



Measuring the Capacity of Community Organisations Contributing to Sustainable Land Management

DISCUSSION PAPER - FEBRUARY 2015

Many Hands, One Voice
Wanda Hovard's One Voice



Local Land Services

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FOREWORD

In May 2014, Landcare NSW, in conjunction with Local Land Services (LLS) and NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI), hosted a Partnership Forum in Dubbo, a project funded under the NSW Landcare Support program.

There was a recognition that developing the capacity of Landcare¹ groups was an important outcome in and of itself, as capacity is a key enabler for the community to be active participants in Natural Resource Management (NRM) and Sustainable Agriculture.

It is important for investors to understand the capacity of the groups with which they choose to partner. This will underpin decisions surrounding the level of investment a group can manage, and identify the support or other inputs that may be required by the investor in order to achieve a successful outcome and to ensure strong governance and accountability in the management of funds.

It is also important to be able to measure and monitor group capacity to assess, learn and review a range of mechanisms designed to support the capacity of community organisations.

However how does one define or measure capacity? What are the indicators that are used to determine the capacity of a group or network? How do we know if investment in building capacity is achieving outcomes? What are the outcomes we should be looking for?

Landcare NSW and Murray Local Land Services recognized the need for work and provided funding for a small scale project to progress the work commenced at the Dubbo Forum.

This discussion paper was prepared by Chris Mirams & Associates in collaboration with Landcare NSW and Murray Local Land Services, and drew upon consultations with a range of stakeholders and individuals. I thank all individuals and organisations for giving their time and expertise toward this project.

I also commend Murray Local Land Services for their support in building the understanding of capacity, and I believe this discussion paper lays a solid foundation for increasing a common understanding of capacity and developing ways to measure the capacity of groups. Indeed Murray Local Land Services is already utilising the information in this paper, along with recent work from a number of other institutions, in developing a survey tool to assess group capacity and health. Tools such as these will be essential if we are to measure and map capacity and monitor changes over time.



Rob Dulhunty
Chair, Landcare NSW
May 2015

1. Landcare being the collective term for community based NRM/Ag groups including but not limited to groups such as Landcare, Buschcare, Coastcare, Dunecare, Producer groups etc.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

There are a significant number of community organisations working to achieve sustainable land management. The level of support in terms of core funding and training varies from state to state and from coastal to rural situations.

A number of recent changes have impacted on groups and stakeholders in the NRM and AG space in a number of ways. These impacts have focused attention on the capacity of community organisations prompting work to develop a state wide approach to mapping group capacity and measuring group health.

This paper particularly focuses on measures of capacity in inland NSW and motivations for investment in capacity in inland NSW but many of the findings could be applied to coastal situations.

Some key drivers for this study include:

- A reduction of government funding to agricultural extension - With significantly less government extension capacity than in the past, utilizing Landcare and Producer groups and their networks will be a significant feature of future programs.
- An increased focus on community/ government partnership and delivery models requiring an understanding of group capacity to inform decisions around capacity support and appropriate levels of risk in the devolution of funds for project delivery.
- A focus from the Australian Government and the NSW state government (as expressed through the NRC standards for Local Land Services) on collaborative and devolved decision making and delivery that reflects an understanding of and support for community capacity.
- An understanding that to avoid unintended consequences investment in capacity needs to be respectful of the goals and motivations of individual organisations.
- An identification by the state and Australian government of a responsibility for Local Land Services to support capacity of community organisations.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to:

1. Create a definition of community capacity.
2. Consider how to capture quantitative, qualitative and spatial information about group capacity.
3. Consider how to create a state wide approach to mapping group capacity, measuring group health and informing investment in building group capacity.
4. Build the case for recognizing building community capacity as a compelling investment with measurable outcomes.

1.3 Process

To develop the paper the following process has been undertaken:

1. Review a range of existing documents that reflect research and policy on this issue.
2. Consider the role and structure of Landcare and Producer groups.
3. Identify institutions that currently interact with Landcare and Producer groups and may have some interest in investing in capacity of groups.
 - a. Understand how they invest in groups and/or with groups.
 - b. Understand how they currently measure group capacity.
4. Research theoretical models of measuring group capacity.
5. Summarise the key findings.

