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## FROM TOP-DOWN TO BOTTOM-UP: BUILDING STAKEHOLDER CAPACITY TO PARTICIPATE IN REGIONAL PLANNING IN RANGELANDS

*J.A. Bellamy<sup>1</sup>, A.P. Dale<sup>1</sup> and L. Pollock<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>CSIRO Tropical Agriculture, 120 Meiers Rd., Indooroopilly, Qld. 4068.

<sup>2</sup>Dept. Natural Resources, Emerald, Qld. 4720

### ABSTRACT

A new paradigm of integrated and ecosystem management approaches to regional planning is emerging. It is based on building strong partnerships between key regional stakeholder groups with a role in natural resource management, as a means of achieving a shift towards more sustainable and equitable resource use and management outcomes. A novel approach based on this paradigm is the Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning Project. The mechanisms adopted by this process for building stakeholder capacity to more effectively participate in and influence regional planning processes, include: improving institutional arrangements, supporting sectoral groups to undertake and influence planning processes, raising community awareness, and improving access to information.

### INTRODUCTION

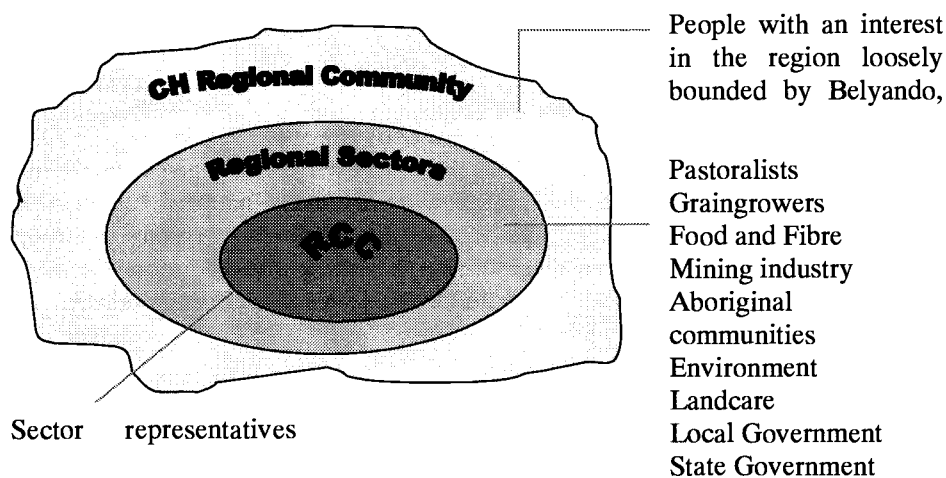
Approaches to regional planning in rangelands have, in the past, been largely centralised processes that have taken a uni-sectoral or a single issue focus, such as economic development, social planning and nature conservation within a region (Dale and Bellamy 1998). Commonly, Government has driven them alone frequently in a reactive response to resource use crises (e.g. climatic uncertainty, heritage protection, and market forces). However, a new paradigm of integrated and ecosystem management approaches to regional planning is emerging based on building strong partnerships between key regional stakeholder groups with a role in natural resource management. Such approaches are proposed as a potential means of achieving a shift towards more sustainable and equitable resource use and management outcomes at a regional level. In particular, fragmentation of responsibilities and institutional rigidity, together with uncertainty about the appropriate balance of top-down and bottom-up processes, are seen to impede change and provide a fundamental barrier to sustainable and equitable natural resource use and management. A diversity of regional policy and activities exists within government, industry and the community. These need to be integrated across all levels. Integration needs to move beyond the coordination of functions. It needs to involve negotiatory processes and commitments to specific roles and responsibilities for implementing and monitoring planning decisions at the regional level. Significantly, this needs to occur within a framework that reflects societal values and expectations relating to natural resource use and management.

