



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

Technical Report 80



# **Securing the foundations: towards improved local government NRM engagement**

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**December 2005**



CRC for Coastal Zone  
Estuary & Waterway Management





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**December 2005**



Securing the foundations: towards improved local government NRM engagement

*(Research report no. 5 in the series for the CRC's Environmental Planning for Natural Resource Management project.)*

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Published by the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary  
and Waterway Management (Coastal CRC)

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication data

Securing the foundations: Towards improved local government NRM engagement

QNRM06320

ISBN 1 921017 60 0 (print and online)



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## Abbreviations and acronyms

Coastal CRC	Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary and Waterway Management
CSPs	Case study partners
FNQ NRM Ltd	Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Limited
GH CMA	Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NRM	Natural resource management
SEQ	South-east Queensland
SEQ WCG	South East Queensland Western Catchments Group

## Project background

The establishment of a regional community-based framework for natural resource management (NRM) planning and program delivery throughout Australia provides both challenges and opportunities for achieving sustainable outcomes for NRM at regional and local levels.

These emerging initiatives have the potential to move existing state and local agencies to a higher order of regional community engagement. However, the initiatives will have to evolve within the existing statutory and institutional frameworks for environmental and natural resource planning and management. This suggests a different and evolving role for local government within the new regional arrangements. It also suggests that there are key links between NRM and existing planning processes and practices that must be addressed.

This project was a collaborative research project between the Environmental Planning group (Griffith University) of the Cooperative Research Centre for Coastal Zone, Estuary and Waterway Management (Coastal CRC) and a number of regional NRM bodies. It was undertaken as an action research program and used a longitudinal study with selected NRM regional bodies as collaborating research partners. It focused on environmental planning for NRM with the intent of enhancing the role of local government in cooperative regional NRM.

The project's regional NRM case study partners (CSPs) are:

- South East Queensland Western Catchments Group Incorporated (SEQWCG)<sup>1</sup> – Ipswich, Queensland;
- Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Limited (FNQ NRM Ltd) – Innisfail, North Queensland; and
- Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority (GH CMA) – Hamilton, Victoria.

When this research project was commenced at the beginning of 2005, these NRM bodies were already established and operating in a manner that could facilitate the introduction of the implementation aspects of their regional NRM plans into an action research program. The accompanying figure shows the location of the three CSPs in eastern Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> During the course of undertaking this study, SEQ WCG was amalgamated with the NRM SEQ to form SEQ Catchments, thus creating one accredited regional NRM body for the SEQ region. This project has retained reference to SEQ WCG, however, as it was the original CSP who took part in the action research. Nevertheless, it is understood that the project's recommendations are relevant to the new SEQ Catchments group.



Figure 1: Location of case study partners

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 General

The three case study partners (CSPs) for this research project were some of the first regional natural resource management (NRM) bodies to have their regional NRM plans accredited. Hence, at the commencement of this research project at the beginning of 2005, all three regional bodies had begun the implementation of their respective NRM regional plans. Each of the regional NRM plans had assigned a range of specific NRM responsibilities to local government, both as lead and support agents for this implementation.

This report examines the implementation aspects of regional NRM plans, particularly as they apply to local government as a partner in this collaborative process. While there has been considerable interest to date in the processes of plan- and policy-making, there has been a dearth of research and understanding about the implementation aspects for plans and policies. This situation applies equally to collaborative processes for plan and policy implementation. Hence, the prospect of studying the initial implementation of these new regional NRM plans provided an excellent opportunity to further our understanding of this crucial phase of the overall planning process.

This specific first-order assessment of local government capacity to implement assigned NRM responsibilities has involved an examination of the CSPs' regional NRM plans including:

1. SEQ Western Catchments Group's (SEQWCG) 2004 report titled: *Healthy land – Our future*
2. Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management Limited's (FNQ NRM Ltd) 2005 report titled: *Sustaining the wet tropics: A regional plan for natural resource management 2004–2008*
3. Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority's (GH CMA) 2003 Regional Catchment Strategy: *Glenelg Hopkins regional catchment strategy 2003–2007* (see also Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005c).

The aim of the report is to outline the basic considerations that are relevant to improving local government uptake of NRM initiatives in accordance with their regional NRM plans. This report will also make recommendations for a way forward aimed at enhanced local government engagement in NRM matters in their respective local authority areas.

## 1.2 Methodology and approach

A detailed description of the overall methodology for the research is provided in project report number 7, *Enhancing the role of local government in cooperative regional natural resource management: Summary project report* (Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2006). Conducted as an action research program, it involved a longitudinal study of the implementation of the regional NRM plans for the three selected case studies.

For this specific component of the research project, the subject of this report, the methodological approach has entailed:

- examining the collaborative processes involving local government as they commenced the implementation of their assigned responsibilities associated with the regional NRM plan for their respective regions;
- benchmarking the current collaborative planning and management arrangements in the case study areas;
- identifying the barriers and constraints that prohibit collaborative NRM activity involving local government; and
- providing a comprehensive approach and strategy for enhanced and continued local government involvement in NRM under collaborative regional arrangements.