2. BACKGROUND

In the distant past productive agricultural pursuits and natural resource management were seen as antagonistic and discussed in isolation, perhaps linked conceptually only by cause and effect. Landcare groups were established to focus on Natural Resource Management and Production groups focused on enterprise.

Modern agricultural development and extension refers to whole farming systems and considers productive agriculture and natural resource management as synergistic components of a sustainable agricultural system.

Landcare groups and producer groups are tending to reflect this, as they commonly engage in both sustainable agriculture and NRM projects, to varying degrees. They also facilitate community development, education and build social capital and will be referred to in this paper as community groups.

This is highly relevant as it broadens the range of stakeholders individual groups may interact with, as they evolve into multi-disciplinary community groups. In the competitive world of project funding, a group now needs to be able to present its credentials quickly and succinctly to a wide range of funding bodies and investment partners.

This has created a common interest amongst the stakeholders, as they each consider how best to measure and interact with a myriad of independent and unique groups.

The desire to do this well is increasing, as the stakeholders are becoming more reliant on groups as a key extension channel and to provide connection back into regions, farming systems and to industry leaders.

3. POLICY CONTEXT AND LOCAL LAND SERVICES

Local Land Services are the NSW government agency with an identified role to support the capacity of community to participate in NRM and sustainable agriculture. There are a number of policies that guide the expression of that role:

3.1 NRC Draft Standards

The Natural Resource Commission is establishing standards for Local Land Services (LLS).

Three standards specifically relate to collaboration, community ownership and customer satisfaction. The draft standards also refer to the mapping of capacity and risk.

3.2 Localism Policy

Localism is a term used to describe the principle of devolving decision making to the lowest capable level.

This begs the question, what does capable mean, can we describe it and therefore measure it and if the decisions vary in complexity, scale and risk, does this mean we need to develop a scale of capability?

The National NRM Regions Localism Position Paper identifies 14 principles (see appendix) which are strongly linked to the principles of community development.

These principles extend the localism concept beyond decision making into planning and implementation.

This now implies accountability and following the same logic as above, different levels of investment and risk require different levels of accountability.

“Accountability is the glue that ties commitment to results”

3.3 Public Service Commission

The New South Wales Public Service Commission released a report in 2014 “Doing Things Differently”.

This report identified 3 key features of the NSW Public Sector of the future.

- Productivity
- Customer satisfaction
- Collaboration

To achieve these goals LLS needs to understand its customers and the capacity of their identified groups to participate in achieving mutual outcomes.

4. WHAT IS 'CAPACITY' AND 'CAPACITY INVESTMENT'

4.1 A business perspective on investing in capacity

Businesses will often start a conversation about capacity with their specific business objectives clearly described and then determine what capacity is required to achieve those objectives. The next step is to identify the gaps between their current capacity and their required capacity and determine the most resource effective way of filling those gaps.

In the business world capacity is often considered as:

$$\textit{Capacity} = \textit{Capability} \times \textit{Resources}$$

Considering this in a community group capacity context, the two components are interlinked, as a group's capability directly affects its ability to access and utilize resources.

Individual community groups have little immediate effect on the total **resources** available to them. Therefore investing in a group's ability to access existing resources would seem an effective way to increase the resources side of the equation.

Therefore a primary area for investment in growing group capacity is in programs that increase individual member and group **capability**.

A capability audit process that compares needed capabilities to actual capabilities would be a very useful tool. It could be used to identify specific limitations in capability and identify opportunities to invest in improvement.

A suite of governance, educational and leadership programs could be adapted for delivery to community groups to address specific needs.

On-going capability audits would measure change over time.

Investing in capability provides an avenue for a measured outcome from investment in building group capacity.

