



**Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary & Waterway Management**

Technical Report 19



# **Bridges and barriers**

**to collaborative natural  
resource management  
in South East Queensland**

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CRC for Coastal Zone  
Estuary & Waterway Management





## **Barriers and Bridges to Collaborative Natural Resource Management in South East Queensland**

An evaluation of collaboration processes and outcomes in case studies including initial identification of barriers, bridges and solutions to collaboration involving knowledge seeking and use in Natural Resource Management groups in South East Queensland.

Peter Oliver, James Whelan and John Mackenzie  
February 2005

Submitted as the third of four reports for the Dialogue and Knowledge Exchange Project of the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary and Waterway Management.

## Executive Summary

Community-based natural resource management throughout Australia is currently being regionalised in line with two federal government funding schemes: the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality and the Natural Heritage Trust II. This change was heralded in the 1999 discussion paper *Managing Natural Resources in Rural Australia for a Sustainable Future* prepared for the National Natural Resource Management Task Force (NNRMTF, 1999).

In Queensland, non-government-based regional bodies have been established to develop regional natural resource management (NRM) plans and to seek support from government, community and industry for their implementation. This document reports the findings of Stages 1 and 2 of a three-stage action research project on barriers and bridges to dialogue, knowledge exchange and collaboration between the regional body and grassroots NRM groups in two coastal areas of South East Queensland. These groups include 'carers' groups, conservation, industry and other local groups concerned with the planning and management of land, water and biodiversity.

The research was undertaken qualitatively, with data collected using a variety of techniques including document analyses, semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The assumptions underpinning this research project are that:

- The decision to regionalise NRM is beyond the sphere of influence of stakeholders;
- Good relationships between planners, 'investors' and 'implementers' are key to effective implementation of regional NRM plans; and
- Government, industry and community motivations for involvement in the regionalisation process may differ.

Data were analysed manually and using *nVivo*, a computer-assisted data coding and analysis program (QSR International, 2002). The project has involved several 'Think Tanks': workshops where stakeholders have evaluated the reliability of emerging research findings. To date over 140 stakeholders have been involved in the four Think Tanks held in Stages 1 and 2 of this project. Another two Think Tanks are planned in Stage 3.

This report summarises key concepts from the literature presented in a previous project report. It outlines the barriers and bridges identified in the case studies and groups them under four themes:

- (i) **Regionalisation:** highlighting the need for shared and realistic stakeholder expectations, to examine perceptions and assumptions of stakeholders, and to clarify the roles and responsibilities of all involved.
- (ii) **Resourcing the regionalisation process:** emphasising the need for all stakeholders to share a common understanding regarding matters of funding and staffing that may be needed to achieve shared expectations of the NRM regionalisation process.
- (iii) **Working collaboratively:** focusing on matters relating to inclusiveness and mandate; time and travel for stakeholders; Indigenous involvement; when to act deliberatively or according to procedures; and the need for critique, learning together and adaptive management.

(iv) **Conflict:** outlining ‘turf wars’ between grassroots groups and explaining one of the symptoms we observe of unresolved conflict among participants, the ‘blame game’ being played between various stakeholders including grassroots groups and government agencies.

Recommendations or ‘bridges’ to overcome many of the barriers presented within the discussion of results are discussed as part of these themes.

This report will be used as a basis for Stage 3 of the research project, with the final project report focusing on two audiences: stakeholders involved in grassroots group–regional body collaborations; and government agencies who may have a role in supporting these collaborations and the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of regional NRM plans.

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# Dialogue and Knowledge Exchange Project

## Bridges and Barriers Report

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February 2005

### Introduction

#### Background

Natural resource management (NRM) in Australia is currently undergoing a process of regionalisation in accordance with two federal funding schemes: the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality (NAPSWQ) and the Natural Heritage Trust Extension (NHT2). As part of these schemes, regional collaborative organisations have been established to plan, implement and administer NRM in fifty-six federally identified regions. Through this process, the Australian Government intends that participants from industry, community, government and scientific institutions will all contribute to the planning and implementation of regional NRM.

A 1999 review of NRM throughout Australia by the National Natural Resource Management Taskforce (NNRMTF) that has led to this current move to regionalise NRM, stated that natural resource management required a partnership between government, communities, industries and landholders with clear and agreed roles and responsibilities for each of party (NNRMTF, 1999, p.11).<sup>2</sup> It further noted that empowerment of regional communities would involve the establishment of appropriate regional institutional structures to allow such relationships to develop (NNRMTF, 1999, pp.14-15).

These regional collaborative organisations, or regional bodies, as they have become known, will need to develop effective relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, including the three levels of government and their respective government agencies,

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<sup>2</sup> The discussion paper that resulted from the review of NRM set out the basis of a national policy. It is more commonly known as the 'blue book'.

grassroots NRM groups (e.g. Coastcare, Landcare, catchment management and Bushcare, industry and environmental groups), as well as individual land holders and natural resource management owners to complete this task. While the quality of all these relationships will be critical, a significant part of the development and implementation of the regional plans relies on the contributions of community-based, voluntary, grassroots NRM groups and the research project reported on here focuses on the relationships between regional bodies and grassroots NRM groups.

## Research questions

Using an action research method, this project concentrates on a case study of the collaborative relationships between the newly formed regional body for South East Queensland (NRMSEQ Inc) and community-based, grassroots NRM groups in two geographic areas of the region. The three-year research project discussed here is in its second year. This paper is the third report of the research project, tracking the development of the regional body in South East Queensland. It addresses a number of specific questions relating to collaborative community-based natural resource management policy and process, including:

- What are the limits to collaboration and partnership building among participants involved in natural resource management?
- How effectively are these people working together?
- How can they reflect on and learn from their efforts so that the knowledge held by all participants can be better shared to inform NRM decision-making and on-ground activities?

## Overview of key concepts

Concepts key to this work have been discussed in detail in the literature review presented as Milestone 4 of this project (Oliver and Whelan 2004). These concepts and their inter-related nature are suggested in Figure 1 below.

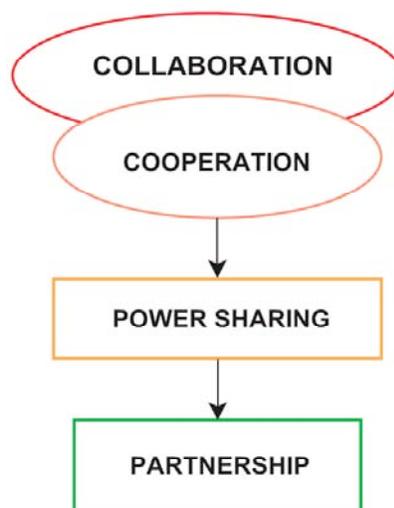


Figure 1: Collaboration, cooperation, power and partnership

Collaboration occurs when two or more participants work together to achieve goals that are mutually beneficial to participants. Collaboration may also involve acts of cooperation (as shown in the overlap between collaboration and cooperation in Figure 1, above), where the participants do not realise a direct benefit, yet may be involved because the collaboration fulfils values that are important to them (Gray, 1985 and 1989; Long and Arnold, 1995; Tennyson and Wild, 2000; Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000; Oliver, 2004). In this report, the expression encompasses a range of collaborative, cooperative and partnership-based relationships that may occur between grassroots and regional groups. Usually, people collaborate with others to achieve goals that would be unachievable working individually.

If participants decide to share the power present in a collaborative relationship, then the relationship becomes one of partnership (Arnstein, 1969; Eisler, 2002).<sup>3</sup> Typically, natural resource management collaborations and partnerships strive to benefit all who may be affected by the management of the natural resource or ecosystem in question, rather than just the participants actively involved in such relationships.

The processes of social learning, dialogue and knowledge exchange are key to the development of effective collaborative and partnership-based relationships. Milbrath (1989, pp.94-113) advocates the need for a “learning society” – one that can work together to treat the process and outcomes of shared activity as a basis for collective reflection and learning. Such social learning can help us to better relate to each other and manage the conflict that inevitably arises when people with values derived from different ethical frameworks come together in an attempt to manage natural resources (Merchant, 1992). Social learning requires dialogue. Dialogue occurs when individuals involved in a relationship learn about the values that underpin the opinions that each holds on a particular topic (Yankelovich, 1999). Both dialogue and social learning are key to the exchange of knowledge relevant to the NRM issues and problems that have brought participants together.<sup>4</sup>

As its title suggests then, this research project is concerned with improving the understanding and practice of dialogue and knowledge exchange occurring between grassroots groups and the regional body in the case study area, as indicators of the ‘health’ of the relationships between grassroots groups and the regional body. Such knowledge may also be used as an opportunity for social learning and, where participants think necessary, for the improvement of these relationships.