These challenges were initially addressed through a series of workshops conducted in each of the CSP regions. It was reasoned that the involvement of the principal stakeholders (namely the Board members and staff of the regional NRM bodies and the elected members and officers of the local authorities in these regions) would provide realistic and relevant guidance to the research findings. It is also argued that by directing the research to these specific connections to the potential users of the research outcomes, this should ensure relevance of the research outputs and a higher probability of uptake of the research outcomes.

The first series of workshops involved the Board members and staff of each regional NRM body and focused on the following objectives:

- to understand the NRM Board's appreciation for the implementation phase of their NRM plan;
- to identify the key challenges that workshop participants see in implementing their regional NRM plan;

- to highlight and prioritise the key aspects for enhancement initiatives to assist in the implementation process; and
- to identify the principal roles for local government in the implementation phase of regional NRM plans.

The results from the first round of workshops have been reported in Low Choy and Maccheroni (2005a). The second series of workshops was conducted with representatives from the local authorities from each of the CSP regions and sought to satisfy the following objectives:

- to understand local government's appreciation of their principal roles and responsibilities in the implementation of their regional body's NRM plan;
- to understand local government's experience from the implementation phase of their regional body's NRM plan;
- to identify the key challenges that local governments experience when implementing the local government NRM aspects of their regional body's NRM plan; and
- to highlight priority enhancement initiatives to assist local government to fulfil their role in the implementation of their regional body's NRM plan.

The results from this series of workshops have been reported in Low Choy and Maccheroni (2005b). The workshop findings that are relevant to the subject of this report are summarised below. These were supplemented by a review of the respective regional NRM plans and their supporting documentation to identify the expectations of, and commitments for, local government involvement in the implementation of regional NRM plans.

This review was also complimented by a literature review to explore the diversity of barriers, constraints and opportunities for NRM uptake into local government planning processes and practices. It also sought to establish current understanding of the implementation phase of the planning process.

### 1.3 Report organisation

The following section of this report (Section 2) explores the implementation phase of the planning process and looks specifically at the nature of collaborative implementation. Section 3 presents a set of principles for local government engagement that have been drawn from previous work in this project. Likewise, a rationale for local government involvement in NRM has been abstracted and reported in Section 4. Barriers to local government involvement in NRM have previously been discussed and analysed (see Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005c) and are summarised in Section 5. The sixth section is devoted to the main focus of this report—enhancement requirements—and a specific set of enhancement recommendations are contained in the seventh section. Finally, Section 8 provides a short conclusion to the report.

## 2 The implementation phase

### 2.1 Implementation in the planning process

As previously noted, one of the principal focuses of this research is the collaborative implementation of plans. Hence, the commencement of the implementation of regional NRM plans by the CSPs at the start of this project was timely and therefore purposely chosen for the intended research.

In order to address one of the main research questions—identifying the key elements of successful cooperative planning and management involving local governments in regional-scale NRM—it was necessary to examine implementation aspects in the context of the full planning process. This approach acknowledges that implementation does not occur in isolation and is in fact an integral part of the much wider generic planning process.

Low Choy (2002) proposed a generic planning process that incorporates Hall's (1992) cyclic planning process (see Figure 2). Two distinct phases (a plan-making phase and a plan implementation phase) make up this 'rational' cyclic planning process. The plan implementation phase includes the continuous monitoring of selected performance indicators, their evaluation and reporting and their periodic review (Hall, 1992; Low Choy, 2002).

