AN IMPROVED MODEL FOR COMMUNITY CONSULTATION?

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Dr John Wolfenden specialises in ecologically sustainable development and community facilitation. His research involves the invention, application and extension of new techniques and processes that can help in this decision making. The emphasis in Dr Wolfenden’s work is on applying holistic systems approaches, which integrate diverse stakeholder interests and transdisciplinary scientific knowledge, to the exploration of environmental problems and the generation of tailor-made solutions and economic management strategies. He has worked in areas as diverse as integrated catchment management, integrated water resources management, native vegetation management, community economic development, river restoration, strategic flood planning, waste management, strategic weed management, sustainable regional development and sustainable transport infrastructures. The recently coined term “triple bottom line” is used by Dr Wolfenden as a useful descriptor of the approach adopted, where explicit attention is paid to the economic, ecological and sociocultural aspects of development and management and how they interact.
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ABSTRACT

Many parts of Coffs Harbour were inundated in November 1996 when a storm event of greater than 1 in 100 year intensity occurred. As a result of the major damage caused, estimated to be in excess of $30 million, a flood study and floodplain management study were commissioned by Coffs Harbour City Council (CHCC) in conjunction with the then Department of Land and Water Conservation. In the early stages of this process, the Centre for Ecological Economics and Water Policy Research (CEEWPR) received funding from the Australia Research Council and CHCC to explore improved process for community involvement in floodplain management planning. This paper reports on this action research, giving details of the particular approaches used and evaluating their effectiveness from a variety of pragmatic perspectives including: cost effectiveness, managing conflict, contractual timing, two-way information flows and the ability to communicate hydrological and flood data in a way which more easily makes sense to the wider stakeholder community. Some techniques and protocols to support improved community consultation are proposed.

Introduction

The Centre for Water Policy Research (CWPR) received a grant from the Australia Research Council in about 1999 to explore ways of improving stakeholder engagement with the floodplain planning and management process. Following negotiations with Kevin Gibson of the Department of Land and Water Conservation¹ and John Rowe of Coffs Harbour City Council, it was decided to undertake this project in conjunction with the Coffs Creek Floodplain Management Study which at that time had not been commenced.

In effect, the CWPR would function as an independent consultant to manage the stakeholder engagement process for the project. The CWPR brought to the project some specialist tools and skills which had previously been developed. The research component of the project was to determine whether the community engagement part of the overall floodplain management study could be improved through the application of these tools and skills.

The Problem

The author and his colleagues have observed over a number of years that there is a fundamental problem with community consultation where water management is concerned. This problem comes about because managing water generally means that hydraulic and hydrologic considerations must be considered, and these are by their nature difficult to communicate to non-specialists. Typically, the results of water modelling are presented to stakeholder meetings of one sort or another, and phrases like ‘annual exceedance probability’, ‘discharge’, ‘average recurrence interval’ and ‘model calibration’ abound. On a number of occasions the author has seen this generate glazed looks

¹ Since that time the Centre for Water Policy Research (CWPR) has been renamed the Centre for Ecological Economics and Water Policy Research (CEEWPR), and the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation (DLWC) is now part of the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR).
among participants which suggest they do not really understand what is being presented, despite the best efforts of the technical specialists to explain it. Despite this, social pressure tends to mean that people don’t like to show their ignorance by asking questions, perhaps fearing that they are the only ones who don’t know what’s going on. Our experience suggests that this sort of technical communication failure is common, and that it tends to alienate most people from participating effectively in these situations. This communication failure can be termed ‘technical alienation’.

One of the (presumably) unintended consequences of technical alienation is that those affected can become suspicious of the motives of the technical specialists and the people who engage them. In particular, if there are some pre-existing contentious management issues, stakeholders can very quickly form the view that there is an attempt to ‘blind them with science’ so that they can’t bring their concerns to attention. It is just about impossible to argue with a computer model which seems to prove certain things, unless one can directly challenge the assumptions underlying the model and the analytic paths taken in the model. This is generally beyond the capacity of non-specialist stakeholders, and they therefore find it impossible to convincingly argue a position in contradiction to the authority of the model.

