


Regional partnership agreements on prioritised investment strategies for the Burnett-Mary Region

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Overview

The Burnett–Mary region is typical of the diversity of natural resource management (NRM) stakeholder groups. These include 27 local government authorities, catchment bodies, Landcare groups, conservation groups, coastal management, traditional owners, primary, secondary and tertiary industries, infrastructure corporations, research and development bodies and educational institutions.

SE03 funds were provided for a collaborative project between the Burnett Mary Regional Group (BMRG) and The University of Queensland. The project aimed to establish processes for creating negotiated partnerships to achieve the ‘targeted’ investment required in an investment strategy for the regional NRM plan. The project was conducted in two stages—a scoping project in 2004, which then paved the way for more detailed work in 2005 in association with the Centre for Rural and Regional Innovation.

The objectives for the first year were to:

- establish the partnership
- clarify stakeholder perspectives
- identify methods of negotiating partnership agreements that were likely to suit different stakeholder groups
- apply for funding to test alternatives in 2005.

Objectives for the second stage were to:

- continue interviews with sector members to understand their perspectives
- test methods of negotiating and formalising agreed contributions
- identify, design and pilot-test capacity-building activities for the sectors studied in 2004 (including building trust and strengthening internal and external relationships).

Interviews used Strategic Perspectives Analysis, a process that allowed exploration of opportunities for shared goal attainment. Researchers interviewed representatives of the local government, Landcare, catchment group and conservation sectors in the first stage, at a range of localities across the region.

In the second stage, researchers continued interviews with the coastal, secondary and tertiary industry sectors, while assisting BMRG where possible with partnership development. An Indigenous team member assisted the BMRG Indigenous Liaison Officer with partnering for this group. The researchers also assisted BMRG with activities towards cross-sector partnering for water quality monitoring, and for business development.

The successful Round 2 SE03 submission gave the research partnership confidence to apply the research to existing and planned processes for key stakeholders in the region. This approach has proven to be productive and effective for both BMRG and the researchers. However, due to unforeseen circumstances with some of the sectors (e.g. postponement of meetings and forums), research outcomes were affected.

The project has applied partnership formation principles from the business management sector to the partnering challenges facing regional bodies—suggesting different forms of partnering apply for different partners.

Readiness to form partnerships varies both within and between sectors. The issues identified by sectors and BMRG's approach to implementing targeted actions indicate that there are opportunities for multilateral partnerships. Relationship formation and capacity building are needed to prepare some sectors for this. Meanwhile, researchers have gained an understanding of the features and conditions for partnership formation, and a process or model for facilitating appropriate partnerships within and between community groups, or between community groups and business.

Conceptual and theoretical foundations

NRM stakeholders of the Burnett–Mary region are diverse. The region is represented by:

- 27 local governments
- over 40 Integrated Catchment Management (ICM), Landcare, and Conservation groups
- a wide range of groups across primary, secondary and tertiary industry
- up to ten traditional owner claimant groups,
- other key stakeholders including educational institutions and private sector organisations.

This diversity poses challenges in building a cohesive sense of 'belonging to the region', and to BMRG developing partnerships committed to targeted sustainable investment.

At inception, the perceived benefits of undertaking this research were that it provides:

- a clearer understanding of key stakeholder roles and responsibilities, including acceptance and willingness to operate in an integrated manner
- a coordinated investment strategy supported by key partners
- additional funding through private and philanthropic sectors flowing on from demonstrated stakeholder commitments.

The newly formed regional bodies share the challenge of making the model of stakeholder-based collaborative planning (Healey 1997; Gray 1989) work in practice, by building the necessary local ownership and strong horizontal and vertical linkages towards shared goals among NRM stakeholders.

Bellamy (2002) identifies the need for collaborative, multi-stakeholder catchment management approaches (such as National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality regional bodies) to develop strong horizontal linkages (among stakeholders at either local or regional scales) and vertical linkages (between local and the regional scales) among its sectoral and local constituents.

The essence of this project was to enable BMRG to understand its constituents and the opportunities for building linkages within and between sectors towards a solid and enduring investment plan, including the opportunity to build capacity.

Establishing readiness to partner was based on the Strategic Perspectives Analysis (Dale and Lane 1994) approach of identifying commonalities and opportunities for shared goal attainment. The approach taken to formation of partnership agreements largely follows the theoretical groundwork provided by Felkins (2002), who emphasises prior conditions of relationships and trust formation before entering into agreements, and the need for flexibility and dialogue. Felkins argues that because agreements must be made in an environment of continuous change, they require flexibility and opportunities for feedback and renegotiation, responsiveness, understanding and accountability, and attention to needs, roles, results, relationship and culture.

Felkins (2002) summarised characteristics for effective community agreements as:

- foundation in shared values and mutual beliefs
- consensus on social rules that define relationships
- commitment to common goals and mutual interests
- responsiveness to individual needs and concerns
- flexibility and openness to renegotiation
- emphasis on trust and longer-term relationships
- reinforcement of social action and accountability.

