



Stakeholder engagement in water policy: Lessons from peri-urban irrigation

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ABSTRACT

In highly urbanised Australia many cities and towns demand may have exceeded existing water supply. In peri-urban areas this can lead to conflict over access to supplies with priority often given to urban users. In an effort to resolve potential conflicts, water management planning often seeks to engage 'community stakeholders' in an attempt to produce a 'harmonised' strategic plan. In this paper we focus on the process of developing one such plan for sustainable water management in a peri-urban area with complex and conflicting stakeholder interests. We subject data from a series of planning meetings and 'stakeholder' workshops to a critical review and analysis against the project's stated aims for this stage of the process of: engaging key stakeholders, developing a common vision, and deciding research priorities. We conclude that the approach was unable to achieve these strategic outcomes. In discussion we explore how this analysis reflects barriers in the engagement process, which highlight more general concerns about this widely accepted model for stakeholder engagement in resource issues.

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Introduction

Australia is a highly urbanised nation with 85% of the population concentrated along the eastern seaboard (Davies et al., 2004). As the driest inhabited continent, critical issues are the allocation of water resources with associated potential for conflict between urban and rural water users, and between industrial (including agricultural) and residential (including individual household and social recreational/amenity) uses (Ticehurst et al., 2007).

In many urban centres water demand may have exceeded the capacity of existing water supply infrastructure, and increased pressures are inevitable with expected climate change, continued population growth, urban and industrial development, and more intensive peri-urban agriculture. These competing demands already dominate peri-urban agricultural land-use patterns, and conflict will probably increase between users over access to water. However, political pressure demands that water is made available for urban use, even at the expense of other water users and uses (Pigram, 2006). An intergovernmental agreement (NWC, 2004) allows for increased urban water demand to be met from 'new' sources (desalination, recycling, and stormwater capture). However, these are not developed and, in the interim, increased urban

requirements are likely to be met by purchase from rural water user supplies (Young, 2007).

On the peri-urban fringe of many of Australia's major cities, the water authorities require all new urban developments to incorporate water cycle management and recycled water systems. Increasingly, this includes diversion of effluent from sewage treatment plants to urban use (see e.g., Sydney Water, 2006). While this diversion increases available supplies for use in urban households and public sport and recreation facilities it often reduces effluent flow to existing creeks in rural/agricultural areas and can affect 'fresh water' flows in even major rivers below the confluence with these creeks. This reduction in supply can be a concern to some users such as licensed irrigators, fresh-water and estuarine fisheries and other groups whose livelihood depends on the rivers (Rae, 2007).

A five years, federally funded research centre, cooperatively funded with industry and with nodes across several Australian sites/States, explored the development of regional irrigation business plans for each of these areas. The peri-urban study was seen as critical in this research because such areas are often rapidly urbanising. As such they reflect much greater complexity, and competing interests, with potential for, and sometimes long histories of conflict between interests; and hence greater challenges associated with managing both environmental and social pressures compared to many irrigation management processes (see e.g., Palerm-Viqueira, 2007).

In Australia these urban fringe water catchment areas are often large (>600 km²) and frequently degraded as a result of vegetation clearance associated with urbanisation, leading to greater and more

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heavily polluted surface water run-off that has dramatically altered the hydrology, geomorphology and ecology of watercourses (DEC, 2004; HNCMA, 2007). In areas such as the Hawkesbury – Nepean catchment which skirts Sydney on its north and west, these trends are anticipated to continue with significant population increase predicted, in some areas projected to double within 20 years. While such areas frequently produce a substantial fraction of the city's food supply, urban land-use is soon expected to exceed agricultural uses (EPA, 2001; GCC, 2006). The planned rezoning and land release for housing and industry may increase tensions between urban developers and agricultural irrigators over access to water.