Another form of stakeholder alienation can occur where Council is perceived (rightly or wrongly) as having preset agenda(s) which are not in the public interest. Where this happens to any significant extent, especially where floodplain development issues are concerned, it can lead to protracted argument and lack of trust between Council officers and elected representatives, and members of the wider community. This can be termed perceived-agenda alienation.

Effective involvement of various stakeholders is a core assumption underlying the NSW approach to floodplain management. This is implicit in many parts of the NSW Floodplain Management Manual, and particularly the following:

> Broad community involvement in the floodplain risk management planning process, from the very beginning, should produce the best prospect for community acceptance of and commitment to the resulting management plan. (NSW Government 2001, p.10)

Presumably, to achieve “... community acceptance of and commitment to …”, community involvement in the overall planning process would need to be effective and with minimal alienation of participants. However, we have observed both technical alienation and perceived-agenda alienation to be a real factor in interactions between Councils and their technical consultants and the wider community. At the same time, we have witnessed poorly managed and ineffective community consultation processes which seem to stem from such alienation, among other things.

**The Process Used**

In undertaking this project, we were interested to explore ways in which stakeholder alienation could be minimised, so as to produce a more effective overall stakeholder consultation process. This section provides an outline of the process adopted – the next section will provide a brief evaluation of that process.

The principle we have used is that an *independent* third party can serve as an effective facilitator, providing reassurance to participants in the planning process that their views and concerns will be taken seriously by the Council and the technical consultants. Note that it is absolutely essential that this third party be perceived to be independent, and not seen to be a ‘spin merchant’ working for Council to pursue Council’s agenda (otherwise perceived-agenda alienation will occur). In this instance, the CEEWPR’s involvement was (largely) externally financed by the Australia Research Council, and came with the
imprimatur of being from a University Research Centre specialising in water policy. As such, acceptance of the CEEWPR project team in the role of independent facilitator was readily obtained. We comment further about this issue later in the paper.

The NSW Floodplain Management Manual provides guidance as to the constitution of a Floodplain Risk Management Committee whose role is to advise the ultimate decision maker (Council) on various aspects of the proposed management plan. The committee provides a forum for discussing "... technical, social economic and ecological issues and for the distillation of possibly differing viewpoints on these issues" (NSW Government 2001, p. 11). The guidelines suggest a certain mix of people to be on the committee, and imply that once established it would be closed to new members, although various agency specialists could be co-opted as necessary.

Our previous and continuing theoretical and practical research suggests that taking this closed-book approach to establishing and running the advisory committee, is likely to generate perceptions that secret business is being transacted. This is especially likely to be the case where particularly contentious issues exist. A perceived-agenda alienation outcome can be created, even though genuine attempts have been made to establish a representative and open committee structure and process.

Figure 1 shows the main steps in preparing and implementing a Floodplain Management Plan (note that the NSW Guidelines now refer to a Floodplain Risk Management Plan, although the previous terminology is used here because it is that which was used in the initial project reports). The bottom part of the diagram showing the CWPR's role has been added to indicate the duration of our involvement in the process.

![Diagram of Floodplain Management Process]

**Figure 1: Steps in developing a Floodplain Risk Management Plan**

Once the Floodplain Management Committee has been established, it commences the technical work of identifying and collecting appropriate data. This may involve commissioning various studies, and/or collating existing data. The committee will arrange for tender documents to be prepared, and will select an appropriate consultant to undertake the flood study. A flood study is technical by nature, and is intended to "... define the nature and extent of the flood risk by providing information on the extent, level and velocity of floodwaters and on the distribution of flood flows across various sections of the floodplain" (NSW Government 2001, p.12). Given the highly technical nature of this study, there is little opportunity or need for community involvement, other than to provide anecdotal evidence of previous flood heights and damage.
In contrast to the Flood Study, the Floodplain Management Study needs to be much more engaging of diverse viewpoints and perspectives. It should include an assessment of the various "... social, economic, ecological and cultural impacts ...", while also working to develop widespread community acceptance and commitment. The only way to properly achieve such outcomes, is to engage the wider community in an effective two way dialogue on these issues. The dialogue must be open, and able to accommodate the full range of issues that might be identified by the community.