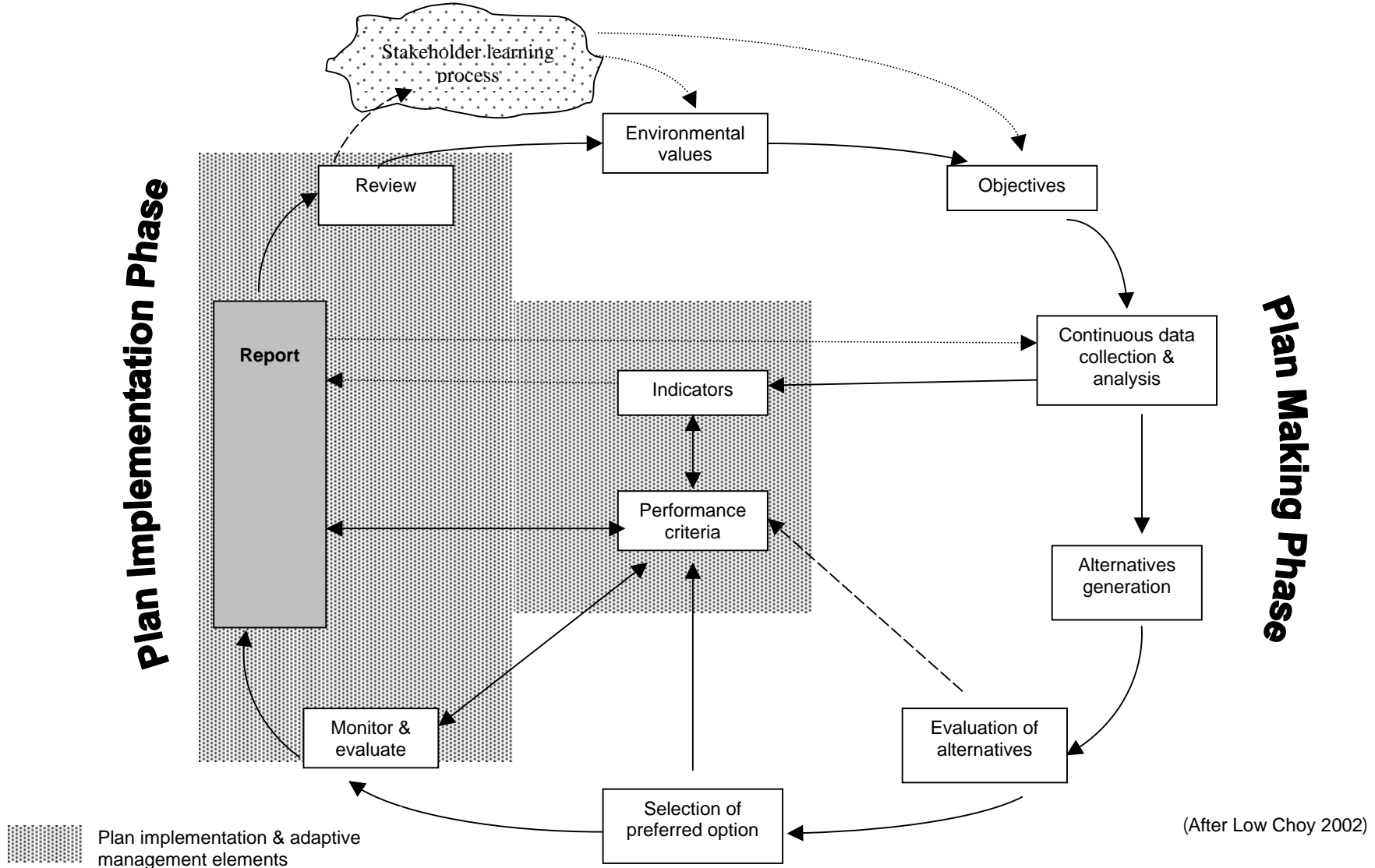


Figure 2: Cyclic (continuous) planning process highlighting an adaptive management framework

One of the most significant features of the implementation phase is the feedback mechanism that facilitates an adaptive management approach in response to changing circumstances, new information and improved understanding. It is absolutely essential for there to be the necessary follow-through in terms of monitoring, evaluation and reporting during implementation so that a measure of the achievement of the desired outcomes (objectives) can be established. It is equally important that there be a process that will enable adjustments to the plan or policy in the light of these improved learnings gained from the evaluation and review of the monitoring results.

The advantages of the cyclic planning approach to plan implementation include:

- It provides a mechanism for the planning process to be continually informed by additional information and understanding.
- There are maximum opportunities provided for public involvement in the implementation phase.
- Opportunities for future flexible adjustments can be accommodated as a result of lessons learnt and improved understanding from the in-built monitoring, evaluation and feedback during implementation that in turn facilitate adaptation to change over time (Low Choy, 2002).

## 2.2 Collaborative implementation

The collaborative aspects of the implementation phase involve specifying the actions required and assigning specific responsibility for the various actions, roles and tasks to participating stakeholders. This will include monitoring, evaluation and the measurement of outcomes to review and renegotiate the original cooperative agreement where necessary. Implementation involves negotiation and bargaining between those seeking to put policy into effect and those upon whom action depends (Barrett, 2004: 253). It is in fact a continuous exercise in problem-solving (Palumbo & Calista, 1990).

These views counter the notion that plans, once determined, will be automatically implemented unaltered and remain in accordance with the original plan/policy intent and agreements. Under these circumstances, implementers can play an active role in shaping policy and could be involved at every stage of the plan-making process, including agenda setting, problem identification, formulation, implementation and evaluation (Low Choy 2005).

Low Choy (2005: 9) discusses a relatively unrecognised component of the collaborative implementation phase whereby “various stakeholders will evaluate

their achievements and re-evaluate their interest in continuing with further collaboration". He highlights a "re-evaluation and renegotiation step" within the implementation phase (Low Choy, 2005: 7).

