



Monitoring and evaluating the performance of regional NRM bodies in Queensland: applying a capacity model to the performance of regional groups

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Overview

The aim of this project was to implement a theoretical and methodological framework to monitor change in the capacity and performance of NAPSWQ regional bodies in Queensland. Based on a systems model of organisational capacity and performance, and using both qualitative and quantitative indicators, the objective of the project was to further operationalise existing indicators and collect indicator data on the capacity and performance of regional bodies.

The data that were collected enable:

1. a comparison of retrospective and current trends in indicators
2. comparative assessments amongst all regional groups
3. baseline indicator information for future performance and capacity monitoring of regional bodies.

Conceptual and theoretical foundations

The aim of this project was to develop and implement indicators to monitor change in the capacity and performance of NAPSWQ regional bodies in Queensland. It was intended that the information collected through this assessment would be used by regional bodies in evaluating their current performance, and provide a basis for the ongoing monitoring of the performance of regional bodies into the future.

The findings of a recent national pilot study informed the methodology and indicators for the current project. The study sought to refine indicators and a methodology to assess the social and institutional foundations of regional NRM programs.

The indicators and the methodology were developed in the national pilot study through workshops with Australian and State Government and regional body representatives in each State and through pilot testing with three regional bodies in Queensland, Victoria, and Western Australia.

In total, thirty-six indicators were used to assess the performance of regional bodies in relation to their management and program capacity and environmental controls.

The **management capacity** of regional bodies refers to the degree to which systems and processes are in place to maintain the function of the regional body, and includes, for example:

- skills and abilities in financial management and human resources
- staff training and development
- the quality of decision making processes
- organisational cohesion and leadership within the regional body.

Program capacity focuses on the delivery of NRM outcomes, including the development and implementation of regional NRM plans, investment strategies and on-ground actions. Indicators of program capacity include:

- the use and availability of NRM knowledge and technical skills
- the use of expert advisory panels
- the use of and access to NRM information
- the effectiveness of local NRM facilitator networks.

While the performance of regional bodies is dependent upon management and program capacity, it is also recognised that performance is influenced by processes external to regional bodies, including their interaction with external organisations such as Government, community groups and the general community.

Based on earlier research associated with the development of indicator frameworks, these indicators are referred to as '**environmental controls**'. Examples of these indicators include:

- the development and implementation of a community engagement strategy
- providing opportunities for engagement
- the level and quality of NRM engagement
- the inclusiveness of decision-making within the regional body.

Table 3. Indicators of regional body capacity (sample from total thirty-six indicators)

Management capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills and abilities in financial management and human resources • Staff training and development • The quality of decision making processes • Organisational cohesion • Leadership
Program capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use and availability of NRM knowledge and technical skills • Use of expert advisory panels • Use of and access to NRM information • Effectiveness of local NRM facilitator networks
Environmental controls	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development and implementation of a community engagement strategy • Level and quality of NRM engagement • Inclusiveness of decision making within the regional body

Methodology

The project included all six NAPSWQ regional bodies in Queensland and was based on structured telephone interviews with the Chair, CEO, and two senior staff members nominated by the regional body. All six regional bodies participated in the project; however in the case of one regional body, only one staff member participated, resulting in a total of twenty-three participants.

The CEO of the regional body was contacted first, and the project was described, and the requirements for participation in the project outlined. All regional bodies were informed that while a summary report of the project (the State report) would be developed, the identity of each regional body would remain confidential. Regional bodies were informed they would be provided with confidential individual reports of the project findings which were specific to their regional body.

Interviews with regional bodies were undertaken in January 2006. The interview schedule, (which identified seventy-two questions and the associated scoring rubrics), was forwarded to

each participant immediately prior to the interview. This permitted each participant to review and consider the questions prior to the interview, and also enabled the interview to be undertaken more efficiently. Each participant was informed that the information they provided would be confidential and that they should avoid discussing the questions or the project with others in the regional body.

The questions were based on the current situation within the regional body (limited to within the last twelve months). Retrospective questions (asking what the situation would have been two years ago) were also asked for several of the core indicators; to have collected this information for all indicators would have increased the interview time considerably.