5. STAKEHOLDERS

5.1 Overview

The collective aim of the stakeholders in inland NSW is to create a sustainable and productive landscape that supports a vibrant rural industry and regional community. To achieve this outcome, on the large component of private land, stakeholders need to work with and influence land managers. Where land managers have formed groups with overlapping goals these provide an effective and efficient mechanism for stakeholders to achieve their goals. Many groups also manage to leverage additional funding to value add to outcomes.

5.2 Major stakeholder groups

The following organisations have been identified as having significant interaction with community groups. Interviews were conducted with representatives from a selection of organisations:

- NSW DPI
- Landcare NSW
- Local Land Services
- Regional Landcare Facilitators
- Landcare and Producer Groups
- Landcare and Producer Group Networks
- Research & Development Corporations
- Universities and Innovation Centres
- Local Government

6. FINDINGS FROM STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

6.1 Local Lands Services

Murray Local Land Services as key investors and collaborators for this project have identified the key motivations for supporting the development of a group capacity measure.

The Board has a strong commitment to the principles of localism including devolution of decision making and project delivery, as well as supporting the capacity of community to participate in NRM and Sustainable agriculture.

- Localism involves devolution and therefore requires capable delivery partners.
- To maximise localism, groups need to be skilled, informed, strategic and prepared to participate.

The Board also has a strong commitment to fair, transparent and evidence based decision making and so decisions around investment in groups and in group project delivery should reflect an understanding of existing community capacity.

The Board has a commitment to adaptive management and this requires measures that can inform the success, or not, of investment decisions.

In 2014 a meeting of 12 key LLS staff identified the following criteria to include in a group investment framework for capacity:

- *Capacity and scale to make a difference*
- *Community buy in*
- *They have skin in the game (proactive and active)*
- *Experience - core project outcomes (history)*
- *Alignment with LLS goals*
- *Willingness to collaborate and partner*
- *Risk assessment*
- *Merit/benefits*
- *Groups commitment to intent of investment - Prepared to meet agreed outcomes*
- *Contribute to stable of capable groups*
- *Prepared to participate in our engagement processes*
- *Prepared to support LLS identify and respond to community need*
- *Geographic spread/coverage (Avoid duplication/fill gaps)*
- *Not reliant on one funding source – leveraging investment*

6.2 Research & Development Organisations

There are a number of Agricultural Research and Development Corporations (RDC's) in Australia. They are funded by farmer levies and Government funds and in broad terms their role is to undertake research and development, extension and marketing.

The organizations interviewed include Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC), and Meat Livestock Australia (MLA).

Each RDC interacts with community groups. The nature and structure of the relationships are highly variable. There are however some consistencies:

- The primary aim of the interaction is extension.
- They all consider how to measure group capacity.
- They all recognize the benefits of utilizing groups and group networks.
- They are all very concerned about the current lack of extension capacity in NSW.
- They would all like to be part of the conversation as the new extension model evolves.
- They all recognize that utilizing groups and group networks will be a dominant feature of future extension models.

6.2.1 Australian Wool Innovation

Australian Wool Innovation (AWI) do not invest directly in groups.

They do contribute to building group capacity by maintaining networks and aligning trained advisors to group based extension programs.

AWI co-invest in seven state based networks as extension pathways for the product of their RD & E.

AWI contract Victorian Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources (formally DEPI) to manage and support their Best Wool Best Lamb Network (BWBL), which includes fifty six groups and approximately seven hundred farmers.

AWI contract Rural Industries Skills Training (RIST) to manage and support a national network of advisors who coach farmer groups through the Lifetime Ewe Management (LTEM) program. Two thousand farmers have graduated to date.

These two programs alone have significantly influenced land use and land management decisions on over one million hectares of farmland.

Each BWBL and LTEM group has an advisor, who leads the program, provides technical information, intellectual capability and a link to the network. This model reduces AWI's risk of programs not achieving their outcomes.

The LTEM and BWBL participants are often sub groups of existing community groups. Running the programs through a host community group contributes to the community group's network, education, total activity and social capital. All of these are group capacity key performance measures.

6.2.2 Grains Research & Development Corporation

Grains Research & Development Corporation (GRDC) invest strategically in building skills and capacity along the entire chain of innovation, through to the point of decision on farm (GRDC Themes Part 7 - Building skills and capacity).