Typically, community consultation in such projects is undertaken by the consultant undertaking the Management Study. This consultant has been previously engaged to achieve pre-specified deliverables, which tend to constrain that consultant to only address matters relating directly to those deliverables. The unfortunate consequence of this can be that some issues raised in the consultation process can be outside the brief of the consultant, who can only respond "Sorry, that is outside my terms of reference". This can also lead to perceived-agenda alienation.

We proposed an alternative approach in which the independent third-party consultant (CWPR) would take overall responsibility for the stakeholder engagement process. Since we were engaged prior to tenders being called to undertake the Management Study, it was possible to vary the usual community consultation process. The plan was to involve the wider community in specifying the main issues that needed to be considered in planning for flood management, and to establish a technical working group which people could join by self-selection following public meetings.

A public meeting was called in October 1999, with media advertising and direct invitation being used to encourage people to be involved. Twenty-eight people attended the meeting, representing a wide diversity of interests. Agenda items for the meeting included: A review of the floodplain management process; A general exploration of causes and effects of flooding in the Coffs Creek catchment; Stakeholder identification; and Formation of a Technical Working Group to assist Council’s Floodplain Management Advisory Committee to develop and implement the plan for Coffs Creek. In order to ensure that the various issues were considered in context, a facilitated dialogue approach called mud-mapping was employed. In this approach, participants are invited to contribute to developing a shared understanding of the issues and how they inter-relate. For example, a consideration of economic issues relating to flooding was recorded as in Figure 2.

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**Figure 2** Part of the mud map relating to economic issues
There are of course issues other than economic to be considered, and the public meeting also scoped out social, planning and environmental issues and their interactions with each other. Full details of this are given in Wolfenden and Gill (1999).

As an outcome of this public meeting, a Technical Working Group was formed, with membership being completely open to anyone who wanted to be involved. A subsequent meeting was held with the Working Group (which included some members of the Management Committee), and based on the previous workshop, terms of reference were developed for the tender to undertake the Floodplain Management Planning consultancy. In addition to the usual legal and performance-related aspects, the terms of reference included specific objectives based on community input, and required that the consultant demonstrate an ability and willingness to work with the CWPR who would continue to manage the community engagement process for the remainder of the project. The successful consultant was Bewsher Consulting from Sydney.

Once Bewsher Consulting had been appointed, the project progressed in the usual manner, with a few notable exceptions:

- As facilitation and process specialists, the CWPR staff worked closely with Bewshers and the Management Committee to develop and implement the detailed community engagement program;
- CWPR staff facilitated public meetings and meetings of the Technical Working Group, and acted independently from both Council and Bewshers to ensure that transparent and effective consultation ensued;
- The independent facilitation role was especially useful because there were a number of highly contentious issues involving both technical alienation and perceived-agenda alienation which led to some public meetings being very heated;
- As third party facilitators, the CWPR team were able to act as a neutral arbiter for difficult issues – this helped to tackle these issues in a way which reduced the confrontational elements for Council staff, whilst ensuring that the various community concerns were properly considered.

The above should not be taken to imply that Coffs Harbour City Council or Bewsher Consulting were in any way deficient or lacking in professionalism. Indeed, we were impressed with the effort they committed to work with us in the development and implementation of the consultation program. We merely wish to highlight that the CWPR’s perceived independent status was a key factor in the overall success of community engagement phase.

Our perceived independent status enabled us to tackle both forms of alienation referred to above. Technical alienation occurs when non-specialists are confronted with scientific and technical jargon and model outputs which make it very difficult for effective dialogue to ensue. CWPR staff are technically literate but not technical specialists. As such, we undertook to challenge the use of technical jargon by anyone, and to ask ‘silly’ questions like “What does PMF mean?”. In this way, we relieved people of the embarrassment of having to do this themselves, and also did not in any way appear condescending to them, but rather took the responsibility for the ‘ignorance’ ourselves. We purposely took the ‘side’ of the non-specialist members of the community, and advocated on their behalf for clearer information. At the beginning of the process and during it, we explicitly stated to all parties that this was a role we would perform, and gained agreement to do so.
Perceived-agenda alienation was handled in a similar manner. If community members asked about what were perceived to be a hidden or otherwise preset agenda, and were fobbed off by Council staff, our role was to pursue this issue with Council staff until a satisfactory conclusion was reached. We agreed on this protocol in the early stages of the project.

