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*Community-based Governance  
for Global Sustainability*

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# Outline of presentation

1. Background
2. Collective action and governance: some theory
3. The Australian 'experiment' with community engagement in sustainable NRM
4. Transitioning to community-based natural resources governance
5. Conclusions

# Background



# Global problems require global solutions?

- Sustainable development emerged as a global agenda
- Still a tendency to frame it as a global problem requiring global solutions
- Critics of this framing argue that the solutions are multi-levelled and community-based
- My aim is to summarise this argument and illustrate it with reference to Australia's 'experiment' with rural community engagement



Collective action and governance: some theory

# Sustainability as a collective action problem

- Sustainability is a collective (non-excludable) good exposed to risks of ‘free riding’
- Conventional collective action (CA) theory predicts a ‘tragedy of the commons’ unless external intervention
  - i.e. global intervention for a global commons problem
- This prediction refuted by advances in CA theory
  - large-group problems are normally decomposable into smaller problems
  - cooperation can get started through reciprocity in providing small-group collective goods
  - this cooperation can grow via virtuous-circle dynamics

# Governance and collective action

- Governance can bolster reciprocity ('vertically') as group size increases
  - but only to the extent that group members cooperate with governance efforts
- Self-determination theory suggests this cooperation depends on perceptions of 'autonomy support'
- Subsidiarity is pivotal to such perceptions
  - higher governance levels subsidiary to lower levels
  - onus on higher levels to build lower-level capacities
  - lower-level units self-organise their governance as far as competence allows

# Community-based governance

- Governance consistent with subsidiarity is truly ‘community-based’
  - higher-level units ‘nest’ rather than sideline lower ones, which retain substantive autonomy
  - results in a nested community-based governance system, ideally extending to the global level
  - nested units serve as ‘mediating structures’, mediating trust both ways between their constituents and higher-level units



# The Australian 'experiment' with community engagement in natural resource management



## Landcare (from 1980s onwards)

- “... landholders working in their own local social group to solve their own local land conservation problems in their own way” (Poussard 1992)
- “... voluntary collective action at a neighbourhood or district level” (Campbell 2016)
- Groups established from pre-existing social capital
- Started on issues of strong common interest to their members (typically ‘brown’ NRM activities)

# Integrated catchment management (ICM)

- Introduced by state governments in 1990s recognising interdependence of natural resource issues
- ICM committees looked towards landcare-type groups for voluntary implementation of their catchment strategies
- Implementation funding becomes available in 1997 from the Natural Heritage Trust
  - beginnings of a purchaser-provider model
  - ‘green’ NRM activities given significant funding priority

# The 'regional delivery model'

- Purchaser-provider model became more centralised and prescriptive with advent of the regional delivery model in 2000-01
- 56 new NRM regions defined, with a regional organisation to be established for each
  - these regions were much larger than ICM catchments
  - so regional organisations were more socially distant
- Relatively few regional bodies saw themselves as subsidiary to ICM and landcare groups
  - discouraged by Commonwealth focus on upward accountability
  - opportunities to nest these lower-level groups as mediating structures were foregone
- “The tendency for the regional NRM policy reform to displace and undermine rather than augment community Landcare was a grave error” (Campbell 2016)

# Transitioning to community-based natural resources governance



# Transitioning in a 'green field' setting

- Provide institutional support for the transition
  - appoint an appropriate public agency to oversee the transition
  - use public funds for catalytic purposes
  - accept weak coordination/integration of early local efforts
- 1. Encourage members of pre-existing groups to establish groups concerned with 1-2 natural resource issues of immediate common interest
- 2. After groups have achieved successes with their original issues, encourage them to consider other issues and to 'join forces' with other entities with complementary interests/capabilities.
  - financial focus would primarily be on 'internal' resources
  - accessing 'external' resources would be secondary
  - independent assessment of bottom-up proposals for externally-funded structures
  - if necessary, nest the locally-preferred structure within the funder-preferred structure

# Transitioning in a 'green field' setting (cont.)

3. Externally-funded structures established with required standards of downwards accountability
  - upwards accountability focused on outcomes not activities
  - external funds provided on a 'block grant' basis,
  - thus leaving the structures with the autonomy they need to motivate voluntary cooperation from local groups and individuals

# Transitioning from the regional delivery model

- Existing set of 56 regional bodies assumed to persist into the medium term
- Progress towards community-based governance could be fostered by:
  - funding existing regional bodies more by way of block grants matching local contributions
  - the regional bodies supporting emergence of multi-level governance arrangements within their respective regions on the basis of subsidiarity, and
  - the regional bodies providing block grants to lower-level structures with capacities to utilise them productively and accountably



## Transitioning from the regional delivery model (cont.)

- This process may eventually lead to bottom-up proposals to replace existing regional bodies with alternative structures
- Resulting arrangements would be more complex but more capable of motivating voluntary collective action



Conclusions

# Conclusion: Global problems require community-based solutions

- The collective action required for global sustainability is feasible only by 'piggy-backing' on collective efforts at lower levels
- These lower-level efforts will be maximised through community-based governance, which is governance organised in accordance with (authentic) subsidiarity
- The Australian experience indicates the promise of community-based natural resources governance, but also the challenges of growing it beyond the local level
- Overcoming these challenges requires transformational policy reform

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