They invest in the capacity of advisors and farming systems groups, to ensure sound development and extension methodologies and the availability of quality information to growers.

They invest in industry leadership, seeking high level grower representation across the industry.

They invest in farmer training to ensure growers have the ability to discover new information and adopt new technologies.

GRDC also invest with a wide range of groups of varying size, structure and interests, through partnering in project delivery. The projects also vary in size, duration and complexity.

The larger three to five year research development and extension projects are often managed in partnership with large farming systems groups, which have significant governance, skills, networks and capacity.

Smaller, annual programs are often managed in partnership with Agribusiness networks and producer groups with less existing capacity.

GRDC support an Agribusiness Trial Extension Network, which is similar to Meat & Livestock Australia's Producer Demonstration Site program. The projects are initiated by grower groups, usually to inform on specific local issues. Consultant or Agribusiness support is provided to the project. This is an indirect investment in the group's capacity, providing intellectual capital and leadership.

Industry Development Awards provide grants for study tours, travel, workshops and education, with the aim of benefiting individuals, organizations and the wider grain growing community. These projects are an investment in building the skills and capacity of growers and their groups.

In an effort to balance risk against scale of investment, they match the size and complexity of the project with the capacity of the group.

When asked what they consider when evaluating a group they suggested that there is no set recipe, rather, they define what governance is valid on a project by project basis.

In general terms they look for:

- A good executive officer.
- The required level of governance for the project.
- The required skills for the project.
- Strong partnerships.
- A network.

6.2.3 Meat & Livestock Australia

Meat & Livestock Australia (MLA) does not invest directly in groups.

They do contribute to building group capacity by entering into partnerships, maintaining networks and aligning trained advisors to group based extension programs.

MLA has two national products, More Beef from Pastures and Making More from Sheep. Both are delivered in Victoria by Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources through groups, managed by the Best Wool Best Lamb Network and Better Beef Network. Both networks are supported at a strategic level by MLA.

MLA manages a participatory research program and one of its products is the Producer Demonstration Sites program (PDS). Each PDS is a three year project instigated by an existing community group. MLA evaluates the capacity of the group through the application process. Each project is aligned with a researcher or consultant who is funded by MLA, through the group. This is an indirect investment in the group's capacity and reduces MLA's risk of the project not achieving the outcomes.

When asked what they consider when evaluating a group they volunteered the following:

- Good Executive Officer
- Group's strategic operating plan
- Governance structure
- Membership services / social capital
- Communication Strategy
- Adoption strategies
- Networks
- History

6.2.4 Summary

Some Research & Development Corporations do invest directly in building group capacity, however generally their greatest contribution to building group capacity is to invest in developing networks, aligning professional advisors to group extension programs, providing education, increasing group activity and contributing to building social capital.

The professional advisors also provide intellectual capital and leadership to individual programs, which reduces the RDC's risk of program failure.

One of the challenges identified throughout discussions is the realization that a "one size fits all" checklist for measuring group capacity is not simple due to the large variation in the size, structure and interests of community groups.

The common themes are:

- Good Executive Officer
- Appropriate governance structure
- Strength of their partnerships
- Networks
- History

6.3 Innovation Centres - Graham Centre for Agricultural Innovation

The Graham Centre for Agricultural Innovation is an alliance between Charles Sturt University & NSW Department of Primary Industries.

They are well known for entering into partnerships with RDC's and established grower groups, primarily to undertake collaborative research projects.

When asked what they consider when evaluating a group they volunteered the following two step checklist:

- The groups capacity statement
- Who is in their network
- The groups history and track record
- The groups' history of collaboration and partnerships with other grower groups, industry stakeholders, researchers, universities, public and private sector.
- Governance (strength of their Board / Advisory committee)

Checklist done, the Graham Centre then decides how much to invest and where to invest to fill in the gaps:

- Where do the strengths lie within the group?
- Look at in-kind contributions/opportunities
- Clarification around the groups vision, who to speak and negotiate with
- Work on projects like the GRDC bilateral proposal (collaborative network between Graham Centre and grower groups)

6.4 Landcare and Producer Groups

Landcare and producer groups in the Murray, as part of a 2013 CMA and Landcare review, recommended a clear and transparent framework be developed to support decision making around investment in groups for capacity and the application of localism concepts at all levels.