## **Research objectives**

This project aims specifically to examine the relationships between the regional body and grassroots NRM groups in South East Queensland in terms of the processes and outcomes of collaboration. We are seeking to:

- Identify the forces and factors that may strengthen or inhibit collaboration between the regional body and grassroots NRM groups, and

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<sup>3</sup> Power is a complex and important concept in social science. We have adopted one of the seminal definitions of power found within the literature, and define power as the ability of an individual or group to exert influence over the actions of others (Weber, 1947, p.47). As such, power resides within relationships between people. Examples of evidence of a renegotiation of power in NRM partnerships may include the sharing of resources, information and decision-making.

<sup>4</sup> These concepts are discussed in greater detail in Oliver and Whelan, 2004 which is a companion report to this report.

- Derive a series of recommendations for open, participatory, transparent and effective collaborative processes.

This report focuses on the first of these objectives. In the final report for this project we will report on attempts to apply recommendations derived from the forces and factors identified in this report. It will also explore how these recommendations can be applied more generally to improve the effectiveness of collaborative relationships between community organisations and other Government-Organised Non-Governmental Organisations (GONGOs) involved in natural resource management.

## **Research design**

### **Research paradigm**

This research is situated within a critical social science paradigm (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: p.136; Fay, 1987). Critical social science researchers seek to understand the reality of a social situation from the point of view of the participants and to engage in dialogue with participants to help them to better understand how they value, understand and may improve the nature of social situations of which they are a part (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Neuman, 1997).

We have found it very useful to work qualitatively in this study. A qualitative approach has helped us to investigate how people come to understand themselves and what is important to them about their situation. This approach is inherently value-laden and focused on perceptions and processes. While the data on which qualitative researchers base their work may be criticised as 'soft', 'intangible' or 'immaterial', qualitative data are empirical and are gathered through documenting real events, recording what people say and do and studying written documents (Neuman, 1997, p.328). Table 1, on the following page, compares and contrasts qualitative and quantitative research against assumptions made by researchers, and the purposes, approaches and roles of the researchers in undertaking social science investigations.

**Table 1: Attributes of quantitative and qualitative modes of inquiry**

<i>Quantitative Mode</i>	<i>Qualitative Mode</i>
<p><b>Assumptions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social facts have an objective reality</li> <li>- Primacy of method</li> <li>- Variables can be identified and relationships measured</li> <li>- Etic (outsider's) point of view</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reality is socially constructed</li> <li>- Primacy of subject matter</li> <li>- Variables are complex, interwoven and difficult to measure</li> <li>- Emic (insider's) point of view</li> </ul>
<p><b>Purpose</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Generalisability</li> <li>- Prediction</li> <li>- Causal explanations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Contextualisation</li> <li>- Interpretation</li> <li>- Understanding actors' perspectives</li> </ul>
<p><b>Approach</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Begins with hypotheses and theories</li> <li>- Uses manipulation and control</li> <li>- Uses formal instruments</li> <li>- Uses experimentation</li> <li>- Is deductive</li> <li>- Uses component analysis</li> <li>- Seeks consensus, the norm</li> <li>- Reduces data to numerical indices</li> <li>- Uses concepts in the form of distinct variables</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ends with hypotheses and grounded theory</li> <li>- Uses emergence and portrayal</li> <li>- Places researcher as instrument</li> <li>- Is naturalistic</li> <li>- Is Inductive</li> <li>- Searches for patterns</li> <li>- Seeks pluralism, complexity</li> <li>- Makes minor use of numerical indices</li> <li>- Uses concepts in the form of themes, motifs, generalisations and taxonomies</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Uses statistics, tables or charts for analysis, showing how these relate to hypotheses</li> <li>- Uses standard procedures, replication assumed</li> <li>- Abstract language in write-up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyses by extracting themes or generalisations from evidence and organising data to present a coherent, consistent picture</li> <li>- Uses particular research procedures so that replication is rare</li> <li>- Is descriptive in write-up</li> </ul>
<p><b>Researcher role</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Detachment and impartiality</li> <li>- Objective portrayal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personal involvement and partiality</li> <li>- Empathic understanding</li> </ul>

(Oliver, 2004, p.117, adapted from Glesne and Peshkin; 1992, p.7; and Neuman, 1997, p.329)

### **Background of researchers**

All three researchers involved in this project have worked as volunteers for grassroots NRM groups, and, in two instances, as paid support staff for grassroots groups, employed by government and non-government organisations. Between us, we have nearly forty years experience as members and support staff of such groups. As outlined in Table 1, we recognise our “personal involvement and partiality” and do not seek to give an ‘objective’, ‘detached’ and ‘impartial’ portrayal of the nature of collaborations between grassroots and NRM groups. To attempt to do so would be dishonest and situate this research outside the critical social science paradigm. However, we do seek to give a rich and detailed description of these collaborative relationships and to seek an

understanding of factors that may enhance or inhibit their effectiveness. We are keenly aware of our biases and have sought to address the way they may affect our data gathering and analysis by:

- Triangulation: collecting data from a range of sources using various techniques;
- Systematic analysis of these data; and
- Reinforcing this analysis through systematic participant-evaluation.

These processes are outlined in the following sections.

### **Triangulation and analysis of data**

Research techniques used to collect data from various sources have included document analysis, field and participant observations, and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (Denscombe, 1998). These are discussed in the following pages. Data were coded looking for themes relevant to the research questions both manually and using a computer software application NVivo (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Huberman and Miles, 1994; QSR International, 2002).

### **Participant evaluation and action research**

In addition, to date, we have employed four participant 'Think-Tanks', where stakeholders from government, conservation, education, scientific, landholder and other non-government groups were invited to assess the research findings, explore implications and to collaboratively develop actions arising from the findings. This research technique is often referred to as 'participant evaluation'.

In contrast to participant observation, participant evaluation seeks to *directly* involve participants in the research process. As outlined by Feuerstein (1986) and Garaycochea (1990), this approach has previously been used to evaluate social and community development projects. It is based upon the concept of communal reflection and self-evaluation, "in which those directly involved in the qualitative processes are instrumental in assessing its progress and outcomes" (Garaycochea, 1990, p.82). The inclusion of the participant 'Think-Tanks' transforms the suite of data collection techniques used into an action-research and 'citizen science' based research project (Greenwood and Levin, 2003, p.149; Irwin, 1995, p.167). Action research:

- Is inquiry in which participants and researchers co-generate knowledge through collaborative communicative processes in which all participant contributions are taken seriously;
- Treats the diversity of experience and capacities within a group as an opportunity for enriching research and action;
- Produces valid research results;
- Is context centred; and
- Aims to solve real-life problems in context.

The knowledge and understanding gained in an action research process lead to social action, or to the construction of new understandings (Greenwood and Levin, 2003, p.149).

Participant evaluation also helps to ensure reflexivity, suggesting continual and critical self-awareness on the part of researchers, and validity in the research process. Without this component, the research techniques employed could potentially reinforce the

researchers' assumptions and values: "It is possible that researchers will omit a whole range of data in order to confirm their own pre-established beliefs, leaving the method open to charges of bias" (May, 1999, p.154).

As critical social science researchers we have firstly sought to understand limits, barriers and bridges to collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange from the point of view of people in community-based grassroots NRM groups and, secondly, focused on the viewpoint of staff and members of the regional body. We have done this:

- To provide feedback to participants directly involved in the collaborations; and
- As a means of accurately informing agency and government policy deliberations of on-ground perspectives of NRM regionalisation.

As such, the outcomes of the research will ideally form the basis of two conversations: one among participants about how collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange can be improved in the regional NRM setting, and the other with people in various levels of government about how policies and practices may be adapted to improve programs supporting the regionalisation of community-based natural resource management.