One approach attempting to operationalise this paradigm in rangelands is the Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning Project (CHRRUPP). CHRRUPP is a collaborative project that aims to improve the system of planning for sustainability of resource use and management in the Central Highlands region of Queensland (Dale *et al.* 1998; <http://chrrupp.tag.csiro.au>). The perceived need for this initiative stemmed from recognition by key regional interests of the increasing pressures (eg. market, social, competing uses, environmental and geographical) facing the region that required integrated solutions at a regional scale. CHRRUPP seeks to address these regional pressures through a more integrated, regionally-driven and negotiated approach to improving the overall system of planning for sustainability of resource use and management in the Central Highlands. This paper discusses stakeholder engagement in this predominantly bottom-up regional process.

## PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURE

Due to the large size of the Central Highlands region (approx. 64,350 sq/km with 29,721 people) and the pluralistic nature of its community with a broad diversity of interests and social values, participation is based on representation of regional interests supported through a two-tiered structure comprising regional sector groups and a Regional Coordinating Committee (RCC) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. CHRRUPP participatory structure.



CHRRUPP operates as a voluntary partnership involving 15 key regional sector groups within government, industry and community. Sectors are collectivities of people with common interests (not defined by geographical space) that are drawn from existing organised groups predominantly within the Central Highlands (including pastoralists, graingrowers, food & fibre, mining, aboriginal communities, environment, landcare, local government, state government, Commonwealth agencies, human services, economic development organisations (EDOs), Fitzroy Basin Association (FBA), Desert Uplands Build-up and Development Strategy Committee (DUBDSC)).

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT MECHANISMS

Stakeholder engagement in CHRRUPP occurs through four key mechanisms:

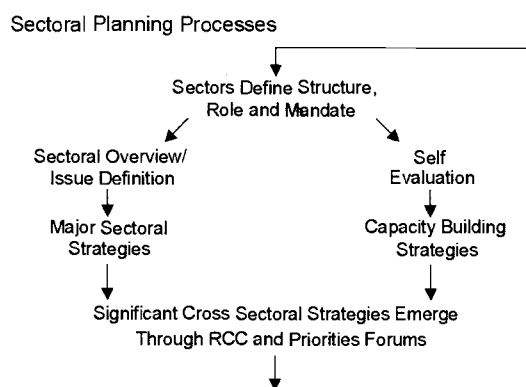
- Improving institutional arrangements to support more equitable negotiation among stakeholders on resource use.** The RCC provides a multi-sectoral and inclusive regional forum for the negotiated development of a common regional vision for the Central Highlands. It is CHRRUPP's central integrative mechanism and comprises representatives formally nominated by each of the 15 sectoral groups. In principle, sector representatives on the RCC act as agents for their constituents and formally represent their sector on the RCC. Meetings of the RCC involving all sector representatives (and/or their proxies) are held to bring the different regional interests together in a single forum to discuss common issues, foster inter-sectoral linkages and agree on processes to ensure that regional resource use is effective and equitable. The RCC meets formally three times per year in face-to-face meetings, which are interspersed with tele-conferences to

ensure that time-critical issues are progressed and that the group is up-to-date on activities in other sectors.

Through the RCC, CHRRUPP aims to establish clearer partnership arrangements between Government and different sectors in the Central Highlands to resolve regional sustainability problems. This occurs principally through the negotiation of "project briefs" about how to resolve the key regional issues. This is a new approach to structuring Government/community responses to regional problems. For example, in the first RCC meeting, all sectors agreed one of the major issues that needed to be resolved through a co-operative regional approach was reform of the impact assessment system in the region; that is the collective formal processes for decision making on natural resource management. These processes exist under a variety of statutes and operate to a range of standards. The brief developed for the Impact Assessment Reform Project (see <http://chrrupp.tag.csiro.au>) represents the start of an agreement between the State and the RCC about how this particular regional priority will be resolved.