In 2014 a selection of Murray Landcare and producer groups participated in a session with Local Land Services to identify the criteria that should inform the development of a framework for investing in core support to groups for capacity.

They developed the following list:

- Identify gaps in group coverage – geography and industry
- Groups to be assessed on their:
 - Strong membership involvement
 - Track records + or –
 - Active leveraging of other investment
 - Process's in place to identify and address community needs
 - Governance and administrative capability

- Good leadership foundation and committee buy in
 - Existing Capacity or capacity to develop
 - Geographic coverage, industry coverage
 - Collaborative approach with other stakeholders
 - Preparedness to support smaller groups eg through connecting, admin support, ideas
 - Mutual goals with funder
 - Intent and capacity to deliver projects addressing community needs and preparedness to consider/negotiate others
- Priority should be to identify and maintain existing groups and capacity

Attendees agreed that investment in capacity support and staff for groups created some mutual responsibilities:

- Supporting other local groups with eg info/admin support
- Working collaboratively with stakeholders
- Participating in consultative forums
- Ongoing activity addressing some mutual goals
- Participating in regional planning

6.5 Regional Landcare Facilitator

The National Landcare Program provides each regional body (LLS) funding for a Regional Landcare Facilitator. These positions work to support Landcare and production groups to adopt sustainable farm and land management practices and to protect Australia's landscape.

This report only interviewed 1 RLF, from the Murray LLS region. This position is outsourced to Holbrook Landcare Group, to work with the community right across the Murray landscape.

6.5.1 Murray

Regional Landcare Facilitators

Measuring group capacity

The Murray RLF considers group capacity from two perspectives;

- In absolute terms.
- In relative terms, measuring a group's ability to achieve its own goals.

In describing absolute terms the following questions would be asked:

- The size of the membership.
- The number of employees.
- The number of active projects being undertaken.
- The number of meetings held in the past twelve months.
- Is the group part of a formal network or a relationship based collective?

- How robust is their network and / or relationships.

In describing relative capacity the following questions would be asked:

- How many members does the group have?
- How many members would the group like to have?
- What do your members want the group to deliver?
- How do you know that?
- How close are you to delivering that?
- What do you need to achieve it?

This type of audit measures the group's capacity relative to its own needs and expectations. It also leads to uncovering specific limitations, which is very useful in providing the framework for investing in building the group's capacity.

Both the absolute and relative audits are very useful.

Measuring group connectivity

Murray RLF identified "connectivity" (as opposed to isolation) as a critical key performance indicator of group capacity. Connectivity provides an avenue for collaboration and the sharing of intellectual capacity, ideas, skills and knowledge.

There are commonly two models that provide connectivity:

- The group belonging to a formal network.
- The autonomous group that focuses strongly on building relationships and partnerships.

They use a three-step process to measure this; spatial, capacity and relationship.

Groups are located on a map and a traffic light system used to identify criteria such as size, influence and activity. Then subjective questions are asked, to determine the strength of each group's relationship with other specific groups. Bold or feint lines are drawn to link the groups, providing a spatial map of group capacity and connectivity.

This is a simple but informative process.

The influence of key individual group leaders cannot be understated, as they use their own connections and network to significantly support the group's connectivity.

Investing in developing key leaders is also an investment in connectivity.

Building group capacity

One of the roles of the RLF is to build group capacity. When asked how this is achieved they volunteered the following:

- Providing RLF time to specific groups.
- Providing specific leadership and advice.

- Providing expertise in community development.
- Creating strategic plans for regional coordination.
- Creating collaboration and partnerships.
- Identifying funding and project opportunities.
- Identifying group limitations and seeking solutions.