### **Definition and case study boundaries**

For the purposes of the study in community-based natural resource management, we have defined the term 'grassroots NRM groups' in very broad terms. We see them as voluntary associations of people who are collectively taking action to improve the ways that they or others use and interact with land, water, biodiversity, air and energy. These actions may be direct, in terms of changes in practice or in remediation or rehabilitation, and/or indirect, in terms of taking an advocacy-based approach to engender such changes. The actions and concerns of grassroots groups are usually local in focus, however they may also be based on interest, values, practice or identity. Using this definition, grassroots NRM groups may include Landcare and catchment management groups, environmental groups, primary producer groups, indigenous groups, historical societies, outdoor recreational groups, and industry groups.

Given this broad definition, the action-research project focused upon the grassroots NRM groups of two geographically defined areas, rather than on a particular type of NRM group. This allowed us to avoid representing a particular type of grassroots group as more important or relevant to the management of natural resources than any other. Our sampling ensured the inquiry would examine the experiences of both urban and rural grassroots NRM groups, and those of groups that are actively participating in the current regional planning exercise and others who are participating much less actively.

### **Conduct of the project**

The cycles, stages and steps of the research design are shown in detail in Figure 2.

**In Stage One** of the project, we sought to understand the nature of the collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange that is taking place in relationships between grassroots NRM groups and the regional body in South East Queensland (NRMSEQ Inc). This stage involved two distinct parts. The first was an overview of the current literature on collaboration, partnership, dialogue and social learning for regional NRM in Australia (Oliver and Whelan, 2003). In the second part we worked actively with participants to map the NRM networks of case study region in terms of power and

conflict, knowledge exchange, and community participation and collaboration (Whelan and Oliver, 2004).

**In Stage Two**, the focus of this report, we have used the action research method to identify some of the key barriers and bridges to collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange between these parties.

**In Stage Three**, the second action research cycle of the project, we will attempt to highlight actions that may be taken to overcome the barriers and build on bridges to improve the nature of collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange existing between grassroots NRM groups and the regional body. As part of this process, there is scope within the project to help in the implementation of and reflection on the outcomes of these actions, as appropriate. Action research is an iterative and ongoing process. If this project facilitates learning and beneficial outcomes for those who participate, they may engage in further cycles of acting, reflecting and planning.

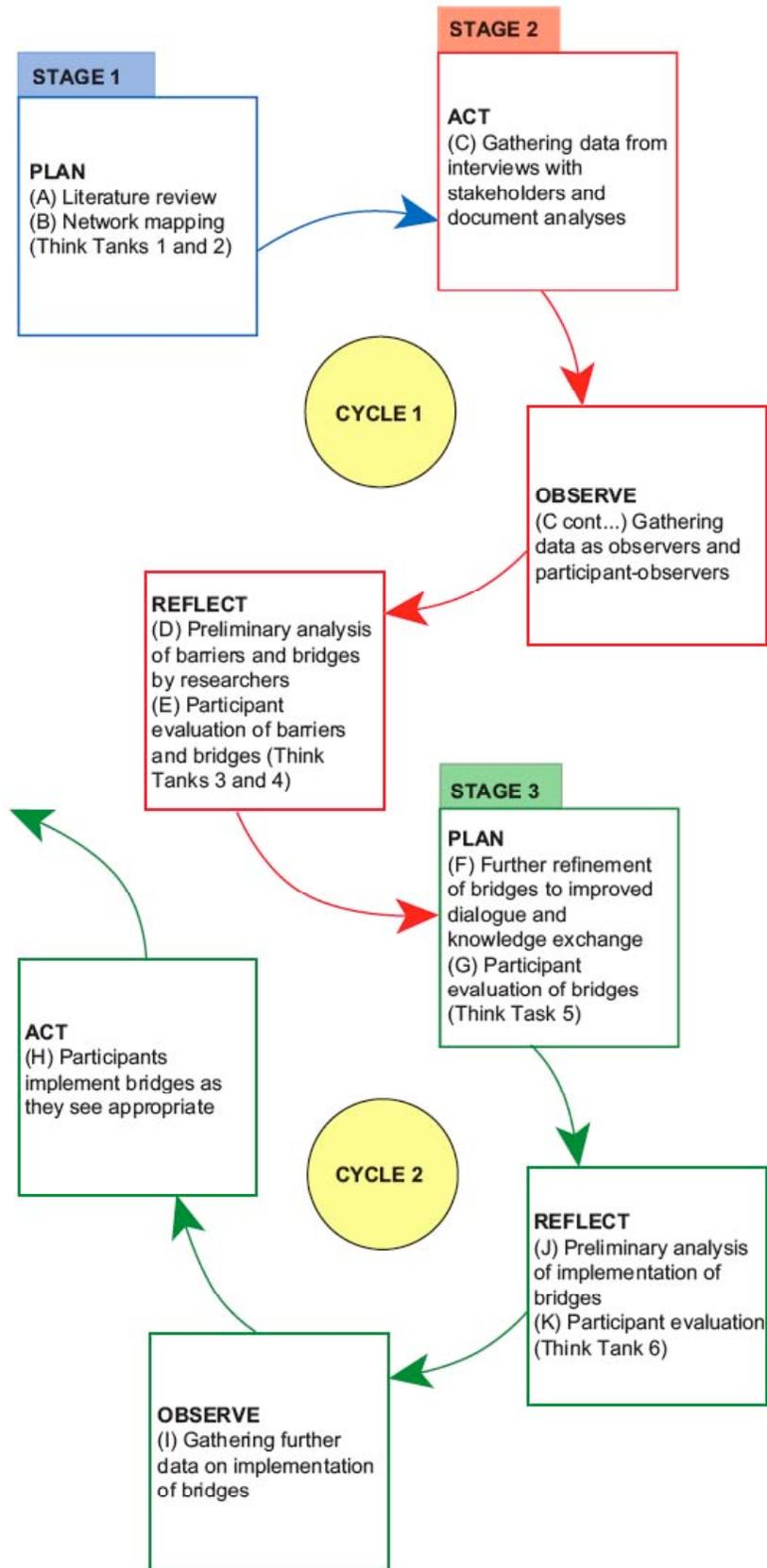


Figure 2: Research design

**Table 2: Action research cycle; components, stages and steps**

<b>Action Research Cycle</b>	<b>Component or 'Moment' In Cycle</b>	<b>Research Stage</b>	<b>Step</b>	<b>Think Tanks</b>
First action research cycle	Plan	Stage 1 – Gaining understanding of the nature of collaboration and NRM networks in SE Qld	A – Literature Review	
			B – Network mapping	Think Tanks 1 and 2
	Act	Stage 2 – Identifying key barriers and bridges to collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange between regional body and grass roots NRM groups in two case study areas in SE Qld.	C – Gather data through interviews, document analyses and field observations	
	Observe		D – Preliminary researcher analysis of data	
Reflect		E – Participant evaluation of barriers and bridges based on analysis of data	Think Tanks 3 and 4	
Second action research cycle	Plan	Stage 3 – Highlighting actions that may be taken to further improve collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange between these groups; helping in implementation of and reflection on outcomes of these actions.	F – Further refinement of bridges to improved dialogue and knowledge exchange	
			G - Participant evaluation of bridges	Think Tank 5 (planned)
	H – Participants implement bridges as they see appropriate			
	Act			
	Observe		I – further data gathering on implementation of bridges	
	Reflect		J – Preliminary researcher analysis of data	
		K – Participant evaluation	Think Tank 6 (planned)	

## Techniques

Whilst action research defines a research method, including the assumptions and approach of the researchers in the course of the investigation, it does not of itself determine the research techniques that are employed for the collection of data (Denscombe, 1998, p.58). For example, it is possible to base an action research project on quantitative survey data, questionnaires, direct observation or interviews. Our approach, however, relies on a series of qualitative research techniques including document analysis, semi-structured interviews, field and participant observation, participant 'Think-Tanks' and the triangulation of data.

### Document analyses

We have examined a range of relevant literature and documentation pertaining to both the regional body and the grassroots NRM groups in the areas of the study. In addition to both academic and non-academic literature published, we analysed press releases, magazine articles, local newspapers, Internet resources, pamphlets, newsletters, meeting minutes and promotional material pertaining to the studied organisations where available. The document analysis was predominantly foundational research, in preparation for and to complement the subsequent stages of engaged field research. The aim of the document analysis was to develop an appreciation of the evolution and social context of both the grassroots NRM groups and the regional body, including their impact on the community, from a diverse range of sources.