Low Choy (2005) contends that collaborative approaches to implementation involve complex, unpredictable and not well understood undertakings which could place at risk the achievement of the sustainable outcomes being sought. He identifies a number of preconditions for successful implementation in collaborative planning. These are:

1. *Governance and institutional arrangements*: establishing a whole-of-government approach including the provision of continuous strategic leadership;
2. *Certainty and confidence*: achieving a stable climate for cooperation through a long term commitment to implementation;
3. *Funding commitments*: creating adequate, aligned and committed funding arrangements capable of securing the desired outcomes;
4. *Community engagement*: establishing and supporting a whole-of-community approach to collaborative involvement and engagement ;
5. *Holistic management arrangements*: instituting a coordinated and integrated approach through vertical and horizontal integration;
6. *Private interests*: facilitating voluntary stewardship initiatives to bring this important interest group into the implementation process;
7. *Planning processes*: refining improved planning processes that facilitate the active and collaborative engagement of all stakeholders; and
8. *Research and communications*: incorporating a research component that facilitates improved understanding and continual learning (Low Choy 2005).

### 3 Principles for local government engagement

A previous review of local government attributes, roles, functions and contemporary challenges conducted as part of this project highlighted a range of generic principles that characterise this important level of government and provide guidance to their broader engagement in emergent fields (Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005c). The consideration and development of initiatives that seek to address local government engagement in NRM will need to be guided by this set of overarching principles. They include:

1. Local government exercises (or has the potential to exercise) a substantial and fundamental role in the management of natural resources at local and regional levels.
2. Local governments are involved in a range of NRM initiatives as part of their statutory duties.
3. Existing local government planning processes and associated frameworks provide a sound basis for achieving NRM outcomes.
4. Local authorities are legitimate institutions of government with an autonomous charter to manage local community affairs, service provision and associated infrastructure.
5. Local government is both a regulator and provider of services.
6. Local government exercises considerable land and water quality management responsibilities as owners and trustees of large tracts of land.
7. Local government is a proponent of economic growth and prosperity through a wide variety of activities, including land development, industrial promotion and employment generation.
8. Local government is the custodian of historical and cultural assets at a local and regional community level.
9. Local government has experience operating at the regional level in cooperative ventures.
10. Local government is the closest level of government to the community and can play a major community engagement role through awareness-raising, community education and consultation.
11. The role, power, responsibilities and functions of local government are defined by the legislation of their respective state governments.
12. There is large diversity among local authorities in terms of size, resources, capacities and focused priorities.

## 4 Rationale for local government involvement

Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005b, c) examined with CSP collaboration the potential role of local government in NRM implementation in the case study regions. This examination extended to an identification of the rationale and opportunities for this involvement, particularly in terms of special features such as the potential nature, depth and range of involvement in plan implementation.

There are a number of reasons why local government is suitably positioned to address many of the NRM issues within a regional catchment either in partnership or as part of their individual responsibilities. These include:

- Local government is an appropriate level of government to deliver NRM.
- Local government currently undertakes some NRM activities, on which they can build.
- Local government is well positioned to ensure balanced and equitable land use development and the use of natural resources (e.g. through local government planning activities, statutory controls on private land and enforcement powers for development consent conditions and unauthorised land uses).
- Water management is a local government responsibility (e.g. local government is responsible for stormwater management and control, sewerage and septic works and flood control and planning).
- Local government manager public land and must control pest plants and animals.
- Councils can influence vegetation management through incentive programs, such as rate rebates in exchange for vegetation protection measure.
- Councils manage local open space to restore remnant vegetation and to provide habitat and these areas include bushland reserves, parks and playing field.
- Local government has responsibility for pollution control and environmental management of land, water and air, including public health issues.
- Councils may manage and coordinate community groups, provide access to tools and facilities for volunteer groups and generally build the capacity of local communities to become involved in activities such as NRM.

Additional justification for local government involvement in NRM is provided by the imperatives established through the regionalisation of NRM and the consequential requirement for 'integrated' outcomes from various natural resource managers, particularly the local authorities in the NRM regions catchments. As collectives of local authorities exist spatially within these NRM regions and catchments, there is an excellent opportunity to build upon local government's experience in operating at the regional level in cooperative ventures to establish collaborative ventures for NRM, in particular, for improved water quality outcomes.

## 5 Barriers to local government involvement in NRM

Perceived barriers for local government involvement in NRM were ascertained from the second series of workshop conducted with representatives from the local authorities in the CSP regions during 2005 (Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005b). These findings are consistent with those from similar research in other regions (see LGAQ, 2005; McDonald *et al.*, 2005). They also confirm the range of attributes, challenges and special functions that characterise Australian local government (Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005c).

The principal barriers perceived by the workshop participants to hinder local government involvement in the implementation of their respective regional NRM plans have been summarised by Low Choy & Maccheroni (2005c). They include:

### ***Main barriers for local government***

The most significant barriers to local government are related to their internal structure and limited human resources that were, or could be, devoted to NRM matters. The lack of dedicated NRM staff and available technical NRM expertise seriously hampers local government from achieving a proactive NRM stance. The implications of these limitations affect a wide range of local government activities extending from internal activities to external communications with the community. However, the precise shortfalls and deficiencies in these areas are unknown and should be addressed as a matter of urgency. This will have to be addressed on an individual local authority basis and should lead directly to the development of specific NRM capacity enhancement initiatives for each local authority.

