

Linking the social with the environmental: identifying community capacity in the South East Queensland Western Catchments Region



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Overview

This project drew on social capital theory and sense-of-place theory in order to understand the complexity and diversity of local communities and their links to environmental actions in particular spatial domains.

Put simply, social capital develops when individuals and groups within a social system interact for mutual benefit in a variety of ways over a period of time. However, in the context of natural resource management, social systems interact with the geospatial environment in complex ways. Research on social capital has not been concerned with the strength and nature of human-environment relationships. By understanding social capital and environmental action within a context of spatially demarcated boundaries, linkages across communities and community groups can be better targeted and supported in practice.

This research was undertaken in the Bremer catchment, which comprises a diversity of communities and environments (e.g., rural, urban, peri-urban, etc.). The study employed both purposive and snowball sampling within the Raceview and Churchill region; around Purga and Peak Crossing; and in the Warrill View area. By conducting semi-structured interviews and workshops with key stakeholders, this research identified stakeholders' NRM priorities, existing and potential stakeholder partnerships, and the spatial limits of stakeholders' environmental actions and responsibilities. This information contributed to an understanding of the stakeholder relationships and the achievement of NRM objectives at the local and regional levels. It sought to build on the local environmental knowledge and awareness brought by individuals and groups embedded within specific spatial communities.

Conceptual and theoretical foundations

This research study explored the relationship between participation, social capital and stakeholder partnerships in achieving NRM objectives. It drew on both social capital theory and sense of place theory in order to develop understandings of how environmental change can occur across local regions, by engaging rural, peri-urban and urban communities across part of the Bremer Catchment. The specific aims and objectives of the project were:

1. to map the social capacity of stakeholder groups within the South East Queensland Western Catchments Group (SEQWCG) communities (rural, urban and peri-urban) for contribution to local NRM targets
2. to explore the linkages between different stakeholder groups and their impact on local community capacity given potentially varying spatial domains of responsibility
3. to explore ways to address potential impediments to the development of trust and collective action.

The study operated within the context of the following statement from the enabling program within SEQWCG's *Healthy Land Our Future* plan : The natural resource asset targets will not be met unless there are well informed and empowered communities supported by effective and efficient institutional systems across the region. Enabling programs address the threats to the 'people assets' of the region.

The term 'social capital' has become convenient for talking about a cluster of values, norms, and behaviours central to community health or well being, sustainable economic development, and effective environmental management..

Social capital is seen as shorthand to encompass the social elements that encourage and support individuals coming together, taking committed action toward an agreed upon goal. Trust, cooperation, and social networks are paramount in this concept. The emphasis may be on the efficacy of what has been called 'bonding social capital and capacity', as in the *Healthy Land Our Future* definition:

'...the way in which the social networks, relationships and processes of a community support individuals and communities to exercise their capabilities. Voluntary cooperation is easier in a community that has inherited a substantial stock of social capital. Social capital, unlike conventional capital, is a public good rather than a private good.'

Some see social capital as necessary, but not sufficient, for effective civic engagement and add to the discussion the importance of structural characteristics of access to institutional governance networks and access to resources which enable continued involvement. Both intra-community ties or networks between groups and organisations, as well as inter-community (and regional), may be included in discussions of effective engagement for meeting collective goals.

Most of the studies reviewed found that social and financial resources (such as effective coordinators, facilitators, and adequate funding for them) to support and lead the partnerships was critical, and participants needed to be in networks, be committed, and trust the other members of the partnership.

The concept of social capital can be problematic in general, and within Natural Resource Management frameworks designed to meet targets of strategic regional plans, in particular. The importance and centrality of social capital in community engagement to articulate environmental issues and to commit to implementing the necessary changes indicates the importance of addressing these potential difficulties. This research, in linking the social with environmental practice, seeks to identify useful ways of talking about social capital in relation to issues within the catchment area, and to indicate the ways in which it may be operating within the spatial dimensions of the study area.

In the context of natural resource management, social systems interact with the geo-spatial environment in complex ways. For example, local action and community membership has been found to have a geographic component as made explicit in the concept of 'sense of place'.

Moreover, environmental responsibility for pro-environmental, voluntary behaviours has been found to have geographic limits. There also is a need to recognise the diversity of communities in the region (e.g. rural, urban, peri-urban) and the consequences of increasing pressures on communities of different types. The framework or perspective is important within an NRM context to address diverse stakeholders and issues.

Methodology

The research was designed to explore local community-based solutions to environmental problems in five stages.