### Semi-structured interviews

To date, the project has included eleven semi-structured interviews, with employees, volunteers and committee members of grassroots groups, members of the regional body's board and staff, and public servants employed by local and state government agencies concerned with NRM.

### Participant observation

This report is informed to a considerable extent by participant observation, by which we mean:

...the method in which the observer participates in the daily life of the people under study, either openly in the role of the researcher or covertly in some disguised role, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time. (Becker and Geer, 1957, p.28)

Observation of people and events may be thought of as either *systematic* where the observer interacts minimally with research subjects, gathering quantitative data according to predetermined observation schedules, largely as a non-participant; or *participant* in nature, in which the observer is immersed in the social setting that he or she wishes to describe and understand (Creswell, 1998, p.58). A fourfold typology describes this more fully. A person in a research setting may be:

- *A complete observer*: a non-participant researcher;
- *Observer as participant*: a researcher from outside the social setting who participates in group activities while making observations;

- *Participant as observer*: a group participant who makes observations for research purposes), or
- *A complete participant*: a person who participates without making observations for research purposes. [Gold (1958) and Junker (1960) cited by Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994, p.248].

We have worked largely as observers-as-participants, coming in from outside the social setting and have observed and participated to varying degrees in a variety of events involving the regional body and grass roots NRM groups including a volunteers' forum, a regional conference, two annual general meetings, catchment association and environmental group meetings, a Queensland Land and Water Carers' Meeting and a Citizen Senate organized by the regional body.

### **Participant Think Tanks**

In addition, we have held four participant 'Think-Tanks' of two to three hours duration to complement the other methods through a commitment to participant evaluation. These events were convened consistent with principles of open and democratic participation. With the exception of Think Tank 1 which was held as a series of briefing, scoping and feedback meetings with individuals and groups at the commencement of the project, all Think Tanks were open meetings with all participants invited to the meeting. Grassroots group members known to have an interest in collaborative regional NRM were also free to invite others whom they thought might be interested in this research project and its progress. These Think Tanks helped to ensure that what could have been simply an ethnographic investigation (i.e. a piece of research that simply describes and perhaps interprets the way people in a 'culture-sharing' group describe and interpret their culture) was transformed into a critical social science action research project. Table 3 shows the numbers and backgrounds of people who have attended the four Think Tanks held to date.

**Table 3: Description of Think-Tank locations and participants**

Think Tank	Location	Number of people attending	Background of people attending
1	Various –held as a series of smaller meetings throughout South East Queensland to help scope the project	Over 100	Meeting with Chair of NRMSEQ; attendees at an SEQ Land and Water Carers’ meeting; attendees at a catchment management group meeting; meeting with regional community conservation groups; Meeting with NRMSEQ Board Member; Meeting with staff of Moreton Bay Waterways and Catchment Partnership; Presentation and discussion with Natural Resources and Mines Community Engagement Reference Panel; Presentation and discussion with SEQ Regional Coordination Group.
2	Griffith University, Nathan	9	Qld. Wader Study Group; Commerce Queensland; Greening Australia; Environmental Planners (Griffith University); NRM private consultant; Coastal CRC researchers.
3	Urban Catchment Centre	11	Urban Catchment Group members; CSIRO; University of Queensland; University of Southern Queensland; Coastal CRC researchers.
4	Sunshine Coast NR&M Conference Room	23	NRMSEQ staff; Landcare members (two groups); Greening Australia; Waterwatch group; Coastal CRC review staff; Local creek revegetation group; Coastal CRC researchers; Local Government staff (two local governments).

Participant evaluation undertaken in the Think Tanks was specifically aimed at ensuring reflexivity in the research process, and ‘de-centring’ the role of the researcher as the locus of authentic knowledge. In contrast, participant observation can potentially reinforce the researcher’s subject-position and associated values. “It is possible that researchers will omit a whole range of data in order to confirm their own pre-established beliefs, leaving the method open to charges of bias” (May 1999: 154). The structure of the Think Tanks was derived from series of questions derived by social scientist, Bent Flyvbjerg (2001): What is happening? Is this desirable? What should be done?

Think Tank 1 was held as a series of meetings that allowed us to test the accuracy of our scoping of the project with participants. Participants in Think Tank 2 gave us feedback on the accuracy of our network mapping. Think Tanks 3 and 4 invited informants and other participants in regional community-based NRM to discuss the barriers and bridges that are discussed in this report. They were held in the metropolitan and Sunshine Coast sub-regions that make up this case study. All Think Tanks provided us with opportunities for participant evaluation on many levels. We were able to test:

- Our analysis of results; and
- The assumptions that we have made in undertaking this research.

## Two types of assumptions

The critical, ethnographic and qualitative nature of this inquiry makes it important to articulate the assumptions that inform and shape our inquiry. The assumptions that we have made as researchers fall into two categories:

- *Type A*: assumptions that we have examined carefully and consciously decided are reasonable to assume given our values, knowledge and experience to date in community-based natural resource management; and
- *Type B*: assumptions that we may not be aware of, but which others feel that, on examination, have influenced the research.

The Type A assumptions are listed below. We have been very careful to try to learn as much as we can about our Type B assumptions through the participant evaluation process used in the Think Tanks to ensure that research outcomes are as credible and trustworthy as possible. Key assumptions fall into two categories: one relating to NRM regionalisation; and the other relating to the research process. These are outlined below.

### Assumptions about NRM regionalisation

This inquiry is shaped by four assumptions about regionalisation of NRM. These assumptions relate to the researchers' values, knowledge and experience to date in community-based natural resource management.

#### **1. The decision to regionalise NRM is beyond the sphere of influence of research participants**

The decision to regionalise the funding delivery mechanisms for NRM in Australia is beyond the sphere of influence of the people involved in NRM grassroots groups and regional bodies. It is a decision that has been taken by federal government politicians on the advice of their agencies. However, people directly involved in grassroots and regional NRM groups have the capacity to influence how the regionalisation process evolves. Such decisions may directly affect the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of the regionalisation process.

#### **2. Good relationships between planners, investors and implementers are key to effective NRM regionalisation**

The implementation of NRM regional plans will rely *primarily* on the quality of the relationships the regional body has with investors and implementers. While relationships with other groups and individuals (eg. local government, industry groups, major non-government organisations and individual landholders), as investors and implementers, are pivotal to the process, the relationship between the regional body and grassroots groups is also critical. Much of the implementation of the regional plans will rely on the contributions of community-based, voluntary, grassroots NRM groups. We have also assumed that the development of effective, working relationships needs to happen in parallel with NRM regional planning and strategy development, and not as an adjunct or secondary process. The timeframe imposed through the NHT Bilateral Agreement does not allow the luxury of relationship building prior to plan development and relationships will, by necessity, develop 'on the run'.

#### **3. Government agency staff face competing motivations that affect agency involvement in NRM regionalisation: the desire to cut agency costs and minimise agency risks while simultaneously meeting agency-stated goals of supporting sustainable NRM**

Agency staff from all three levels of government (local, state and federal) involved in NRM regionalisation are members of organisations that pursue sustainable natural resource management as one of their stated corporate goals. They may also personally value such a goal. However, agencies and their staff are also motivated by a desire to minimise costs and risks to their agency and level of government. While citizens involved in grassroots NRM groups and the regional body may also wish to minimise costs and risks to themselves and their organisations, and see that governments have a need to minimise costs to taxpayers, they are also likely to act according to other ecological, social, economic and cultural values they view as important. This means they may be more likely to accept risk if ecological, social and cultural gains may be significant. Also, for them cost is not always the critical decision making factor.

#### **4. Collaboration has its limits**

Collaboration is not an NRM 'magic wand'. Cosgrove, Evans and Yencken, (1994, pp.5-6) advocate a need for an eclectic approach to sustainability, stating that a variety of tools (e.g. legislation and regulation, economic incentives and disincentives, and education and awareness programs) will need to be used in a context-appropriate way if more sustainable natural resource management is to be achieved. We agree with this statement and note also that collaboration needs to be well informed, fair and legitimate. As Wondelleck and Yaffee (2000, p.231) note, any collaborative relationship should be subject to a three-way test, namely:

- **Is it legitimate?** Does the relationship provide for normal public review and opportunities for comment?
- **Is it fair?** Have all parties who may be affected by the matter been invited to be involved in the citizen participation process? Are the processes they are using in their deliberations open and transparent? Are the requests that are being placed on citizens in terms of their participation reasonable and in proportion to the significance of the NRM problem under scrutiny?
- **Is it wise?** Have adequate sources of knowledge been identified and brought to bear on the matter at hand? Do the participants understand areas of uncertainty in this regard?