At the heart of these barriers is local government's constrained financial resources and finite rate base which is particularly acute for the smaller local authorities. There is a strong expectation that external sources will be necessary to address these resource shortfalls.

### ***Barriers related to the regional body and the regional NRM plan***

Local government consistently identified a lack of clear definition of their roles and responsibilities with respect to NRM matters and also how these related to the roles and responsibilities of the regional bodies. There appeared to be some considerable confusion over these matters.

Other identified barriers related to a lack of clear communication channels between local government and the regional body at various levels. The need for defined points of contact that could improve the regional body's understanding of

local government's planning systems and responsibilities was also identified. In a number of instances, local government perceived a lack of a true partnership arrangement with their regional body and they did not feel they were considered as equal partners in the delivery of NRM.

### ***Barriers between local governments***

The lack of regional coordination among local authorities and cross-boundary issues such as the lack of continuity in the maintenance regimes (e.g. vegetation management) were identified as barriers to achieving effective local government coordinated regional NRM. The lack of compatibility between local government technical systems supporting planning and policy development were also highlighted.

### ***Other barriers for local governments***

A principal concern related to the lack of any long-term certainty in state and federal government funding arrangements for NRM and similar initiatives. There was particularly widespread criticism of the continued and significant delegation of responsibilities down to local government without the necessary resources accompanying the delegations. This led some participants to question the whole NRM initiative and whether local government could in fact financially support these new responsibilities under their current financial regimes.

The overlaps between some state government programs and NRM objectives which too often presented local government with different sets of priorities were also seen as a significant barrier.

### ***Barriers related to the community***

While local government's very well established local community networks were recognised, concern was expressed regarding who had responsibility for promoting, communicating and educating the local community on NRM matters. This was considered to be an important issue with local government as they considered that the community did not understand their role in the NRM area and that the community did not comprehend NRM matters generally.

The limited capacity of local government in terms of expertise, time and resources was also noted as a serious barrier to effective community engagement on NRM matters. This was particularly the case in the provision of assistance to landowners and with the coordination of community-based projects. There was also concern expressed for the long-term ability of the community to sustain the responsibilities of NRM before the advent of 'volunteer fatigue'.

Some of the identified barriers relate to matters beyond the control of the regional bodies and individual and collective local government. However, in most cases, the development of strategies and initiatives aimed at addressing improved local government engagement in NRM matters can and should address those barriers within the control of local government and the regional bodies. It will be imperative to deal with these barriers if Low Choy's (2005) preconditions for successful implementation of collaborative planning are to be met (see Section 2.2).

## 6 Enhancement requirements

The second round of the 2005 workshops that involved local government participants in the CSP regions also sought their views on the additional resources and enhancement initiatives that they considered necessary for improved local government involvement in the implementation of the respective regional NRM plans (Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005b). These included:

### ***Additional resources required by local government***

There was unanimous recognition of the need for additional resources to be made available to local government in order for them to successfully implement their assigned NRM responsibilities under their respective regional NRM plan. The required resources included financial and human resources.

It was agreed that enhanced local government capacity to facilitate and manage NRM across its core business activities required appropriate funding to support the recruitment and employment of specialised NRM staff with the ability to strategise as well carry out effective implementation of NRM initiatives and community liaison. This initiative should also lead to improved NRM expertise and data available within local government circles which in turn could facilitate improved communications between local government and the community.

### ***Enhancing the relationship between local government and regional bodies***

It was unanimously agreed that improved partnership arrangements between local government and their respective regional NRM bodies are an essential enhancement initiative. This should build on the achievements of previous successful local government environment and NRM initiatives.

This will also require a stronger commitment from the federal and state governments to support local government's formal involvement and role in NRM initiatives. Local government should be formally recognised in future NRM agreements. The identified support ranged from the provision of technical expertise and advice through to the access of essential NRM data.

There was also agreement that regional planning organisations (e.g. the Regional Organisation of Councils or equivalent) could play a role in assisting to set NRM targets and in the integration and coordination of implementation actions. This approach could also be extended to improve local government relations with other levels of NRM in the various states (e.g. regional coordination groups, Joint Steering Committee, Reef Intergovernmental Steering Committee etc.).

Suggestions for specific enhancement initiatives for improved and closer cooperation between local government and their regional NRM bodies ranged from the establishment of high-order policy forums between local government and the board of the regional body to working groups to improve NRM implementation at the officer level. This also included forums to improve the flow and transfer of NRM technical advice as well as staff secondments between local government and the regional body. It was also agreed that the regional body could provide more assistance to local government with technical NRM advice and in accessing and applying for funds to support their emergent NRM responsibilities.