In summary, our role in the project was as an advocate for the community members in the Technical Working Group (not to advocate their agenda, but rather to advocate their right to understand and to be heard). To achieve this, we helped to specify the Floodplain Management Study brief, and also facilitated and organised all public meetings and Technical Working Group meetings. We worked closely in conjunction with the Management Committee, and members of that committee were directly involved in public meetings and the Technical Working Group.

Evaluation of the Project

The above provides a very brief review of the CEEWPR’s involvement in the Flood Management Planning Process for Coffs Creek. Following are some critical reflections upon this, followed by some suggestions for improvement of future management studies.

- Cost effectiveness – the research component of the CEEWPR’s role was funded by the Australia Research Council. Coffs Harbour City Council provided partnering funding, which was the amount of money that might otherwise have been made available to the Floodplain Management Study consultant for community engagement. In this sense, our involvement was cost-neutral to Council.

- Managing conflict – one of the public meetings was extremely heated as people reacted to findings of the flood study which found higher flood levels for the 1 in 100 year flood. Our independent position allowed us to mediate effectively and to bring the meeting to a reasonable conclusion. Some of the more vocal people joined the Technical Working Group – through time they came to work together to address the substantive risk management problems, rather than just wanting to argue.

- Contractual timing – the model we used means that an additional consultancy must be included in the overall project – that of managing the stakeholder engagement process. This consultancy needs to be commissioned sometime during the flood study, and needs to run until at least the end of the Management Study.

- Two-way information flows – we certainly put emphasis on achieving this, and suspect that it was probably improved due to our intervention. In theory, dealing with stakeholder alienation ought to improve these flows; in practice, the outcomes of the project suggest that effective two-way information flows occurred.

- Communicating technical hydrological and hydraulic information to non-specialists – full credit must go to Bewsher Consulting who excelled in the way in which they tackled this issue. Whereas the CWPR team occasionally asked questions about technical terms, both members of the Bewsher team proved highly competent at presenting the information in a way which could be readily understood. We wonder whether this is the whole story however. A lot of effort was put into developing trust among the community members involved in the process, and for them to develop a willingness to accept that the technical specialists were not trying to hoodwink them in some way. Indeed, early in the project at the first public meeting which Bewsher Consulting attended, there was significant suspicion evident about their role in the process and how qualified and trustworthy they were. An internal review of this project by the key participants identified the
The involvement of the CWPR as instrumental in helping to develop trust so that good technical information could be received at face value.

The above is presented from the perspective of the author, and reflects his views based on feedback from various participants and the Bewsher Consulting team. In addition, a more formal review was undertaken with Council's Floodplain Management Engineer, and the DLWC's Flood Manager for the area, which also found that the process driven by the CEEWPR was a significant factor in the successful outcomes of the overall project. We invite anyone interested to pursue the matter for themselves with the relevant people (see the acknowledgements for their names).

Potential Ways to Improve Community Consultation in Floodplain Management Planning

From this project, we propose that for floodplain risk management planning where contentious issues are involved, that the process suggested in the Floodplain Management Manual be modified to include the engagement of an independent process facilitator. Of course, since the consultant would be engaged by Council, they could not be entirely independent. However, we don't see this as a problem provided that the consultant acts as though they are independent, and provides effective advocacy for those who would otherwise be alienated from the process.

Perceptions of openness and transparency are achieved if the offer is made for anyone to self-select to be part of the planning process. The Technical Working Group is formed by these people, and can work to supplement and inform the tasks of the formally constituted Floodplain Management Committee.

We also note that this project started out with the development of a mud-map which enabled people to consider the various issues and how they interact. In this way, the impact of single-agenda lobbyists is diluted, as their issues are seen by all in their contexts. At the same time, all participants tend to learn from each other as their respective views and knowledge are progressively recorded. In effect, comprehensive problem scoping is achieved at a public meeting, and this provides a foundation for all subsequent work.
References


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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and should in no way be taken to necessarily represent the views of any other person, organisation or government agency.