We feel that all NRM tools have their limits that their use should also be subject to this three-way test.

#### **Assumptions about the research process**

As researchers, we have also made two assumptions that we see as key to our research process.

##### **1. We will be sensitive to the feelings of participants and respectful of their views**

Grassroots NRM stakeholders have a range of motivations for being involved in the regionalisation process. They bring different knowledge bases, experience, skills, and abilities to the process. Their perceptions of collaborative relationships involving grassroots groups and the regional body may be strongly influenced by these differing motivations and backgrounds. These differing perspectives will influence our data collection, participant-evaluation activities and analysis.

##### **2. We can gain a useful appreciation of the situation by comprehending the point of view of those actually involved**

We are intentionally seeking to understand the barriers and bridges to collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange, firstly from the perspectives and experiences of people in grassroots NRM groups, and secondly from the point of view of staff and members of the regional body. Our approach very intentionally develops an understanding of the points of view of grassroots NRM groups and regional body members and staff, rather than of various levels of government.

In addition, we assume that the findings of this study will have some applicability in other regions. Some aspects of the collaborative relationships and experiences in South East Queensland may be idiosyncratic and unique to the region, but many of the insights generated through this project, and the barriers and bridges identified and tested, will be of broader interest and relevance.

## **Results**

Table 4 shows the data that has been analysed to date. While no interviewees have expressed a preference for anonymity, this report refers to interview transcripts by number rather than name.

**Table 4: Data set analysed to date**

<b>FIELD NOTES</b>	<b>EVENT/ ACTIVITY</b>
FN1	Informal discussions with agency staff
FN2	Conservation Sector Meeting
FN3	Conservation Sector Meeting
FN4	2003 NRMSEQ Inc. Annual General Meeting
FN5	Meeting with urban catchment group executive and staff
FN6	Urban catchment group general meeting
FN7	Regional body community consultation meeting
FN8	Regional Body 2004 Annual General Meeting and Board meeting
FN9	CRC mini-conference
FN10	Regional body workshop
FN11	Think Tank 3
FN12	Ecopolitics International Conference 2004
FN13	Urban catchment group meeting
FN14	Land and Water Carers' Meeting
FN15	Volunteers in NRM Forum
FN16	South East Queensland Biodiversity Conference
FN17	Think Tank 4
<b>INTERVIEW</b>	<b>INTERVIEWEE</b>
INT1	Regional body board member
INT2	Regional body board member
INT3	Urban catchment group staff member
INT4	Urban catchment group executive member
INT5	Regional body staff member
INT6	Urban catchment group executive member
INT7	Urban catchment group executive member
INT8	Local government staff member
INT9	Waterwatch group staff member
INT10	Landcare group executive member
INT11	Regional body staff member
<b>DOCUMENTS</b>	<b>DOCUMENT TYPE</b>
	Regional Body Newsletters
	Draft Regional NRM plan

**Table 5: Major themes derived from data analysis**

Grass Roots Groups – Regional Body Relationships	
Themes	Sub-themes
Regionalisation	Need for shared expectations Examining perceptions and assumptions – clarifying roles and responsibilities
Resourcing the regionalisation process	Funding Staffing
Working collaboratively	Inclusiveness and mandate Time and travel Indigenous involvement When to act deliberatively or according to procedures Need for critique, learning together and adaptive management
Conflict	‘Turf wars’ between grass roots groups ‘Blame game’ being played by grassroots groups and government agencies

Table 5 highlights the major themes identified, in Stages 1 and 2 of this study (see Figure 2 and Table 2) by analysing the data gathered using the methods and techniques outlined previously in this report. They are discussed in some detail below and will become the basis for further action research to be undertaken in Stage 3 of this project. Each theme and sub-theme is discussed in turn. As the research project moves into Stage 3, the following discussion will be published in summary format to stimulate discussion and guide intervention. It will also be published in a format appropriate for relevant conferences and journals.

## The regionalisation process

### Need for shared expectations

Regionalisation presents a number of barriers to participation for stakeholders in the NRMSEQ planning process. One of these barriers is that several grassroots groups examined in this study have only limited experience participating in natural resource management at a regional scale. Indeed, these groups have a limited capacity to deal with NRM issues and governance at other than a local scale. This may be attributed to their defined sphere of influence or membership base, or their sense of place, which may have evolved in relation particular ecosystems they have worked to protect or restore.

The regional planning exercise challenges these groups to consider the entire region and to identify with new boundaries and scales. In some instances, these boundaries do not correspond to grassroots groups’ sphere of concern. For example, catchment groups may have extensive involvement along one waterway, but have minimal knowledge of, or concern for, the management of other rivers and estuaries in the region. Groups that have a regional perspective may not define the boundaries of South East Queensland in the same way as this planning exercise, which is shaped, to a considerable extent by the Commonwealth. Interviewees reported, “We don’t see ourselves bound by the catchment at all” (INT3), “Even the concept of *region* is still

difficult for some people” (INT5) and questioned whether it is feasible to directly engage community groups in planning at this scale. In fact, one interviewee observed that NRMSEQ is not actually working with “individual groups” in this regional approach. Others explained the non-participation of some grassroots groups in terms of their limited capacity to participate in multiple concurrent planning processes, their need to compete for resources, their emphasis on local rather than regional priorities, conflictual relationships between community grassroots groups in neighbouring sub-catchments (FN5), and the short-comings of community engagement activities facilitated by other planning bodies. In fact, most interviewees considered that relatively few grassroots groups have the capacity to meaningfully participate in regional NRM planning. This may result in a mismatch of priorities and local capacity to support planned interventions if the regional body embarks on local priorities based on an over-estimation of the capacity and support for volunteer-based NRM projects.

### **Examining perceptions and assumptions: clarifying roles and responsibilities**

The shift in scale from local and sub-regional to regional has also resulted in confusion concerning roles and responsibilities. The need for clarity was foreshadowed by the ‘Blue Book’ (NNRMT 1999, p.10), which highlighted the importance of clear and agreed roles and responsibilities in regional planning, particularly in delineating the cascading responsibilities of the three spheres of government. The confusion reported by many grassroots participants is compounded by the fact that parallel planning processes utilise different boundaries. For example the planning boundaries adopted for the NRMSEQ planning exercise extend further to the east (beyond the Moreton Bay islands) than the boundaries of the concurrent SEQ2021 regional planning (Queensland Government, 2004).

The role of State Government in regional NRM is especially unclear to stakeholders in grassroots groups. From the outset the Queensland Government declared that officers would not participate in the planning process and that NRMSEQ was to be community-led. This remains the stated intention of the regional body and the Queensland Government (NRMSEQ, 2004a. p.37). Within months, however, senior state government officials clarified that the regional plan would require the endorsement of the Joint Steering Group and Regional Coordination Group, the former body composed of both State and Federal representatives, and the latter made up entirely of State Government staff. Moreover, it has been observed repeatedly by community sector participants that government officials dominate the planning process and even ‘community engagement’ exercises such as public meetings and workshops (FN15, FN16).

The role of government is further clouded by some community sector participants’ perception that regionalisation is a cost-shifting exercise that is manipulating or coercing community groups to accept responsibilities that were previously borne by government agencies. They consider this unreasonable, given what they see as the clear public benefit of community-based natural resource conservation and management (INT8). Some grassroots groups now feel compelled to both perform on-ground work and raise required funds, resulting in excessive demands on volunteer-based groups.