The main aims of the Phase 1 study in 2004 were to clarify stakeholder perspectives on opportunities and constraints for contribution to regional plans, and identify methods of negotiating agreed contributions that are likely to suit different stakeholder groups.

For the Phase 2 study (2005–06), the aims were to continue interviews and agreement processes with stakeholders in sectors not covered in Phase 1; identify, design and pilot-test capacity-building activities for the sectors studied in 2004 and 2005; and explore opportunities for cross-sector partnerships.

Methodology

Phase 1 information collection methods included observation of board and stakeholder meetings; interviews with a sample of members from four sectors (catchment groups, Landcare groups, local government, and conservation groups); and requests to other regional bodies for examples of their partnership-forming processes. Researchers also reviewed literature on partnership formation, covering approaches to partnership formation in the social and business domains as well as the natural resource management or environmental domain.

For the stakeholder analysis used to select interviewees, researchers followed the lead set by BMRG in classifying individual and organisation members into sector (stakeholder) categories such as catchment bodies, Landcare groups, conservation groups, traditional owners, local government, primary, secondary and tertiary industry.

Stakeholders were then also categorised by locality: upper, middle, and lower Mary; north, central, south and lower Burnett; and Baffle Creek.

Interviews were based on the Strategic Perspectives Analysis (Dale and Lane 1994) with a structure exploring objectives, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. For these interviews, it was decided to work towards objectives from familiar ground by discussing issues that were at the time subject to consultation between BMRG and the sectors.

When interviews for each sector were completed, researchers developed a 'readiness to partner' profile based on questions provided by Felkins (2002) regarding need, roles, relationships and culture; and also identified where sectors and organisations belonged within a spectrum of stages of partnership developed as part of this project.

Phase 2 consisted of two stages. Stage 1 was to identify and test opportunities for partnership formation using interviews and group workshops (some of this was covered for some sectors in Phase 1). Stage 2 was to identify capacity-building needs and test approaches to raise capacity for partnership development.

After identifying 'readiness to partner', the intention was to undertake activities (e.g. meetings) as needed to build intra-sector relationships and then conduct a sector workshop aiming for collaborative sector-based partnership with BMRG. The desired outcomes of this process were:

- in-principle agreement about partnering and contractual arrangements between BMRG and that sector
- a communication strategy that meets the needs of that sector for effective two-way communication with all sector members and BMRG.

These workshops would also identify capacity needs, leading to design and pilot testing of capacity-building activities that build intra-sector and inter-sector relationships and equip sector groups to design, manage, monitor and evaluate projects.

A cross-sector conference was to be held to explore opportunities for multi-party investment activities (and agreements), using the concept of 'negotiation space', while also carrying out some of the capacity-building pilot testing. The process was to incorporate (after Felkins 2002) narratives that laid out the cultural background and visions of each sector.

Partnership-based research

BMRG identified the need to assess stakeholder capacity and willingness to partner as a research project concept during the early days of the NRM plan development processes. This research was deemed paramount in the preparation of regional investment strategy implementation approaches and successful partnership development. The University of Queensland's School of Natural and Rural Systems Management was identified as an ideal research partner to assist with the development of this proposal. The opportunity for implementation was provided through SE03 and considered by the research partners to be an innovative approach to social research in NRM.

The initial submission under Round 1 of SE03 was only supported as a pilot project. This was considered a disappointing outcome, as the results of a broader study approach would have been invaluable for informing the regional investment strategy implementation preparation phase. In fact, as a result of reduced investment, partnership development approaches were being trialled and progressed with only minimum input from the researchers. This was recognised by all parties as a weakness. However, it is important to note that the researchers committed far greater effort than the limited investment allowed for; the findings did provide direction for improving partnership approaches with sectors engaged in the research to date.

The Round 2 submission was successful in leveraging the full investment required to implement the study methodology. This gave the research partnership confidence to commence the alignment of research methods with existing and planned processes for key stakeholders in the region. This approach has proven to be productive and effective for both BMRG and the researchers. However, unforeseen circumstances involving some of the sectors (e.g. postponement of meetings and forums), impacted on research outcomes.

A significant strength of the research partnership has been the preparedness of both partners to adapt and modify approaches to ensure ongoing success of the research. This has produced a research partnership that is likely to be enduring and sustainable post-SE03 investment. However, given the innovative nature of the SE03 state-level investment project, commitment to fostering research partnerships would have been preferred for a minimum of three years. This would have ensured unquestionable longevity of the research and provided an even greater opportunity for extension of learning and methodological improvement at a broader scale.

Applying project findings

An improved understanding of the diverse needs and concerns facing each of the sectors under the regional arrangements has been one of the key findings derived from the research. This has assisted the BMRG to rethink some approaches to key stakeholder groups and, in particular, design an NRM plan implementation process that supports stakeholder diversity.

Another key finding is the time it takes to build relationships and partnerships. The advent of the regional arrangements has presented a range of challenges in managing stakeholder expectations. This research has provided invaluable insights into what is required to build lasting and meaningful relationships and partnerships. However, application of these findings continues to be an ongoing challenge to BMRG due to time constraints.