### ***Enhancing the NRM relationship between local governments***

It was agreed that regional body-facilitated technical and coordination forums and networks would significantly improve the coordination of various cross boundary NRM resources and activities among local authorities, ranging from work crews to strategic regional projects. The regional bodies could also play a major role in improving the compatibility between local government technical systems supporting planning and policy development in NRM matters.

### ***Enhancing the NRM relationship between local government and the community***

The urgent need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of local government in NRM overarches the entire enhancement initiative. The clarified local government NRM roles and responsibilities should be promoted to all levels of government and to the community. It was strongly argued that getting this message out to the community would go a long way towards achieving a better long term outcome and partnership with a community that was aware of the NRM issues in its region and committed to assisting in their management. Existing local government community networks can play an important role in this initiative. However they should be supplemented with a formal process of community engagement through, for example, the establishment of an NRM community education and information centre in the region. This could act as a focal point of contact and dissemination of NRM material within the regional community.

These observations and recommendations display a strong correlation with those from similar research in other regions (see LGAQ, 2005; McDonald *et al.*, 2005). The findings from this and other studies very strongly suggest that the array of local government enhancement requirements should be addressed as an integrated set of initiatives tailored to the specific needs and shortcomings of each individual local authority. They should be developed in the form of an individual enhancement strategy.

## 7 A way ahead

### 7.1 Achieving an engaged region

Future attempts to improve local government engagement and uptake of NRM responsibilities consistent with regional NRM plans would be significantly facilitated if local government was formally recognised in future high level NRM agreements involving the other levels of government.

At the regional level, achieving enhanced local government engagement in NRM matters should focus on their strengths while addressing the local government NRM capacity requirements identified above. The principal areas for consideration and attention in a local government NRM engagement strategy include the following components:

#### ***Renegotiations***

It was previously noted that the three CSPs were leaders within regional NRM bodies in having their plans accredited and commencing their implementation. In the case of the individual CSPs this occurred in:

- 2003<sup>[B1]</sup>: for the Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority's *Glenelg Hopkins regional catchment strategy 2003–2007*;
- 2004: for the SEQ Western Catchments Group's *Healthy land – Our future*; and
- 2005: for the Far North Queensland Natural Resource Management's *Sustaining the wet tropics: A regional plan for natural resource management 2004–2008*.

These documents assigned a range of expected responsibilities for NRM to local government in their respective regions.

However, as Low Choy (2005) has identified, there is a necessary 're-evaluation and renegotiation step' within the implementation phase (see Section 2.2). Consequently, each local government stakeholder should formally or informally review their progress and achievements to date and re-evaluate their interest in continuing with further collaboration in terms of the current regional NRM plan for their region. In fact it could be expected that there will be a series of ongoing re-evaluations and possibly realignments by each local government stakeholder.

Acknowledging this step suggests that each regional body should seriously consider initiating formal renegotiations with the local authorities in their area of

responsibility to secure their ongoing commitment to improved NRM that is consistent with their regional NRM plan. This proposed renegotiation process should be informed through an adaptive management framework (discussed in Section 2) that should be incorporated into the planning processes of the regional NRM body and local government. In fact, the ideal situation would be an alignment between the adaptive management frameworks, including a joint learning process, of the regional NRM body and local government.

### ***Recognition of local government***

Recognition of local government's potential, including their existing involvement in NRM, should extend to acknowledging their special and somewhat unique position in future NRM arrangements within the regional catchment.

The rationale and arguments for local government's involvement in NRM and the principles for that involvement have been articulated above (Sections 3 and 4) and should be fully embraced in any local government engagement strategy.

### ***Local government activities***

In order to secure a long-term commitment to NRM it will be imperative to embed NRM initiatives into the normal business and processes of local government. This should be achieved in a way that ensures continuity without long-term reliance on continued external resources.

Local government's wide-ranging set of responsibilities for environmental and NRM matters has previously been discussed (Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005c). It was noted that local government undertakes a wide range of statutory and non-statutory planning functions. These include corporate planning; financial planning; strategic planning; statutory town planning; and operational planning. It has been argued that these functions offer some of the best opportunities for addressing improved NRM uptake in local government activities.

Each regional body will need to position itself within the corporate planning process of the individual councils in its region to ensure that the corporate plans<sup>2</sup> reflect the desired and agreed NRM outcomes and that these initiatives are adequately resourced.

Securing the desired local government-related outcomes of the regional NRM plans will also necessitate the incorporation of NRM matters into other areas of local government planning, including statutory plans and operational plans.

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<sup>2</sup> Termed 'council plans' in Victoria

Proposals to complete these undertakings have been canvassed and recommended in an associated research report for this project (see Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005c).

A further dimension of change associated with local government involves the issue of organisational culture. This will require the implementation of a long-term and continuous enhancement, awareness and education program addressed to all levels of local government including elected members as well as staff. This initiative should embrace a long-term horizon for its milestones that extends well beyond the normal election cycles of councils.