The lack of clarity concerning roles and responsibilities extends to government agencies, community and industry groups. The confusion is frustrating some grassroots members’ efforts to initiate local projects:

*How we can set up this project? Is that a regional project? Is that a priority of council to do this? How are they going to do it? Where are they going to do it? And does NRMSEQ set that up? Does [our group] set it up? Do Council [local government] set up it up? (INT4)*

Grassroots participants propose several bridges or remedies to this problem. Clearly, the roles and responsibilities of the regional body and its constituent members need clarification. This has already been achieved to some extent in the draft regional plan, though the many pages in the draft strategy providing this clarification highlight government agencies and provide relatively little detail about community and industry groups: a bias seemingly at odds with the stated goal of 'community-led NRM'. The clarification of roles will be increasingly important as the regional strategy is implemented and reviewed. Local governments will presumably play an important role during implementation and will require the support of state government in terms of both resources and power (INT4).

With respect to the engagement of small, local, remote grassroots groups, the barriers to collaboration appear surmountable. Grassroots participants interviewed during this study suggested the regional body could: (1) work strategically with other organisations that have effective community engagement strategies in place (the Moreton Bay Waterways and Catchment Partnership was given as one example); (2) recruit staff with first-hand experience in the community NRM sector in order to enhance communication and relationships with grassroots groups; and (3) recognise and harness community enthusiasm for projects "in their own backyards" (INT2). Although the regional body has struggled with the competitiveness between NRM organisations and some initial animosity from the community sector, these tensions are subsiding as respective parties more accurately assess each other's capacity and intentions. And there is considerable good will to shift from "butting heads" (INT4) to a productive partnership.

## **Resourcing the regionalisation process**

### **Funding**

For many in the stakeholders involved in this study, the opportunity for funding and support in terms of staff and resources is a significant motivating factor for their seeking to develop collaborative relationships with NRMSEQ. As we shall see in later sections, competition for funding and resources emerges as one of the main factors leading to conflict between groups. Adequate funding is a high priority for grassroots groups, and is a significant motivator for their involvement with the regional body and the regionalisation process as a whole. As one staff member of a grassroots group explained:

*I guess for a community group, if you're getting money from a particular body... they're the ones you dance to. All others take a back seat – that's reality. (INT9)*

However, this was not a view held by all stakeholders. For example, an executive member of another grassroots group explained that the involvement of her group in the regionalisation process was not motivated by funding: "If any funding comes out of it, that will be a bonus, but that's not the prime reason for (us) being involved" (INT7). She explained that their group's involvement with NRMSEQ was at the invitation of staff with whom they had a sound personal relationship and that they sought to "find out the bigger picture" about where they sat in the region in terms of NRM. She further explained that they used a variety of other methods to gain

funding, working closely with local government and industry groups who were active in their area. An employee of the same grassroots group commented that it all depended on how you looked at things, noting:

*I suppose ...and it's not directed at these organisations, (but) I have always been told there is not money in the environment sector. (Yet) from what I can see, the environmental sector is very well funded. There's a lot of money out there in these regional bodies, state bodies, CRCs, there's a lot of money out there. (However), there's not a lot of money that gets put into doing things on the ground (INT3).*

Several stakeholders cited lack of certainty and, in many instances, the cessation of funding that had occurred as a consequence of the regionalisation process as important issues (INT7; INT11, FN15). One local government staff member also emphasised the risk that grassroots groups took in being involved in consultations and collaborations with the regional body, in that it took the group and its members away from their local interests, explaining that:

*It's just taken up a considerable amount of their time and effort just to be part of this process to eventually maybe in three years to get something out of it. They are being asked to have all the input and they are not getting anything out of it in return (INT8).*

Stakeholders also raised the idea that private enterprise may become more involved in funding activities with grassroots groups. One regional body staff member interviewed, who has had long-term involvement with NRM groups, thought that private philanthropy and investment in community-based NRM was not widespread in Australian private enterprise culture.

*Enough industry doesn't understand their role in NRM and the importance to them. They haven't really taken triple bottom line into themselves yet. There's very, very few industries that have. That's the challenge. State and federal government are expecting industry to come on board quicker than they are. That's actually making this gap (in funding to grassroots groups) worse (INT11).*

An executive member from a catchment management group that had successfully secured industry funding countered this view.

*Now that we're sustaining ourselves for wages and such, we're completely different. We are not going to be whinging. ... We will survive, because the name of the game is survival. We haven't got a handout mentality here (INT6).*

Another executive member and a staff member interviewed from that group also supported this view (INT7, INT11). This determination to become self-sufficient has meant that this particular group sees itself as having a different type of relationship with government or the regional body, one that is based primarily on collaborating on matters of mutual interest (if and when they perceive them), rather than simply complying to ensure adequate funding for the survival of the group. As researchers, we would argue that the social enterprise model that this group has developed, in essence working like a type of 'environmental Endeavour Foundation' needs further understanding and trialling (see Mackenzie, 2004). Interested grassroots groups may wish to work together, or with the regional body towards this end.

Notwithstanding the above, we have observed that funding, or the lack of it and expectations about what role governments should play in supporting the regionalisation process with funding, are central to many of the conflicts occurring between grassroots groups and grassroots groups and the regional body. It would appear sensible that government agencies at all levels reflect on funding availability and mechanisms to ensure that all parties have realistic expectations of what funds are available and when and what may be achieved for the amount of money on offer. Given the expectations that several stakeholders have mentioned in this study to date, industry and business should also be involved in this process. Expectations of all involved in the regionalisation process need to be realistic.

### **Staffing**

Realistic expectations are also important in terms of staffing. One executive member of a grassroots group noted that there was a dangerous trend occurring in NRM that appeared to be part of the regionalisation process, in that there were higher than feasible expectations being placed on volunteers. He considered that if you wanted to build a successful and effective grassroots organisation, you had to put “professionals in place” in terms of staff to work with grassroots groups (FN11). An executive member from another Landcare group needed the support of professional coordinators and project officers (FN15 INT10). She further commented that the management structures that had been created in the regionalisation process, were to her mind, typical of large corporations and that they were not ‘volunteer friendly’. She explained:

*Volunteers are NOT paid workers and cannot be managed by a remote organisation, i.e. a Regional Body. Nor can they be managed by roving Community Support Staff. Volunteers do not have to volunteer. They all have a life outside the voluntary time they give and most do NOT rely on these activities for their quality of life, as opposed to paid staff. It is the personal contacts and satisfaction which keep volunteers doing what they do (INT10).*

Another executive member from an urban catchment group echoed this concern. He said that they needed:

*... on-ground support for projects, on-ground support for planning, and having a direct role in regional urban planning. And (community support staff from regional bodies) have got to engage with groups directly – they can't just sit in their offices. ... I think they are brilliant young people with a lot to give, but we need to get them out- out of that office. (INT6)*

A regional body staff member commented that getting out of the office to work with groups was not that easy due to emphasis that both the Australian and state governments had placed on producing an NRM plan within very short time frames (FN 10). From our observations to date, it appears that expectations relating to staffing should be very clearly and understood by all parties (government, industry, and community). This is another topic that needs to be central to dialogue about the regionalisation process. Volunteers are not paid staff. Any regionalisation process that relies, even in part, on maintaining the interest and involvement of volunteers, will have to recognise and meet these interests.

## Working collaboratively

### Inclusiveness and mandate

*Everybody has got a really good intent. I think there are a couple of hiccups, of course, and there always will be. (INT11)*

The regionalisation process is based on the premise that an effective and legitimate regional NRM plan must be developed through processes that facilitate all stakeholders working collaboratively (NRMSEQ 2004a, NNRMTF 1999). The regional body is explicit in its intention to “achieve its mission through providing a means for representation and involvement of all land managers and all stakeholders to develop, prioritise, coordinate and implement integrated natural resource and environmental management activities” (NRMSEQ 2004a, p.30). The process must be inclusive, transparent and accountable. In other words, it is an exercise in participatory democracy.

To remain true to these principles, interviewees observed that NRMSEQ would need to:

1. Facilitate and support the involvement of diverse community interests including those of local government, Integrated Catchment Management (ICM) and Landcare groups, environmental, coastal, marine, research and educational organisations, urban and rural industry, and Traditional Owners;
2. Ensure participants in the planning process have a mandate and exercise accountability to the sectoral interests they claim to represent;
3. Recognise the differing capacities, interests and needs of participating groups and individuals and make arrangements to facilitate the involvement of those with least capacity; and
4. Clearly demarcate between those planning decisions that are appropriately made through deliberative processes and those that are appropriate to procedural and legislative responses.

With respect to these four objectives, this study indicates that NRMSEQ and some other regional bodies have encountered difficulties.

