice change.

Then I went out into the literature and found indicators and measures for these outcomes.



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*What did I learn from using the measures?*

I used existing CCMA survey data for the two measures of communities of the region. I built an 18 minute phone survey to ask questions about all the other matters, and I worked with CMA staff at Program level to have them identify a range of stakeholders. They gave me names and numbers, I trialled the survey, and then it was run by a Melbourne market research company.

The survey was a complex thing to record. I think the measures for the NRM network sphere worked in the interviews. We had potential, which I played with a bit, to compare types of stakeholder across programs against those measures. There is much more to be done here, but let me turn to the measure that really worked hard for us and brought together many points of view—the measure for effective NRM relationships.

*Measuring NRM relationships*

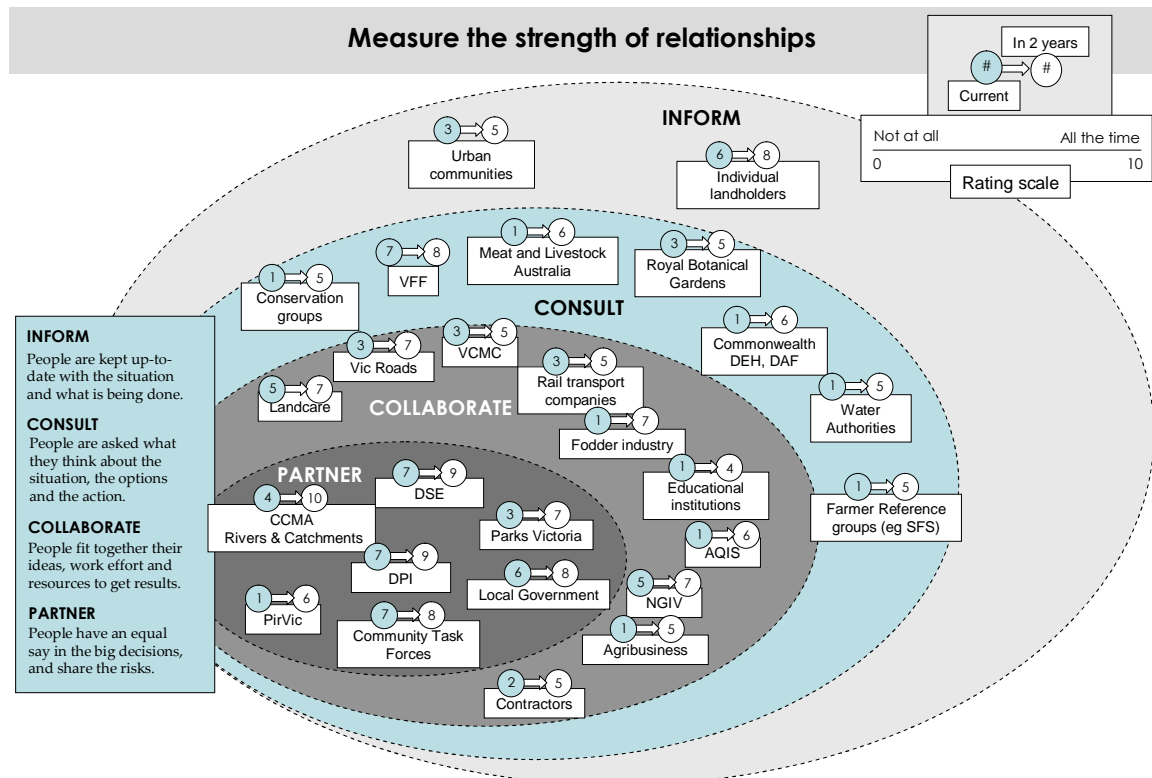
This measure drew in different points of view to assess the quality of working relationships, and to give this a quantitative expression. The measure of NRM relationships had an impact on the thinking of program staff, and became a jumping off point for considering targets for relationships, and where capacity and engagement opportunities needed to be strengthened. In the phone survey of CMA Program stakeholders, we asked:

*"Which of the following statements best describes your **current relationship** with the CMA's XYZ Program ....?" (slide 4)*

- |  |                    |
|--|--------------------|
| We work together on planning and projects, have an equal say in the big decisions, and share the risks. ....                     | <b>Partner</b>     |
| We look for ways to fit together our ideas and activities, but run our projects separately. ....                                 | <b>Collaborate</b> |
| The Program asks us what we think about issues and options related to xyz, and keeps us up-to-date with what they are doing. ... | <b>Consult</b>     |
| The Program keeps us up-to-date with what they are doing. ....   | <b>Inform</b>      |

Once a respondent chose a level of engagement, they used behavioural indicators to identify how well they thought they were being engaged. For example, for **Collaborating**, the behaviour "Pursues their own agenda with little understanding of our needs and goals" earned 2 on a 10 point scale. "We align our activities, talk often to each other and sort out difficulties quickly" rated 10.

This assessment was also made by program staff, allowing for fine-grained thinking about which relationships were critical to a program, and which needed to be strengthened.



#### After the ball is over ....

This and the other measures trialled with the Corangamite CMA were a good start on a difficult measurement task. However, when I toured the results to CMAs around the State, I found little appetite to use or further develop these measures. Managers had enough on their plate with biophysical assets, and didn't want to add another asset to their load.

Fair enough, I thought, kicked myself for not building those wider relationships earlier, and resolved to do this in my next project. It didn't help that I lost my sponsor in DSE, who moved out of the agency to another job towards the end of the project.