### ***Future roles for the regional body***

While the regional NRM bodies are, or are attempting to, fulfil a number of roles under the implementation of their NRM plans, they should consider their potential roles in future ongoing collaborative NRM arrangements with local government.

These roles could extend to and include one or a number of the following:

- Broker
- Facilitator
- Coordinator
- Promoter (e.g. of best management practices)
- Director (e.g. of action plans).

These ongoing tasks will require a high degree of cooperation and liaison between the regional NRM body and local authorities in their region. It will be difficult to meet these demands and expectations without the full-time availability of staff dedicated to these tasks both within the regional body's organisation as well as within various individual or groups of local authorities.

A proposed local government engagement strategy was introduced and discussed in detail in a previous report of this series (see Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005c). It has been proposed that besides clearly articulating a convincing case for local government's collaborative involvement in the ongoing implementation of regional NRM plans, this strategy should also spell out:

- the division of responsibilities for NRM initiatives and management between the three levels of government, the regional NRM body, various community groups and other stakeholders;
- the sources of funding and other resources available to local government;

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- the expected financial responsibilities of local government with respect to the NRM plan and its implementation; and
- a process through which local government can incorporate NRM matters into their corporate and statutory plans and policies.

The contents of the proposed local government engagement strategy should include:

- principles for local government engagement in the implementation of the regional NRM plans;
- shared principles for NRM implementation;
- rationale for local government involvement in NRM;
- acknowledged barriers to local government involvement in NRM;
- local government enhancement requirements;
- mutually agreed benchmark figures on the desirable base level for local government NRM expenditure and other resource commitments to NRM
- incentives for improved participation;
- renegotiation considerations between the regional body and local government;
- recognition of appropriate local government processes and activities;
- potential future roles for the regional body and its relationship with local government;
- opportunities for partnerships with community groups and industry;
- local government facilitated networks and alliances; and
- recommendations.

The local government engagement strategy should be focused on the statutory and non-statutory planning functions. However, as many of the other functions of local government are closely associated with their planning activities, the strategy should be extended to engage an integrated range of these other initiatives as well.

## 7.2 Recommendations

In acknowledgement of the above considerations and enhancement components, the following recommendations have been formulated for the pursuit of improved NRM uptake by local government. It is intended that these recommendations should be pursued through the existing NRM arrangements at national, state and regional levels.

While it is recognised that some of these proposed recommendations have been taken up in some CSP areas, the full range of engagement and enhancement proposals are set out below. The first six recommendations propose actions for both parties to undertake *jointly*, while the remaining recommendations are intended primarily to be one party's responsibility, in liaison with the other party where appropriate.

### ***For regional bodies and local government***

1. Undertake an independent review of the capacity of individual local authorities within the regional body's area of responsibility. The intention of this review would be to identify specific capacity building and enhancement initiatives that could be (re)negotiated with each individual local authority by the regional body, that relates to the implementation intentions of the regional NRM plan.
2. Identify opportunities to share resources between local authorities in the one region and with the regional NRM body
3. Negotiate an arrangement that can coordinate and rationalise the various existing and separate local government forums (statutory and non-statutory) that cover or impinge on NRM matters within the regional body's area of responsibility
4. Examine the feasibility of establishing (or assisting to establish) dedicated NRM coordinators with individual or collective local authorities. This initiative should form part of the proposed local government engagement strategy
5. Jointly develop a formal two-tiered internal NRM capacity-building program that can address the different needs of the elected members and staff of local government. It could also be extended for use with community groups.
6. Introduce a formal adaptive management framework into the respective planning processes of the regional NRM bodies and local government in order to address the implementation of the regional NRM plans through

existing statutory and non-statutory planning at the local government level. This will require the collaborative development of a set of agreed indicators or measures for the key NRM assets assigned to local government. It should also involve community groups working on NRM initiatives in the local government area.

***For regional bodies (in consultation with local government)***

7. Undertake separate renegotiations with individual local governments in relation to their commitments to their NRM responsibilities assigned in the existing and future regional NRM plans.
8. Complete a separate memorandum of understanding (MoU) with each local authority to confirm the renegotiations specifying responsibilities and resourcing arrangements, and alignment of programs across local government and regional NRM plans.
9. Collaboratively develop a separate local government engagement strategy and associated annual action plans with each local authority that has been assigned NRM responsibilities under the regional NRM plan.
10. Establish a local government advisory panel as a separate forum that recognises local government's unique and special role in NRM. This forum should address high-level strategic issues as opposed to specific day-to-day operational matters. It should ideally comprise mayors and CEOs of the councils from within the regional body's area of responsibility. This advisory panel should interact with the regional body at its board or CEO level.
11. Establish an annual (or biannual) regional NRM–local government workshop/conference to review progress, share experiences and scope future opportunities.
12. Establish a joint regional NRM–local government community awareness and communications program to promote NRM to the regional catchment community that demonstrates the close links between the regional body and local government on NRM matters.
13. Appoint a full-time local government liaison officer within the regional NRM body with responsibility for overseeing the implementation of the local government engagement strategy and its associated action plans.
14. Develop an advisory system for local government and the regional community that can assist them to access and apply for funding to

support their ongoing NRM responsibilities under the regional NRM plan.

