



CLEA

Peer-to-peer learning between
community environment groups



Learning about Capacity Building

In CLEA’s reporting for Year Two, NRCL asked:

“What has your project learnt about capacity building during Year 2? How has this learning influenced or changed the project’s anticipated directions and strategies in Year 3 and beyond?”

Learning about capacity building	Influence on project directions and strategies
<p>Landcare Network Committees of Management need ongoing support to become nodes of peer learning</p> <p>CLEA's strategy has been to develop CoMs as nodes of peer learning within a network of Landcare peers across the State. Progress is slow, because it is fitted in around short-term business, and the sometimes irregular meetings of CoMs. Even when there is strong commitment to addressing a Question Without Easy Answers, Coordinators still need discussion with CLEA to talk about what has happened and what they need to do next. They need support and a nudge to keep moving.</p>	<p>Maintain support for CoMs and coordinators in trial Landcare Networks</p> <p>Even if a Network's Question isn't discussed at every meeting, things may still be happening. Having a person from outside inquiring about what has happened helps Coordinators and leaders keep the ball rolling.</p>
<p>Capacity building around organising, collaborating and influencing is constrained by a) the old imaginary of Landcare as planting trees, b) weak institutional support for social knowledge in natural resource management, and c) the isolation of the social innovators in Landcare</p> <p>In the priorities of Committees of Management and the funding of government programs, the social capacity of Landcare runs a poor second to capacity for revegetation and land management. Social capacity is seen as instrumental support for biophysical outcomes. Social capacity is seen as something members bring from their personal lives, augmented by hiring facilitators, or something that exists in the community. Social capacity is not seen as something that can be and needs to be cultivated within Landcare groups and Networks and in rural communities. Why is this?</p>	<p>Build the community of practice between Landcare's social innovators</p> <p>CLEA's tools for CoMs work, and its strategy of developing CoMs as nodes of peer learning remains sound. However, those nodes must be nested inside a community of practice between Landcare innovators, and the innovators are spread thin in a big landscape. When they invest the time to come together, they want to be stretched, they want to discuss their challenges, and they want to learn.</p> <p>In Victoria, the principal venue for knowledge sharing and creation around Landcare's social knowledge is the twice-a-year regional forum run by the VLC.</p>

First, the imaginary of Landcare, that is, the idea in people's heads about what Landcare is in the world, is care for land. Landcare is a lot more than planting trees, but many community leaders of Landcare groups and Networks behave *as if* they were only in the revegetation business. They do take up the community development role in the same way they take hold biolinks or land management practices. Capacity building around organising, collaborating and influencing is not an essential and urgent task.

Second, within the NRM system as a whole and in community-based NRM, institutional support for social knowledge sharing and creation is weak. We have invaluable State investment in Landcare facilitators, but few resources for skill development of facilitators and community members. The community is seen as a resource to draw on when needed, not a resource to be cultivated. This has been the situation for at least 15 years, and it doesn't look like changing soon.

Third, the social innovators in Landcare, community members and facilitators alike, are spread thin. They are *social* innovators because their focus is not technical innovation, but change in the way Landcare organises, collaborates and influences, in communities and in the NRM sector. Social Innovators realise that what's standing in their way is not a lack of technical solutions, but a lack of conducive policy, funding and organisational support. They still organise field days on best practice and planting days, but they know that their long-term success depends on strengthening social capacities.

Weak support for building social capacity brings significant risks for the NRM sector. CLEA's interviews with landcare leaders and the Questions Without Easy Answers identified by Network CoMs converge on a tough set of challenges to the existing Landcare model that will only be answered by innovation. The challenges are multiple and mark deep shifts in society - falling government funding under the neoliberal consensus that smaller government means more vigorous markets, declining farming population as mechanisation proceeds, growth and churn of lifestyle landholders as urban refugees carve out new mixes of work and not-for-profit pursuits, reduced volunteerism, as affiliation with place weakens and virtual organisation of work makes hierarchical organisation less dominant.

These events have an explicit focus on knowledge sharing about organising, collaborating and influencing.

However, the formats used in the forum are locked into presentations around the presenter's interests, rather than peer-to-peer inquiry. Issues are canvassed, but people are not brought together to problem-solve specific situations, as they might be in a group of practitioners.

CLEA should negotiate with the VLC to trial new formats for knowledge sharing and knowledge creation in its regional Forums, focused on the critical development tasks of Networks. If the Forums do this, innovators will find the peers they are looking for, and keep talking to each other in between Forums.