Subsequent work with the Commonwealth's Performance Story Reporting framework, and on a Community Capacity Index for Victoria, both different approaches to measuring the social in NRM, showed the task to be resource intensive (for PSR) and do-able not attractive to a Coalition government. I'm curious about the renewed interest in measuring the social, hopeful about the prospects for environmental accounts, cautious about the likelihood of comprehensive measurement of the social anytime soon.

### *An agenda*

What does seem possible, even in these resource-lean times, is a measure that allows people to ask—"how is this relationship going?"—and to talk to each other about this. If we could also make explicit the theories of change that connect project activity to resource condition in program logics, we would bring a lot of oxygen to the social in NRM.

However, to succeed with even these modest goals, I think our focus should be less on measures than on transformation of the way we do business in NRM. By transformation, I do not mean replacing what we've got, in one fell swoop, with something better. What I mean by transformation is making more of the many but usually isolated episodes of innovation occurring continually across the multi-level NRM system. Without a wide view of governance practices and structures, the measures we develop are likely to be another episode of innovation, that passes once initial funding stops.

In social-ecological systems, public governance provides the leverage to influence human behaviour, and it comes flavoured by the past. Australian NRM is dominated by top-down, technocratic governance, a style that Brunner characterises as *scientific management*.<sup>3</sup> Decisions are made above and implemented below. Those who implement are not agents in their own right but instruments of decisions made above.

Top-down works well in stable situations where a single actor controls the field, but not so well in complex situations or where influence is dispersed across many actors. In NRM, understanding is best developed between those with a stake in the situation, and agreements on action need to be negotiated. Network forms of governance handle this better than hierarchies, and we are beset by hierarchies in NRM. To be fair, NRM also uses network governance a lot, and well. Landcare is network governance in a pure form; landscape scale alliances for revegetation and biodiversity corridors are everywhere; regional bodies use and have their hands in many cross-boundary structures. But hierarchy tends to trump networks, and networks sometimes go their own way rather than look for a closer fit with hierarchies.

There are calls for more adaptive governance, and many schemas, but you can't just wish or mandate these into existence. Top-down systems are remarkably persistent. Moves to integrated catchment management in the 1990's gave way to centralisation of decision making with targeted investment. GIS tools which might have supported decision making at the grassroots have just as often concentrated influence in the hands of those who manage the datasets. 'Partnership' has been used on more than a few occasions as the shopfront for decisions made in a small club. Government programs to support communities have been constructed in wilful ignorance of community ways of organising action.

But it is possible to transform NRM governance from the inside out, and there are three strategies I think worth considering:

- taking the focus of engagement beyond planning,
- networking the innovators in governance, and
- facilitating inquiry into governance.

### *What are people being invited to engage with?*

Engagement in NRM is mostly engagement with *planning*. NRM managers get a patient reception from other planners, but for most people, planning is not all that interesting. It exists at the edge of their worlds, which are centred on making a living or creating a good place to live.

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<sup>3</sup> Brunner, R. D., Steelman, T. A., Coe-Juell, L., Cromley, C. M., Edwards, C. M. and Tucker, D. W. (eds) *Adaptive governance: integrating science, policy, and decision making*. 2005. Columbia University Press, New York.

They show up to planning events hoping to be able to talk about these interests, then they fall away as talk ascends into the maze of government priorities, frameworks and responsibilities.

What might be more engaging than planning? Sustainable landscapes has had its run, and resilience is on the rise, but both are concepts removed from the person. One possibility is *stewardship*, which takes the felt sense of personal responsibility for place and locates it within wider landscape processes and within collective responsibility for country. Another possibility is *governance itself*. We resent and complain about poor governance: might this be harnessed for improving it? For most people, civic responsibility doesn't extend this far. However, there *is* a small segment of the small NRM community for whom governance *is* a live issue, and this brings me to my second suggestion.

#### *Network the innovators in governance*

Amongst the disaffected and idealistic in any sector are a small percentage who, when they are constrained by institutional arrangements, decide to change those constraints. They become innovators in governance, or what one literature calls 'institutional entrepreneurs'. If we connect these innovators, they will inspire each other and we will learn from what is happening in each of their locales.

Our session today is an instance of networking the innovators, but we also need to broaden the creative questioning of governance. Innovators are stubborn and independent-minded individuals, who often act in spite of others. They need a groundswell of people prepared to go beyond complaint and wishful thinking to find out *why* things are the way they are, and what will change them.

#### *Inquiry into governance*

We need critically questioning of our governance practices. Staff training in engagement should be a vehicle for this, but training never reaches the critical mass to shift engagement practice. Staff change too often, the training input is never deep enough, and training is about 'how to' not 'why to'. The crux of change is to rework the relationships between people, so we need to bring together people from across the many levels of NRM governance to think about their situation.

A current project in the Corangamite region with my colleague Moragh Mackay is prototyping this strategy.<sup>4</sup> A core group of 30 people from State to local level are using systems inquiry tools to work out what is locking up NRM governance and what can open it up. They are looking at the systemic constraints around inclusiveness in community groups, collaboration between NRM contributors, the urban-country divide, environmental monitoring and local level planning.

These are big issues, and inquiry sometimes feels a tenuous starting point. It would be impressive to announce a new agenda for governance and set out to put it in place, but grand plans more often than not come to naught. It's better to build slowly. Hierarchies may control resources, but networks have the freedom to question and innovate, and this mobilises the capacity for transformation.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and be part of this discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> Systemic Inquiry into NRM Governance in the Corangamite Region, contact the author or moragh@vic.chariot.net.au