15. Jointly establish a process, as part of the renegotiations, which will ensure that NRM science can flow from the regional body into the individual local government initiatives and activities. This will require a two-way process incorporating the identification of local government priority needs for NRM science and the prioritisation of the regional body's scientific research.

***For local government***

16. Provide a clear and unambiguous commitment to NRM in all major public policy documents, particularly in corporate plans, and include progress reports in annual reports.
17. Improve coordination and alignment between each council's principal planning and management instruments (e.g. its corporate plan, financial plans, various statutory planning instruments, local laws, operational plans and the range of other non-statutory policy documents).
18. Investigate the introduction of a modest levy to supplement existing and future financial resources available for NRM. Councils with an existing environmental levy (or similar) should allocate a proportion of the levy to address NRM priorities in their respective areas.
19. Develop a more comprehensive approach to operational NRM planning and implementation through a realignment and streamlining of existing environmental management efforts, many of which already address NRM priorities. The aim should be to produce an integrated approach that produces savings and provides a cost-effective means of addressing each council's agreed NRM responsibilities. This initiative should be offset through greater regional or subregional partnerships between local authorities and the regional body, industry, or community groups.
20. Clarify internal institutional NRM arrangements through the designation of a council committee (or a process where a committee structure is not utilised) to handle all NRM policy and operational matters. This recommendation extends to the assignment of NRM to a specific internal council branch. This should entail the designation of a specific point of reference and contact for NRM within council, preferably involving an NRM officer.
21. Establish a staff position for a dedicated NRM officer (full- or part-time).

22. Improve the dissemination of NRM matters within council through streamlined internal communications processes. This initiative should be facilitated by the designated NRM branch and point of reference.
23. Maximise the use of existing local government–community networks and supporting infrastructure to advance NRM matters through improved community engagement, awareness and education with the intention of improving the community’s NRM capacity.
24. Implement the two-tiered internal NRM capacity-building program in Recommendation 5, to improve the awareness and capacity of council staff and elected members to exercise their NRM responsibilities.
25. Extend the existing community environmental education commitments of local authorities to embrace NRM.
26. Maximise the use of existing national and state local government networks including state local government associations.
27. Revise future planning and policy documents to reflect current agreed NRM commitments contained in regional NRM plans and in future agreements with respective regional NRM bodies (e.g. local government engagement strategies and MoUs).

In view of current progress with the implementation of the CSPs’ regional NRM plans, a number of priority local government capacity-enhancement initiatives come to the fore. The urgency for addressing certain shortfalls and deficiencies in the current NRM delivery capacity of local government has previously been noted. However, as the nature and degree of these shortfalls are largely unknown, this calls for a response through a number of priority undertakings. Three priority areas stand out and include:

1. The completion of an independent review of the capacity of each local authority within the regional body’s area of responsibility to identify their existing NRM capacity and shortfalls;
2. The incorporation of NRM science into local government planning, using the strategic frameworks outlined by the NRM roadmaps recommended in research report number 4 (see Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005c); and
3. The provision of assistance to local government and their local community to access funding to support the completion of their assigned NRM responsibilities.

These priority local government capacity-enhancement initiatives have directed the research project towards the development of a number of specific enhancement tools. These are full discussed and outlined in research report number 6 (see Low Choy & Maccheroni, 2005d).

## 8 Conclusions

The recommended local government engagement strategy and its associated NRM capacity enhancement initiatives have been designed to elevate the collaborative partnerships between regional NRM bodies and local government to new and potentially more productive levels. This can be achieved through more effective representation, a shared agreement on roles and responsibilities to implement NRM actions and recognition of established and revised NRM arrangements. In order to maximise the benefits from improved local government engagement, the regional bodies and their associated local authorities should treat the individual recommendations as a complete suite of complimentary recommendations that can provide mutual support to each other.

The implementation of this suite of recommendations should lead to significantly improved levels of collaboration between the regional body and the local authorities in its regional catchment/s. This should produce: a more sophisticated collaborative partnership arrangement with better integrated working arrangements; more enduring structural mechanisms promoting improved communications, interaction and coordination; a shared decision-making forum; and a fuller and more productive cooperative plan/policy-making and implementation environment.

This should also have the effect of producing a strong local government network capable of addressing their existing and future NRM responsibilities under any renegotiated arrangements. These renegotiations and alignments need to be a systematic component of the ongoing implementation phase and provide the regional bodies with an excellent opportunity to develop a stronger collaborative partnership with local government. These emergent revisited collaborative arrangements can ensure that the local government–relevant NRM outcomes of the regional NRM plans are shared and achieved.

The proposals and recommendations set out in this report will therefore allow the regional bodies to move towards securing the foundations for improved local government NRM engagement.

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