

## **5. Future needs for viable northern regional NRM**

The evaluation of regional arrangements for NRM suggests three core needs must be met if the regional model is to remain viable in northern regions of Australia, and more specifically, if natural resource managers and their actions are to be effective. These core needs are:

1. Recognise and incorporate stakeholders aspirations for sustainable livelihoods in the design and delivery of natural resource management;
2. Increase focus on cost-effective actions and appropriate monitoring systems that inform local learning and regional decisions
3. Ensure structures, scales and scope of planning is appropriate in large northern regions.

### **5.1. Sustainable livelihood aspirations**

A key factor influencing effective regional NRM in the north is the diversity of economic, social and cultural values that permeate resource use and management decisions. The current program arrangements for NAP and NHT restrict regional bodies' ability to adequately integrate and reflect these values in targets and actions.

The challenge for regional planners is to design interventions that address livelihood aspirations and re-affirm northern communities as regional assets, not simply as means to achieve resource condition outcomes. Addressing livelihood aspirations involves designing interventions that achieve *multiple* outcomes (i.e. economic, social, cultural and environmental). Where engagement and investment processes have adopted this approach, implicitly or otherwise, regional bodies have made good progress.

For program designers and policy makers this means linking NRM objectives to broader regional development efforts. Currently at ground level in regions, program rationale is interpreted in just this way - using improved NRM practice as a vehicle for long-term sustainability of regional communities and industries. More explicit alignment with regional economic development initiatives will also create efficiencies in developing regional reporting systems and supporting coordinators and facilitators working in regions.

Poor sign-on from major service providers, such as local governments, and income generators, such as the mining and tourism sectors also reflects limitations in NAP and NHT program design and delivery. Mining and tourism are viewed by regional bodies as 'pressures' to be managed not as likely partners or contributors to solutions. In some cases government agencies may need to actively facilitate involvement of the mining sector where community networks are unable.

### **5.2. Cost-effective actions and appropriate monitoring systems**

The dynamic nature of northern landscapes - characterised by multiple uses, climate and ecosystem variability - creates uncertainty for NRM delivery. This is coupled with the challenge of getting sufficient information to set realistic targets, design actions and appraise success. As such the relationship between management actions and the improvement of resource condition is not well understood and difficult to demonstrate in the short term. This raises a fundamental question about how to define and measure cost-effectiveness of implementation activity in regions.

In this setting, greater focus on testing the links between actions and outcomes adaptively is needed. There is also a need to accept that achievement of certain actions can suffice as surrogate measures for achieving outcomes in many instances. Coupled with this is a need to improve current efforts to capture and apply local knowledge and experiences to strengthen action-outcome understanding, and, to inform the selection of indicators and criteria to judge success of interventions. Recommendations to this effect, arising from the evaluation findings, have been made by the research team to the *Natural Resource Policies and Programs Committee*:

“The critical need at this step of the regional planning cycle is to build capacity of research providers to partner regional bodies in order to generate clear options on where and how to improve the effectiveness of existing implementation activities. There is a similar need to start improving the use and capture of socio-economic information through catchment and sub-catchment monitoring programs linked to these actions. The selection of these data sets will also need to reflect or be informed by, industry data and local conditions. A key focus for delivery can be in demonstrating benefit from resource management interventions, both in terms of enterprise and community viability, and, improved environmental performance.” (Walker et al 2006)

### **5.3. Appropriate structures, scales and scope**

The role of regional bodies as brokers of partnerships and co-investment in regions has been highly successful. In several larger NHT regions however, where funds for implementation are limited or difficult to secure, the ability of regional bodies to be effective brokers is restricted. In these cases transaction costs can rival the likely benefits to both regional bodies and potential partners.

The second key role embraced by regional bodies is coordination of NRM activities in regions. In fulfilling this role the non-statutory nature of northern regional bodies creates both opportunities and challenges. Opportunities stem from regional bodies’ capacity to work as a neutral broker, avoiding blockages within and between government agencies. Their non-government status also enables regional body to work well with industry and local stakeholders previously disenfranchised by, or shy of, government process.

To resolve more complex issues, such as coordinating *state of region reporting* contributions, the use of forums for negotiation with state/territory agency scientists and managers will be critical. The RCG structure adopted in Queensland shows considerable promise in both supporting agencies and regional bodies to take ownership for these joint-coordination responsibilities to greater effect. In moving into a new phase of implementation, regional bodies have responded by adjusting their governance structures and mode of operation to suit. Maintaining this existing flexibility is necessary to allow further adaptation as the implementation process matures.

Some regions appear too large to be effective under existing arrangements and expectations. That is, some existing planning areas under NAP and NHT do not match appropriate scales for collaboration or stakeholder connection to place or ‘local’ issues. Priorities and values are diluted and local ownership is reduced. The Northern Territory, WA Rangelands and larger regions of Queensland illustrate this difficulty of making progress without sufficient investment and recognition of sub-regional networks and local level support.

Similar to the question of scale is the appropriate scope of regional planning activity. Where the scope of regional body activity is focused on solving a few key shared issues e.g. weeds or water quality, effectiveness increases. And, if integrated approaches are adopted in addressing these key issues, then benefits to other assets (e.g. biodiversity, industry viability) can still be realised. Adopting a reduced scope allows momentum to build in implementation and helps identify likely outcomes to participants. Importantly social capital is built through the exercise of successfully addressing a shared problem. This success then allows more contentious or complex problems to be tackled in future.