The analysis of indicator data was based on the same data analysis procedures as used in psychometric assessments and psychological testing, and included reliabilities analyses, tests of internal consistency, and the development of composite indicators using the theoretical framework for capacity and performance that had been developed.

An analysis was undertaken in the aggregate across all regional bodies to show the relative distribution of scores on each of the indicators across the State, and provided to the project manager (Burdekin Dry Tropics NRM) and research partner (National Land and Water Resources Audit). In addition, specific analyses were also undertaken for each of the six regional bodies and reported to the regional body as a confidential report.

Research findings and interpretation

Interpretation of the indicator summary tables presented in the State report should be undertaken within the context of the overall situation of each regional body. Each regional body will have a different history of development, may be at different stages of NRM planning and delivery of on-ground investments, and be embedded in very different community and organisational contexts.

Clearly these situational characteristics should be considered by each regional body when interpreting the indicator summary tables, and their relative position in relation to each of the indicators.

In addition to interpreting indicators in the context of each regional body's situation, it is also important to review the technical and statistical information presented in each indicator summary table, in order to better understand the validity and reliability of each indicator.

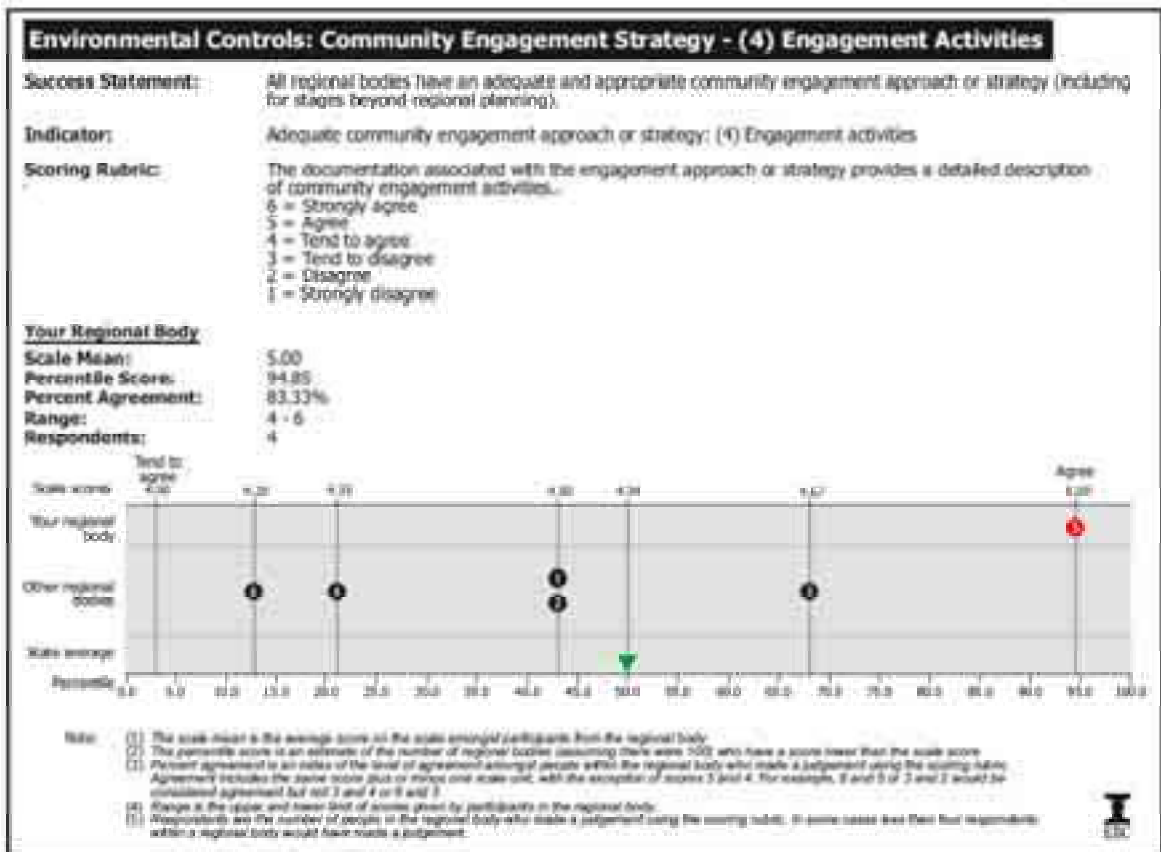


Figure 2. Example of indicator assessment⁵

Without identifying specific regional bodies, and independently of any of the contextual information in which each regional body would interpret the indicator summary tables, there are nevertheless several key findings associated with the analysis of the indicator data:

- When State averages are examined across all indicators, they suggest a positive outcome in relation to the indicators underpinning the performance of NAPSWQ regional bodies. As an example, State averages suggest regional bodies believe that decision-making processes are working well, job satisfaction and leadership competency is high, local facilitator networks are effective and that there are adequate and effective community engagement strategies and processes being implemented.
- The relative variation amongst regional bodies is generally always within a positive range, with the scores for regional bodies being relatively high, positive scores or relatively low positive scores. It needs to be recognised that while a regional body may score relatively low on a specific indicator, it is often a low score within a positive range.
- The findings from the analysis of retrospective questions for many indicators also suggest that respondents believe there has been significant improvement in the performance of regional bodies over the last two years. While the overall trend is generally positive, some caution is required in the use and interpretation of retrospective questions used in this context, as they are based on beliefs about change within the last two years, relative to the current period, and require individuals to recall and judge past events, which may be open to some bias.
- An important characteristic of the indicators and scoring rubrics used in the current study was that most indicators had the capacity to discriminate amongst regional bodies. There was always some variation in the scores amongst regional bodies, rather than all regional bodies having the same score. If indicators and scoring rubrics were unable to discriminate amongst regional bodies in relation to their performance they would be of limited value.

⁵ Fenton & Rickert 2006, p. 8.

- There were also reasonably high levels of internal consistency evident in the data, which suggests that the indicator data may be reasonably reliable.
- Although not reported in the summary indicator tables, it was found that in relation to the majority of indicators, the Chair and the CEO of the regional body scored indicators more positively than the two staff members who generally reported consistently lower scores. It is not unexpected that the Chair and CEO may have a positive bias given their responsibilities in the organisation; however in deriving a final indicator score, the use of two staff members may have somewhat tempered the positive bias.

Regional implications and application

This research has significant benefits for all participating NAPSWQ regional bodies in Queensland as it provides them with comparative and retrospective information through which these bodies may understand and monitor their performance and capacity to deliver NRM outcomes.

Regional bodies are responsible for the delivery of NRM outcomes, but currently have no ability to monitor and evaluate their performance in delivering these outcomes. While the research will allow regional bodies to monitor and evaluate their performance, it will also identify those areas in which the capacity of regional bodies needs to be improved. The research will provide regional bodies with important information on those dimensions of capacity and performance which need to be addressed by the regional body.

The data that was collected:

1. enables a comparison of retrospective and current indicator trends
2. enables comparative assessments amongst all regional groups
3. provides baseline indicator information for future performance and capacity monitoring of regional bodies.

While the research was undertaken in relation to NAPSWQ regional bodies in Queensland, the theoretical and methodological framework on which the research is based has been developed as part of the Australian Government monitoring and evaluation program for all regional bodies in Australia. The application of the methodology in Queensland will also have important implications in its future national application. Therefore it is important that further use of the indicators is not initiated until protocols for their use are developed.

It is expected that the indicators used in the current project will be discussed with and recommended for use by the Social and Economic National Coordination Committee (SENCC).




The sponsors of SENCC, the National Land and Water Resources Audit, will then ask the Audit Advisory Council to endorse the indicators and protocols for implementation and use at the National, State, Territory, and regional levels to underpin the evaluation of current NRM initiatives under the Natural Heritage Trust and the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

References

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⁶ The methodology and indicators used in this project were based on Fenton & Rickert's recent national pilot study of indicators for monitoring and evaluating the social and institutional foundations of regional NRM programs. The initial conceptual and methodological approach on which this study is based is described in Fenton's two earlier research papers.