Stage 1 involved discussions between the partners about prior work conducted by SEQWCG aimed at capacity building, as well as an extensive literature review. Based on this, three communities (rural, urban and peri-urban) were targeted as sites for the research. Within these communities, social networks and key local stakeholders were identified, and used as a starting point to attract additional stakeholders through a process of 'snowball sampling'.

Stage 2 comprised key informer interviews to determine major local environmental issues and issues around the capacity of the local communities to respond. Specifically, this interview process identified stakeholder perceptions with respect to NRM responsibilities, opportunities, facilitating and impeding factors, and investment options. These interviews were then used as a

foundation on which to plan and implement workshops.

Stage 3 involved a series of locally based workshops in each of the three study communities. These community forums served to identify critical local NRM issues and their impacts within the community, as well as linkages across networks within the relevant social and spatial contexts. Participants were also requested to map perceived geo-spatial domains of responsibility for action and explore their capacity to undertake collective action given perceptions of efficacy, trust, and responsibility. Opportunities for alliances were discussed as were the perceived barriers or impediments to the effective formation and implementation of partnerships.

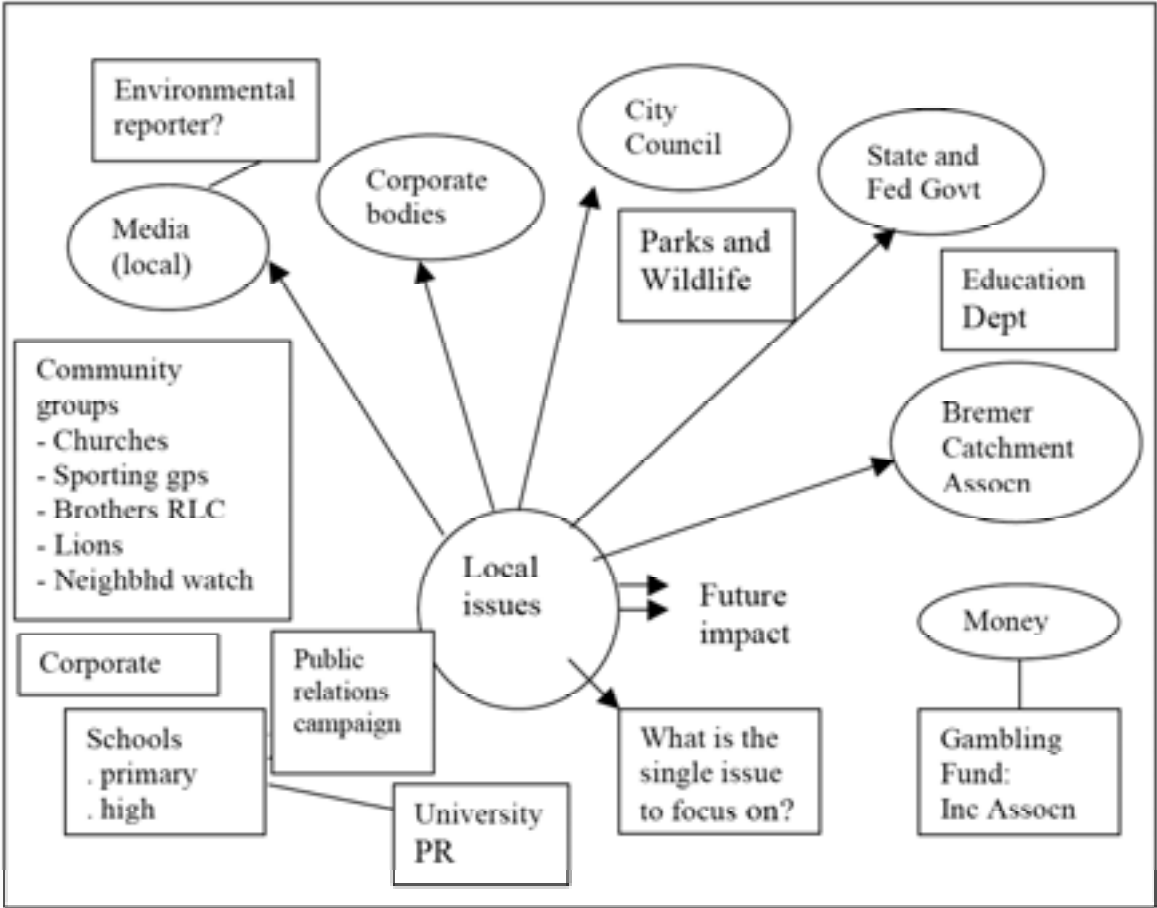


Figure 3. Community capacity mapping⁷

Stage 4 involved follow-up phone calls with participants and key stakeholders in order to determine outcomes from the project workshops.