The 'action-research' model adopted by the national project initiative envisaged development of irrigation business plans using a 'systems harmonisation' approach (cf. Bellamy et al., 2002; Edgar, 2006; Tippet, 2005). This approach assumes that 'key stakeholders will be involved as partners in the research to help define the region's specific issues and deliver appropriate solutions ready for implementation'. It also assumes that one or more major organisations will be identified as 'champions' for implementation of the plan through policy development and community-based practical initiatives (Khan et al., 2008). To this end senior management staff of 'green' State government departments, general managers of local government areas within the region, managers and owners of potentially affected businesses, and key community leaders were invited to engage in the process for its duration. Data to support the development harmonisation plan was also sought from each of these organisations and entities.

Research questions and methods

Recently a regional planning research initiative in one peri-urban area has sought to involve consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. The aim of this paper is to identify the nature of this stakeholder engagement and evaluate the effectiveness of these consultations based on the outcomes of the engagement process against the stated objectives of 'establishing research priorities', 'developing a common vision', and determining 'what needs to be achieved to obtain the desired outcomes'.

The critical questions we addressed are:

- Has this consultation process met the objective of involving key stakeholders as partners in the research in
 - defining the region's specific issues, and
 - developing strategic priorities for the program of research?
- Has it created appropriate processes for dialogue between the key stakeholders that has led to a deeper understanding of shared values, a vision for the future, and priorities for action or methods?
- How has the research team responded to stakeholder influence?

To explore these questions we analysed the minutes and notes recorded from nine meetings and three formal, facilitated workshops conducted between January 2006 and December 2007. Although minutes often do not record the precise comments made in meetings, they preserve the dominant or prevailing opinions (Gidley, 2004). Workshop notes are also a distillation of the views and perspectives of participants, often filtered several times to capture meaning, and summarised in key-word format by the group as part of the reporting process. The process therefore usefully records the major issues deemed worthy of capture and identifies the major areas of consensus and conflict.

All recorded data from these meetings and workshops were included in our analysis. The workshops are particularly significant as they were held at strategically important times for the purpose

of inviting participants to contribute to the three critical aspects of the evolving program:

- Identifying research priorities surrounding water issues.
- Developing a common vision for the future use of water within local river and creek catchments.
- Addressing the questions: what is to be achieved in the development of the regional irrigation business plan, and how may it be achieved?

Details of participation, the results of these workshops, and our analysis against the framework of the research questions are summarised below.

How effective has the process of consultation been?

Stakeholder participation

From the minutes and notes of meetings and workshops we identified participants and their affiliation. Attendees were divided into three major groups: 'researchers' (university staff, research program executives), 'community' (water user associations' representatives), and 'government' (state/local government agencies). A total of 78 individuals attended the 12 meetings/workshops under study: 35 'researchers'; 22 representing water users groups; and 21 government agency staff. More than half of the participants attended only one meeting, and except for the university staff, the maximum number of meetings attended by an individual was seven. These data suggest that 'researchers' are the group that are most consistently engaged in the process and thereby inevitably had a substantial, if not dominant role in the outcomes. It is therefore questionable whether the process has effectively engaged external stakeholders.

The first workshop had some involvement of government agencies but limited community engagement. The second workshop achieved a better balance however there was limited overlap in participation with the first meeting. This pattern was repeated with the third workshop. Those involved were 'representatives' of community stakeholder groups, the accepted approach to 'community engagement' in natural resource management (including water management) in New South Wales (Burgin, 2002; Lunney et al., 2002). Typically such stakeholders committed to engagement in the process for extended periods of time. For example, the senior author represented her constituents on the State Catchment Management Committee (the peak body of natural resource management in New South Wales throughout the 1990s and beyond) for approximately a decade. This level of engagement in natural resource management by representatives from agencies and the community was not unusual (Webb et al., 2009).

Questions arising from this analysis of participation in the consultation process include: are meetings the appropriate manner in which to engage stakeholders (and, if so, which stakeholders should be engaged); and what ways might work to engage these individuals?

Research priorities

The first workshop was designed to identify research priorities to underpin development of the Plan. Held in March 2006, the workshop was facilitated by a university researcher acknowledged for his skills as an excellent facilitator in community engagement. The participants included six 'researchers', five 'government' representatives (4 State, 1 local government) and one 'community' representative from a local water users' group. All of these people had a substantial history in community engagement in natural

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