From the outset, the regional body strived to live up to these expectations. For instance, it reached out to a broad range of constituencies and interests through: extensive and targeted invitations to initial public meetings; the openness of these meetings where the structure and constitution of the regional body were developed; and by explicitly recognising in this constitution that NRMSEQ’s board should include nominees representing each of eight ‘divisions’.

The draft regional strategy provides contradictory claims concerning the extent to which this ideal level of inclusiveness has been achieved. Positive assessments of NRMSEQ’s inclusiveness point to the regional body’s strategic use of existing grassroots networks such as those developed and maintained by the Moreton Bay Waterways and Catchments Partnership (‘the Partnership’) and the South East Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils. Regional meetings, community support officers and representative networks have also helped build inclusiveness. These upbeat assessments are countered, however, by the observations of many participants who consider that:

1. One group or another is dominating plan-making;

2. Other groups or sectors are marginalised including some whose input might considerably enhance the process. This is partly due to the administrative complexity;
3. Many participants are motivated by vested interest;
4. Some influential participants have no clear mandate;
5. Government involvement is problematic (in ways that are explored elsewhere in this paper); and
6. The selection of board and ordinary membership has unfairly favoured particular sectors and has been, at times, unconstitutional.

One Board member highlighted this last observation by noting:

*Many nominations were taken from the floor, and elected members were only accountable to the people present... I could have nominated myself, with no accountability, no delegation and no representative mandate from the ... sector. There are assumptions built into the model that the representatives on the Board will have consulted with their relevant sectors in advance, and will have some representative mandate, which is not necessarily part of the formal process. (FN8)*

Procedural arrangements that were poorly defined and understood yet rigidly implemented meant that a community-sector conservationist with strong support from grassroots groups and a long history of leadership in NRM planning was precluded from board membership.

With respect to inclusiveness, grassroots participants in the regional NRM planning exercise have made divergent and, at times, contradictory observations. These are paraphrased in Table 6.

**Table 6: Divergent nature of stakeholder perceptions of inclusiveness of regional NRM planning exercise**

<b>Groups dominating</b>	<b>Groups being marginalised</b>
Farmers, AGFORCE and National Party-aligned farmers in particular, dominate the process (INT1)	Farmers represent a small proportion of active participants (FN16)
Local government are instrumental to regional planning: the 'glue' in the process (FN15)	Local government is not the community (and should not drive this process) (FN15)
Green groups are holding everyone to ransom (INT4)	Conservation representatives have been systematically marginalised (FN8)
(We are) fed up with national and state politicians manipulating and abusing the hard work of volunteers (FN16); and their 'take it or leave it' approach (FN1)	You need to somehow get people from state and local government (INT7)
The Water and Land Carers network have networked and communicated more successfully than other sectors and exercise considerable influence, including consistent board membership.	On-ground groups are not actively participating. They have competing demands on their time, are disillusioned, and perceive the process as a complex 'talk fest' (INT10)

Other interviewees were more positive in their appraisal. A favourable comparison was made between the level of inclusiveness achieved in SEQ, and the 'membership drive' in other regions that had resulted in a particularly skewed mix of participants.

The rhetoric of partnership, collaboration and inclusiveness has been taken up from NRM regional planning documents and is utilised by community and government participants in NRMSEQ as a yardstick against which to evaluate the regional body's achievements.

### **Time and travel**

A powerful barrier to the participation of community members is the time commitment required for active participation. Relatively few active grassroots participants are able to attend regular meetings, travel throughout the region, read and respond to discussion papers and other documents and network in their groups and more broadly within the community. This competes with family obligations, employment and the demands of parallel NRM decision-making processes. An effort was made during the development of the draft regional plan to overcome this difficulty by emailing information papers through electronic networks. Although some grassroots groups valued this, others considered this arrangement inadequate to ensure effective community engagement:

*Even with all the good will in the world, there's not that many people who will sit down and do it. It comes down to time. It's not about not wanting to... it comes down to finding the time to do it and working out your priorities (INT7)*

On a positive note, NRMSEQ has managed to achieve 'inclusivity' objectives by working with existing networks, for example, utilising the history of cooperation within the regional conservation sector. The regional non-government conservation council and its affiliate groups provide a level of coordination and communication between the myriad of small voluntary grassroots groups that would otherwise present a challenge to the regional body and government agencies. Several interviewees considered this important function critically under-resourced and marginalised by government agencies (INT6, INT8). They recommend increased support and recognition for the conservation groups to ensure their continued involvement.

### **Indigenous involvement**

Two observations concerning inclusiveness that were made consistently by participants interviewed during this study are that: (1) indigenous groups are very poorly represented; and (2) volunteers whose efforts were a crucial factor in the apparent success of NHT1 are finding it difficult to participate in this process (INT10, FN15). The failure to successfully engage indigenous Australians represents a significant divergence from the stated aims of the regionalisation process. Board positions created for indigenous representation have been vacant for much of the plan development period.<sup>5</sup> The architects of this regional NRM process highlighted the importance of traditional owners' historical land management practices, knowledge, skills and aspirations, and proposed strategies to support their participation in NRM planning (NNRMTF, 1999, p.18, 36). Despite this commitment, NRMSEQ has had difficulty engaging indigenous stakeholders (INT2), who are considered to have the least capacity to participate (FN4). Efforts have been made, however, to build bridges to indigenous groups by employing three indigenous community support officers to reach out to Aboriginal and Islander communities. The regional body's 2004 Annual Report (NRMSEQ, 2004b) identifies two indigenous representatives. Currently, indigenous groups are discussing how best to participate in regional governance in the future.

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<sup>5</sup> This study does not suggest explanations for this.

### **When to deliberate or act according to procedures**

Another barrier to effective collaboration is the perceived tension between deliberative and procedural governance. In our research, we have frequently heard grassroots groups speak of government agencies abrogating their legislative responsibilities, and yet failing to provide the commensurate legislative powers for the regional body to exercise these delegated responsibilities. Participants consider that, in some instances, decisions that should remain routine legislative interventions are now within the regional body's discretion (INT2, INT5, INT11). Unlike arrangements in Queensland, the regional planning approach in New South Wales and Victoria involves statutory bodies. It will be interesting to compare the respective success of these alternative models once regional plans have been implemented for five to ten years.

### **Need for critique, learning together and adaptive management**

An important bridge to collaborative NRM identified in this study relates to social learning. The literature review of this research project (Oliver and Whelan 2004) defined social learning as a positive component of collaboration informed by systematic critique, reflection and learning from experience. Having embraced an adaptive management policy framework, NRMSEQ is committed to continual improvement through a cycle of information collation, systems analysis and vision, plan-making, implementation and monitoring and review (NRMSEQ, 2004, p.33). This cycle is intended to facilitate the evolution of knowledge for participants both individually and collectively.

*There will be a lot of criticism and that's just a given. It's not going to be happy families all around... But we've got so much history to draw from and we've got a lot of capacity already on the ground. It's not as if we're starting from scratch... I guess that's the trick the first time around - to make sure that nobody feels invalidated so that they're there for the second time and the third time. (INT11)*

Grassroots group members support this approach and consider it a dramatic improvement on the history of regional planning. Several 'collaborative' bodies with comparable objectives to NRMSEQ's have been established and discontinued in the past. With each change in governance arrangements, trust is undermined, knowledge is lost, some grassroots groups are marginalised, and precious resources are wasted (INT8, INT10, FN15). A key benefit of stable and enduring governance structures, according to some grassroots participants, is the opportunity to debate contentious issues, 'talk through problems' (INT6) and learn from each other (INT2): processes of dialogue that are impossible when deliberative structures are constantly reinvented. Others were less optimistic and observed that some 'partnership' relationships in the region led to 'group think' where 'they all speak with the one voice' for fear of pulling down the partnership' (FN15). Ideally, continual review will result in improved governance arrangements for the regional body and also for participating organisations.

### **Conflict**

Conflict is endemic and widespread in NRM culture generally, and this regional planning exercise in particular. As Tsing, an American NRM policy academic says, national bureaucracies that determine government NRM policy are "not only powerful shapers of the environment themselves; they are also perhaps the most important

sites of struggle over environmental classification and regulation... sites of negotiation and debate as to what will count as 'nature', 'resources' and 'environment'" (Tsing, 1999, p.2). At the grassroots and regional level in our study areas, we have found the situation to mirror that described by Tsing.