Stage 5 comprised an analysis of the data generated from the workshops and personal or telephone interviews. Themes relating to both social capital development and the spatial dimension were identified in order to explore the linkages between stakeholder groups and their impact on local community capacity. Outcomes from the project workshops, together with the analysis, formed the basis for a summary of findings, and guidelines for the support of social capital development for even more effective NRM in the region.

Partnership-based research

Regional bodies aim to facilitate, support and resource strategic partnerships to meet locally and regionally determined NRM goals. Research has shown that local conditions of resources

⁷ Rickson, Warburton and Keith 2006, p. 61
Partnership-based social research for sustainable natural resource management in Queensland

and allocations as well as community and partnership dynamics are such that it is useful to site discussions of social capital, capacity building, engagement, effective networks, etc., in the relevant social and political context. Communities selected for this research (rural, peri urban and urban) exhibit the diversity and complexities within and between communities on the dimensions of particular concern to community involvement in identifying, articulating and overcoming barriers to meet major NRM issues. Researchers explored linkages between different stakeholder groups and their impact on local community capacity, given potentially varying spatial domains of responsibility; mapped the social capacity of stakeholder groups within selected communities for contribution to local NRM targets; and explored ways to address potential impediments to the development of trust and collective action.

This SE03 project has gone some way towards achieving RD&E goals. According to the partners:

'It has certainly helped to make more people aware of natural resource management projects, assets and funding opportunities even though there has not been as much inter-active community communication as desired so far.'

The key findings, therefore, supported the importance of linking the social with the environmental in order to facilitate and support the development and expansion of social capital—with networks of trust, cooperation and confidence—to reduce the impediments to effective action, and to accept the challenges of effective Natural Resource Management in communities, between communities, and beyond to the region.

Relatively effective arrangements were created, given the massive changes in governance structures over the last eighteen months; including both personnel and priorities. There were sixteen personnel changes at each level of agency-partnership connection directly impacting on the implementation of this study. Changes were also reflected in the changing roles and resulting uncertainties related to the catchments, communities, and groups.

Monitoring arrangements that were beneficial during the project included:

- meetings between partners and within subgroups
- feedback at each stage
- discussions and consultations among stakeholders, including the SE03 symposia and the Coastal CRC's Citizen Science seminars.

Monitoring continues to assess and to capitalise on the findings, processes, and tools of this project. The partnership discussions suggest that it is too early to evaluate the results of this project. They support the findings of the study that social capital takes time to develop; and projects that involve volunteers, community groups, and individual property owners often take a considerable amount of time. Some of the workshops and consultations in this project have helped build the regional body's credibility.

Key findings

By documenting the comments made and barriers identified into categories that reflect social capital, governance and communication, we were able to intuit key learnings and then suggest guidelines for improvements that would generate the social capital, governance and penetration needed to engage healthy community partnerships for *Healthy Land Our Future*. Some of the learnings make sense by comparing differences between rural, peri-urban and urban; some apply to all three community-types, though in varying degrees. A sample of key learnings with some of the guidelines to SEQ Catchments staff is summarised in the following table.⁸

The application of the findings from this project will be facilitated by further dialogue with regional management and adaptation to future regional community engagement. Factors impeding the immediate application of these social capacity learnings include shortage of

⁸ Note that guidelines were also developed for communities. How to apply these is another issue.

resources for these initiatives in a climate of demand for short-term demonstration of on-ground work and a wish by the regional body to integrate these findings with outputs from other social and economic research still to be completed.

Table 4. Themes, findings, and guidelines

Theme	Key finding	Guidelines for regional body personnel
Social capital	Cooperation and networks: there are more connections between organisations in rural areas than urban, but often the connections are non-productive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a wide network within a rural community yourself, then look for opportunities to connect groups. Generate interest in possible symbiotic outcomes through new connections. Provide incentives for certain types of partnerships that you wish to encourage.
	Trust: there is little trust of state government over NRM, and caution when government offers money; as well as lack of rural-urban trust and even trust that other groups within the community will be able to carry out commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work at building long-term trust through consistent behaviour and high levels of involvement; for example, attendance at community events;. Maintain extension support for people and groups who commence a funded activity, so that projects reach successful outcomes
Governance	Leadership is left to a very few, who often lead for too long, with few young people moving into leadership roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop skills in nurturing leadership; then do it. Inspire interested people to take leadership roles; then connect new leaders to others who can advise.
	Power: rural people feel they have lost their political voice and suffer from urban misconceptions; many find it too hard to work through the bureaucracy to get things done.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adopt an 'empowerment' approach to providing support and funds by treating organisations as equal partners in NRM Plan activities. Provide funding for 'nuts and bolts' assistance (e.g. administration) that will make the difference between people being willing to take on a project and seeing it as too hard.
Communication strategies	Awareness: there is a considerable lack of awareness in peri-urban and urban localities about helpful, available material.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify cases of potential duplication of effort in information material, and facilitate coordinated use or adoption of materials and methods used elsewhere