7. EXISTING RESEARCH PAPERS

7.1 The impact of independent variables on group activity

Charles Sturt University has undertaken a longitudinal study of Victorian Landcare Groups and Networks from 1991 to 2009. Periodical surveys were undertaken, the last one in 2009 and the following is taken from Report No. 55 CBNRM in Victoria: Contributing to dialogue, leaning and action.

The primary aim of community groups is to effect change on farm and in our landscapes. This change is a result of effective group activity.

Measuring practice change over time is complex, as is measuring change in social and cultural capital (see p25 MLLS Economic Sustainability and Social Wellbeing).

In this model activity levels are used as a surrogate for outcomes.

A range of measures are selected to contribute to a Work Implemented Index and an Engaging / Building Social and Human Capital Index (see page 88). The indexes are combined to create a Final Activity Index. A full list of measures used, referred to as “independent variables which have an impact on group activity” can be found on page 92 of the report.

The ones that stand out as being the most useful for the purpose of this study are:

- The size of the membership.
- The Group employs a project officer, or
- The Group has access to a project officer.
- The Group is part of a network.
- An annual plan is documented.
- The amount of funding received.
- The number of Group executive meetings.
- The number of Group member meetings.
- Group meetings for educational programs last year
- Group established trials / demonstration sites last year
- Member participation in the last 12 months.
- The length of time the Group has been operating.
- Regular and effortless leadership succession.

“We are the sum of all of our achievements”

Interestingly many of the stakeholders interviewed also used activity levels as a surrogate for outcomes. Their logic is that it is considerably easier to measure the indicators than measure and qualify all of the outcomes.

8. INVESTING IN NETWORKS

Connectivity is clearly recognized by the stakeholders as a critical key performance indicator of group capacity.

A network provides an avenue for collaboration and the efficient use and sharing of resources, intellectual capacity, ideas, skills and knowledge. It also reduces the waste and duplication of effort observed when independent groups actively compete against each other for funding in a competitive market place.

Networks also have the ability to affect the total resources available to community groups over the long term, by being influential at a strategic and political level.

Investing in networks directly increases community group capacity by increasing total resources, increasing capability and therefore access to resources, and increasing the collaborative and efficient use of those resources.

Establishing or supporting specific networks also provides an avenue for investment in building group capacity, with measured outcomes.

Many stakeholders currently invest in maintaining or supporting networks to provide connectivity (and all its benefits) to their groups.

9. CONCLUSION

Every stakeholder involved in agriculture, natural resource management and land management currently utilizes community groups and their networks to achieve their aims.

Reliance upon community groups and their networks will increase over time.

Investing in growing community group capacity will be fundamental to success.

This implies investing in group capability, connectivity and resources and individual leadership.

The capturing and sharing of quantitative, qualitative and spatial information about groups, group capacity and networks would be very useful for all stakeholders and investors.

The use of an absolute and relative group capacity audit, with a common language, local knowledge and narrative, could be used to inform the database. It could provide very useful baseline information.

The use of independent variables provides another useful framework for measuring group capacity, particularly change over time.

The concept of capacity equals capability times resources provides a useful framework for measuring capacity and informing specific areas for investment in capability and resources.

Providing governance, educational and leadership programs to individuals and community groups to address specific capability needs provides a clear and measurable avenue for investment in building group capacity.

Investing in networks also provides a clear and measurable avenue for investment in building group capacity and will also provide important linkage between community groups, stakeholders, investors and resources.

In considering how to capture quantitative, qualitative and spatial information about group capacity, the following hierarchy provides some logic:

1. Group description including size, structure and interests
2. Assessment of fundamental governance requirements
3. Absolute independent variables.
4. Relative independent variables and narrative.
5. Connectivity (Network / Collective / Relationships)
6. Spatial mapping.
7. Group capability audits including access to resources.
8. Specific capability building programs addressing identified needs.
9. Ongoing monitoring and feedback.

Measuring the Capacity of Community Organisations Contributing To Sustainable Land Management

This discussion paper was a project of Landcare NSW, funded and supported by Murray Local Land Services, and undertaken by Chris Mirams of Chris Mirams and Associates.

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