BMRG has applied and integrated key learnings from the research in a number of ways; specifically:

- developing a regional partnership approach to the Landcare sector under memoranda of understanding in order to foster intra-sector capacity-building activities
- targeting longer-term partnership arrangements with local governments to ensure ownership of NRM issues and implementation activities and identify the level of resources required to lead our regional community
- committing the time it takes to build awareness and capacity, and improve the engagement and participation of the Indigenous sector in 'caring for country'
- developing a range of partnership agreement templates to support the diversity in NRM plan activities and stakeholder expectations.

Barriers to application and integration

The single biggest barrier to application and integration of key learnings from the research project is time. The need for ongoing testing, trialling, and evaluation is paramount to the key findings being embedded in organisational processes. The BMRG are constantly pressured by the need to meet contractual obligations and milestones and, as such, the opportunity to apply and integrate key findings has been diminished.

Another barrier experienced by the research partnership has been the ongoing trade-off between running distinct project processes and aligning with existing or planned processes by BMRG. This has mostly been out of the control of the project, but has at times impacted on the ability of the research to follow desired work plan activity. Subsequently, full application of the research methods has not been possible with all sectors. However, where this has been identified, alternate approaches have been adopted to ensure the achievement of project outcomes.

Regional implications

The key findings, and their application to, and integration with, regional planning and implementation processes, imply the ongoing need to test, trial, and evaluate the methods with sectors only partially explored to date. Other implications include:

- a need to revisit those sectors already engaged to determine if partnership arrangements can be improved or adapted
- pursuance of the most appropriate partnership arrangement with those sectors (i.e. secondary/tertiary industry) who have only been interviewed with the aim to improve engagement and participation levels
- overall evaluation of the project methodology to refine research approaches with sectors at varying stages of partnership formation with BMRG.

Tools

1. **Strategic Perspectives Analysis** to identify readiness to partner (based on Felkin's questions about needs, roles, relationships, and culture).
2. A proposed process for **partnership formation**:

1. Identify issues and objectives of the sector or organisation
2. Identify themes within the NRM plan that match objectives
3. Assess readiness to partner by answering the questions related to needs, roles, relationships, and culture
4. Identify the type of agreement that best suits the level of readiness
5. Establish a climate that progressively develops responsiveness and shared understanding

6. Formalise the type of contract for accountability that best suits the situation
7. Use a checklist of common characteristics of successful linked communities to monitor progress towards formation of linked communities

3. A classification of **stages of partnership formation** that might foster efforts to achieve truly collaborative partnerships:

1. Competitive tender
2. Triple bottom line tender
3. Institutional alliance
4. Collaborative project contract
5. Sector-based collaborative partnership
6. Sector based collaborative partnership (cross-sector)

4. A **divergence-convergence-divergence** process for profitable dialogue between cross-sector groups and regional bodies, towards forming partnerships to achieve natural resource management goals (issues and solutions discussion, general aims, sector modifications of aims, sector proposed contributions, support needed, rejected roles, philosophies and values to be recognised in developing action programs). The divergence-convergence step involves expressing differences, then meshing different aspirations and roles to form an agreed pathway to achieving the aim. The convergence-divergence step is about allocating tasks to sectors willing to undertake various parts of the overall effort needed to achieve the aim.
5. A process for staff to identify **capacity needs for each sector** by applying ratings (on a scale of one to five) to a list of questions refined from the capacity assessment tool described by Cavaye (2005).

1. What is the extent of networks and contact between groups?
2. How much do they share what they know?
3. How well do they trust and cooperate?
4. How clear are roles and responsibilities?
5. How well do they participate in NRM activities?
6. How well do they operate in partnership planning, decision-making, implementation, reporting
7. How adequate is in-kind investment for partnership activities?
8. Is time *not* perceived as an obstruction?




6. A schema for future negotiation and capacity building with traditional owners, covering:

- negotiation on fees, voting rights, resources and representation of traditional owners
- maintenance training regarding delegate selection and increased active participation
- team building
- governance development (communications, committee structure, legitimisation, protocols, MOU)
- establishment of code of ethics (regarding respect for roles, commitment to ongoing consultation, method of feedback).

7. Identification and development of **alternative partnership agreement templates** for NRM plan implementation activities (i.e. contracts, memoranda of understanding, service level agreements, shared responsibility agreements).

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic Perspectives Analysis for partnership readiness • Process for partnership formation • Classification of stages of partnership formation • Divergence-convergence-divergence process for cross-sector dialogue • Capacity need assessment process • Future negotiation and capacity building with traditional owners • Alternative partnership agreement templates 		
	<p>Keith, K, Ross, H & Burnett Mary Regional Group for Natural Resource Management 2005, <i>Burnett–Mary regional partnerships study: interim report</i>, School of Natural and Rural Systems Management, The University of Queensland, Gatton.</p>		
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