Regional implications

As part of a broader suite of projects exploring the importance of social science in natural resource management, this study found that:

- Community type and location make a difference in almost all aspects of social capital as do other spatial dimensions of sense of place; and that the environmental issues, their proposed solutions, and the barriers to implementation of successful planning also vary.
- Social capacity, effective and extensive networks and networking, commitment to leadership and responsibility have changed, and continue to change, in response to external pressures on the region; as well as individual and community changes in life stage, lifestyle, and new environmental challenges

- Social capacity, knowledge, awareness and support need to be further enhanced and strengthened, often around SEQWCG's small project strategy. These findings led to the development of suggested guidelines to address impediments or barriers to social capital facilitation, network building, cooperative risk taking and responsibility. It is important, for example, to draw together and coordinate the dissemination of information relevant to these communities that has already been prepared by councils, government, environmental groups and industry groups in South East Queensland.

Specific implications indicated by the partners include the need for wide recognition of the diversity of land use activities, and diversity of views and awareness by landholders of the roles of the different levels of Government.

Planners and community engagement agencies need to be aware of the differences among landholders and users: their attitudes to natural resource management; time constraints; financial constraints; age constraints; and their relative sense of urgency when dealing with degraded land, in which they may have a considerable capital investment. In addition, value-adding implies that there needs to be further integration of the findings of this project with others, and with the projected roundtables and workshops within SEQ Catchments.

By understanding social capital and environmental action within a context of spatially demarcated boundaries, linkages across communities and community groups can be better targeted and supported in practice. One of the main implications is to retain the commitment to linking the social with the environmental:

'It is important that policy makers and practitioners continue to seek ways to support processes that help local people play a proactive and positive role [in biodiversity conservation], however complex and uncertain this may be.'⁹

Tools

1. Workshops to establish community partnerships

The study process appears to be an efficient way of forming foundations for community partnership with the regional body. The process involved interviewing a sample of district residents to gain data and generate interest, followed by a two to three hour workshop (with appropriate pre-promotion to organisation leaders and community members) in which issues were identified and prioritised, then responsibilities and general actions for priority issues were discussed.

The process could be used by community liaison officers in this region, or others. It is important, however, for the process to allow the community to set the priorities. This will often mean that issues discussed do not match regional NRM plan priorities. It is important for the facilitator to work through options for action even if they will not ultimately involve the regional body. Feedback to the participants, groups and organizations becomes important in this process, as does support to nurture potential local leadership.

2. Processes to identifying barriers

The process of systematically classifying policy, social, and financial barriers, and reflecting on findings, (followed by development of guidelines for regional strategies to alleviate barriers and to progress NRM objectives), could be applied wherever the workshop process is used. This provides relevant local data for the design of capacity enhancing activities for communities.

3. Mapping NRM problems and potential partners

Although researchers have not yet developed a tool for spatial engagement mapping and planning, we believe there is value in pursuing a process that will focus communities on spatial mapping of both their NRM problems and potential partners for solutions to those problems.

The amalgamation of the indicators used (spheres of influence, networks, etc.) is important, but

⁹ Pretty and Smith 2004, p.637

it is difficult to rely on verbal or written comments that determine the boundaries of 'my neighbourhood' or 'their problem over the river'.



Benefits of the process, noted by a SEQWCG staff member, were that it:

- updated and expanded a list of SEQ Catchment key contacts (both individuals and community groups) in the Bremer and its sub-catchments
- identified that people need one-to-one contact to engage in natural resource management activities
- identified the need to start locally, as a lot of people are only interested in their own property, or perhaps their immediate neighbourhood
- identified the necessity to identify and target key community or organisational leaders (not necessarily elected government representatives) to engage their support to help increase information flow to the wider community
- identified the lack of a single form of contact mechanism for landholders: multiple forms of communication are needed to capture their interest and engagement
- identified there are benefits for local case studies to be widely promoted, to enhance the community's sense of identity. The benefits include improved pride in self and community, and helping to reinforce the role local communities play in regional issues.

Processes used in this project are yet to be adapted to assist the future community engagement activities of the regional body, including planned roundtables.

References

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