- **Building improved planning capacity within stakeholder groups.** The regional sector planning process (see Fig. 2) underpins the RCC process and essentially provides it with credibility and legitimacy. The principal activities of the sector planning process focus on strategic issue identification and action to resolve key regional sustainability issues from the individual sector's perspective. Specifically, each regional sector group works through its response to the regional pressures that it faces in sustainably managing resources. At the same time there is a focus on self-evaluation within the sectors and the development of parallel sectoral strategies to improve their sectoral capacity to plan and also to participate in and influence regional planning processes. To this end, CHRRUPP assists sectors with the provision of and better access to information, the negotiation of support and technical assistance with planning and the facilitation of communication within and between groups.

Figure 2. Regional sector planning process.



- **Raising broader community awareness on regional issues and on opportunities to influence policy and planning processes.** The RCC also hosts Regional Priorities Forums (RPFs), which are interactive public forums held periodically at key centres throughout the region in particular to engage non-aligned community members to:
  - raise community awareness of CHRRUPP and invite broader participation;
  - obtain a broader community perspective on regional resource use planning issues; and
  - ratify the direction of the CHRRUPP process through public comment on the project.

These forums provide a clear opportunity for linking together people from diverse backgrounds and to consider regional issues based on the initiative of the regional community that was not previously possible.

- **Improving technical understanding among stakeholders of how the region functions socially, economically, environmentally and politically.** Fundamental to improving the system of planning for regional resource use and management is the facilitation of stakeholder understanding and learning through both the effective application of biophysical, economic and social knowledge, and more equitable access to appropriate data and information technologies to both assist in the structuring of frameworks for negotiation among stakeholders as well as better informing the negotiation process. To this end, CHRRUPP has also focussed on improving the availability and integration of, and stakeholder access to relevant information on regional sustainability through a number of activities including:
  - the development of a Web-based regional information system;
  - developing tools for assessing issues and to facilitate negotiation processes; and
  - establishing a system of state of region reporting.

## **LESSONS IN PROGRESSING FROM TOP-DOWN TO BOTTOM-UP PROCESSES**

The development of CHRRUPP's stakeholder engagement processes has evolved progressively. In particular, gaining commitment by all key stakeholders to the process has taken considerable time. Although there is strong support from the region for the process, initially there were varying levels of confidence in and understanding of that process across the different regional sectors. Getting all interests to a common level of understanding and to participate with an equal voice based on a legitimate mandate takes considerable time and has proven to be more difficult in specific cases.

Relatedly, sectoral coherence is a challenging issue. Some sectoral interests involved either existing internal structures and processes for communication and networking (with varying degrees of effectiveness), or an existing array of organised groups that were loosely aligned or they operated as single regional entities. Some sectors however were more constrained in forming a coherent group and therefore being involved in a responsible and legitimate way. Key constraints include:

- lack of sectoral development in the region or limited capacity (i.e. resources, communicative structure) to participate as a coherent sector;
- competitiveness of the environment in which some sectors operate leading to conflict about who is best to represent that sector.

Nevertheless, CHRRUPP's essentially bottom-up approach to improving the system of planning for regional sustainability is seen by participants to have a number of strengths including (Bellamy 2000):

- Establishing an inclusive forum (ie. the RCC) for bringing regional sectors together with equal voice that provides opportunities for raising awareness of others' viewpoints and values, a cross-sectoral mechanism for open and informed discussion, and the sharing of information and networking outside traditional boundaries that did not exist in the region in the past.
- Involving individual sector planning processes that underpin the operations of the RCC. This double 'package' is seen to "have the potential to build trust and empower people" to influence resource use planning and policy development in the region.
- Providing for the first time "traditionally disadvantaged groups with a voice in regional planning processes" (eg. Murri interests and the human services sector).

- Bringing people into contact with others they would normally not have the opportunity to do so that “can force one to look outside one’s own boundaries or area of interest and take a more regional perspective”.
- Involving influential people in the region who are recognised as community leaders and who have influence and provide credibility to the process and “access to important people”.
- Supporting learning processes including creating awareness amongst participants of their potential to contribute to and influence regional planning.

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