### **'Turf wars'**

The conflictual nature of regional NRM practices is illustrated through community consultation activities conducted by NRMSEQ that identified seven key regional forces in their *Draft Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan for SEQ* as driving the unsustainable natural resource management in the region: "waste; bureaucracy; self-interest; population; short-sightedness; communications and economics" (NRMSEQ, 2004, p.52). The Draft Plan explains that many of these key regional forces have their basis in different values that various parties hold regarding the use and management of natural resources (eg differing rural and urban values) and the "splintering of responsibility" for this, and the environment more generally, between various government organisations. They cite this as leading to a lack of coordination and integration of policy and planning (NRMSEQ, 2004, pp.54-55). Given the nature of these key regional forces, the prospect of conflict within and between resource users and managers appears inevitable. While the draft regional plan is silent on the prospect of taking action to recognise, reconcile or resolve conflicts between those involved in community-based NRM, it does propose "fostering liaison, understanding and cooperation among stakeholders in natural resource and environmental management issues of concern," and the need to protect and enhance the social capital that exists between people involved in NRM in the region (NRMSEQ; 2004; pp.30, 150-158).<sup>6</sup>

The Draft Plan cites the Draft Queensland Landcare Support Strategy (2000) which highlighted a need for grassroots groups to have access to funds for training and support in a range of areas, including conflict resolution, if the groups are to build social capital (NRMSEQ, 2004a, p.153). However, the Draft Plan does not include this as a training need (p.156), or mention conflict resolution within its Social Capital Asset Targets (p.158). It appears to pay minimal attention to the conflicts that, as researchers, we observed occurring between grassroots groups, within grassroots groups, and between grassroots groups and the regional body. For example, one grassroots group employee commented that late in 2003, he observed catchment groups act quite aggressively to the regional body staff at a state conference, saying:

*Geez, they copped a bagging, and I didn't know about this at the time, but the catchment groups slung quite a bit of mud because they saw it as another organisation that was set up to filter money down ... (INT3).*

Another research participant, a community support officer commented that she had felt, at a personal level, a considerable amount of animosity from the community towards the regional body. She felt this was due to expectations of the community regarding funding and support that were beyond the capacity of the regional body to deliver (FN10). Competition for limited funding, leading to conflict between grassroots groups, and between grassroots groups and the regional body, was also observed by others (INT2, INT5). With the advent of new regional arrangements, the State

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<sup>6</sup> Social capital encompasses the extent of networks between individuals and groups; density and knowledge of relationships; existence of obligations and expectations (promotion of reciprocity); other forms of local knowledge; levels of trust and norms of routine behaviour; and existence and use of sanctions to punish 'free-riding' (Rydin and Pennington, 2000).

Landcare and Catchment Management Council that advised the Minister for Natural Resources and Mines was disbanded. One interviewee saw some 'carer' groups being resentful of this, and that this resentment over 'loss of influence' was affecting their relationship with the new regional body (INT2, FN15).

Another interviewee observed that the nature of the personalities involved also had an effect on conflict levels, but that it was how the conflict was handled that really determined whether NRM outcomes were going to be improved on the ground. She commented:

*... Conflict happens pretty much on a day-to-day basis, not necessarily within our group, but you hear about other groups in conflict and what it really depends on is what it is (about), who it is, and how it is handled (INT8).*

An executive member of a grassroots group commented, "Some groups want glory, whilst other groups want outcomes. I think that is half of the problem!" (INT4).

One Think Tank participant felt that while the regionalisation process had initially led to conflict between groups, that many of these issues had been resolved and that in the face of limited resources groups were 'sticking together' more and guarding their territory collectively (FN17).

### **'Blame game'**

Conflict can give rise to effective collaboration and partnership building. One interviewee responded that the way his grassroots group worked with other groups, was to talk to them. Sometimes, depending on the topic these talks then turned into fights. He noted "... then we turn it into collaboration" (INT1). It appears that most conflict resolution work was advanced "over coffee... when we decide there's something we can work on together, we formalise the relationship" (INT1).

Lack of such productive dialogue may lead to a phenomenon we have observed and come to term the 'blame game'. As one participant in a Think Tank noted, grassroots groups felt that they had been blamed by 'government' for the apparent 'failure' of NHT1, and that this had given rise to the lack of appropriate governance structures and government funding support for grassroots groups (FN11). In part and in turn, this had given rise to the conflict mentioned above. As another Think Tank participant explained, there was also a need to critique the role of grassroots groups in the regionalisation process as well as critiquing the process itself. He felt that grassroots groups sometimes had quite unrealistic perceptions of themselves and their part in the process. Conflict was arising as a result, and that this was causing difficulty (FN11). These thoughts are in line with those of Poncelet (2001) who studied multi-stakeholder environmental management groups in the European Union, noting that conflict had a critical and positive role to play in collaboration, but that it needed to be acknowledged and embraced. It is our observation that the 'blame game' is a symptom of poorly handled conflict.

Dialogue between parties, centred on issues of conflict and based on self-examination and examination of common purpose and values held between participants, should be fundamental to the regionalisation process. Conflict within and between groups should be expected and embraced. Regional Body strategies to protect and build social capital assets within the region should include ways to help all involved come to accept the essential and important role of conflict in community-based NRM and to learn from its reconciliation and resolution. As one grassroots staff member said:

*There are many territorial issues out there and it's a matter of working through them. (INT9)*

## Conclusion

This report, the second of three major reports arising as outputs of this action research project, sought to identify the major barriers and bridges to collaboration between NRM grassroots groups and the regional body in two case study areas in South East Queensland. We have grouped the barriers and bridges to collaboration identified around four major themes:

- Regionalisation;
- Resourcing the regionalisation process;
- Working collaboratively; and
- Conflict.

The themes identified and arguments to justify their choice presented here have been based on an analysis of the data set gained in Stages 1 and 2 of this study (see Table 4). Stage 3, the final action research cycle of this project, will use the themes, barriers and possible bridges identified as a basis for further planning, action, observation and reflection with stakeholders involved in the project.

While we have already systematically analysed a large volume of data (see Table 4), we have collected data that we have still yet to analyse and are aware that there may be a need to collect even more data to ensure that we have reliably captured the views of those involved in grassroots group-regional body collaborations in the case study areas. However, we are confident that the analysis presented is a useful basis from which to pursue Stage 3 of this study.

We see two conversations as being essential outcomes of this study and would hope that the frequency and intensity of these conversations builds as we move through Stage 3 of this project. The action research method will help us to do this systematically. As we mentioned earlier:

- The first conversation is one that participants may wish to have with each other about how collaboration, dialogue and knowledge exchange can be improved in a regional NRM setting and to take action to do that as they see appropriate; and
- The second conversation is with people in various levels of government about how policies and practices may be adapted to enhance programs supporting the regionalisation of community-based natural resource management, particularly from the viewpoint of those involved in grassroots group-regional body collaborations. This may help in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of regional NRM plans currently approved and under development.

As outlined in Table 1, the qualitative mode of inquiry used in this study focuses on contextualisation rather than generalisability. In simple terms, our sample set is small. We have focused on rich description of specific social settings rather than gaining a superficial view of a large number of cases. To overcome this weakness, we intend to seek feedback on findings and recommendations arising from this research project via the Human Dimensions of Natural Resource Management email

network<sup>7</sup> to researchers and practitioners throughout Australia and also to compare our findings to those of others also researching in this area. This will allow us to gain an appreciation of the general applicability of our findings and recommendations.

The final report of this project will present the findings of Stage 3 of the study as part of an overall project report, synthesising the material contained in this report and the literature review and network mapping reports submitted previously. This final report will be available through the Coastal CRC by June 2006.

## Acronym List

CRC	Cooperative Research Centre
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
GONGO	Government-Organised Non-Government Organisation
NAPSWSQ	National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality
NGO	Non-government organisation
NHT	Natural Heritage Trust
NNRMTF	National Natural Resource Management Task Force
NRM	Natural resource management
NRMSEQ	Natural Resource Management South East Queensland Inc.
SEQ	South East Queensland

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<sup>7</sup> This network < <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/humdimnrm/>> is convened by James Whelan.

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