Empower Landcare's social innovators through action learning projects, designed and managed jointly by participants

Spread thin, the social innovators need facilities and support that help them keep talking with their innovating peers. The VLC Forums and brokering one-to-one connections between Landcare Networks is a good start, but we need to sustain that dialogue.

CLEA should build and support action learning projects between those already innovating, on the development tasks that are their priorities. The most effective Networks should be targeted, that is, those tackling difficult questions and trying out new solutions. The focus of action learning should be not just to have new ideas, but to break new ground.

The two issues held in common across Landcare in Victoria are *building partnerships* and *promoting Landcare*. CLEA's insight from this year is that we

<p>Individual groups and Landcare Networks are coming up with solutions that fit their local circumstances, but by and large they do not operate as part of a community of practice learning how to mobilise communities, form partnerships between communities and government, and influence decision makers. The social innovators in Landcare need their own community of practice within which to evolve new imaginaries for Landcare, and build the capacities that will create these futures. Their focus will be opportunity, not deficiency, learning from what their peers are doing that breaks new ground.</p> <p>For an extended discussion on the forces holding back innovation in Landcare and the need to strengthen connections between innovators, see Appendix E: <i>Why we need a community of practice for Landcare's social innovators.</i></p>	<p>need to <i>support existing Network Builders.</i></p> <p>Landcare's role in <i>maintaining healthy communities</i> may be a way to focus both these issues to capture State Government and philanthropic interest. We note that the review of the VLP (still under wraps) called for a metric of Landcare's impact on communities, and that DELWP is keen to make progress here.</p> <p>CLEA should work with innovators in Landcare to develop an action learning project that will support innovating Landcare Networks to articulate best practice in strengthening communities and test new ways to create measurable improvement in community health. This is a big agenda and will need substantial resourcing, for facilitation and for financial support for Landcare staff and community leader participation. CLEA proposes to negotiate with interested social innovators the focus and methods through the next year and build a funding proposal.</p> <p>The action learning format would allow innovators to make substantive progress on issues critical to their Network's future, strengthen peer learning relationships between participants and make the process of learning with peers visible to the wider Landcare community.</p>
<p>Use a threat to wake people up to the need to build social capacity</p> <p>The threat needs to be central to mainstream business, not tangential to it. The compelling challenge in Landcare is that the "plan and plant" model has run out of steam, and that new futures will have to be made. Landcare's ability to innovate using its <i>social knowledge</i> has to be nurtured as assiduously as its <i>biophysical knowledge</i>.</p> <p>This way of legitimating peer learning was trialed at the last VLC Forum in Dookie, May 2016, and 'clicked' for people.</p>	<p>Frame peer-to-peer learning as a way to speed up innovation in the face of long-term challenges to the established model of Landcare</p> <p>Peer-to-peer learning is a means to an end, and CLEA is still searching for the best way to frame the end. The threats facing Landcare are widely and deeply felt. Our approach will be to restate the threats, say that social knowledge shared</p>

<p>The focus was the <i>why</i> of peer learning, not the <i>what</i> or the <i>how</i>. The distinction between social knowledge and biophysical knowledge clarified the way forward.</p> <p>There may be lessons for other capacity building projects which are getting support in principal, but finding that uptake is languishing for want of more time, money and urgency. Find the threat that wakes people up, and show how capacity building reduces risks.</p>	<p>between innovators is what will drive the evolution of Landcare, and that the best, fastest and cheapest way to do this is peer-to-peer learning.</p>
<p>The pool of innovators wanting to use peer-to-peer learning needs to expand</p> <p>The VLC CoM did not buy the CLEA proposal to open dialogue with other environmental groups, so CLEA is still looking for a way to connect out from Landcare to the rest of the community environment sector, those addressing issues like urban sustainability, energy and food supply.</p> <p>A viable community of practice for Landcare's social innovators (proposed above) would have a lot more people and energy if it was a linked to people interested in a) sustainability broadly conceived, and/or b) rural community development. Rural community leadership programs might be a way into people across sectors working from a community development model.</p>	<p>Connect to community leadership networks</p> <p>In year 3, explore how action learning projects on <i>building partnerships, promoting Landcare, supporting Network Builders</i> and <i>maintaining healthy communities</i> could draw in participants from rural community leadership programs and from sustainability groups.</p>
<p>Use what's there, don't build from scratch</p> <p>This has been an on-going learning. It arose in Year 1 when CLEA decided to focus on Landcare Network CoMs as a place for peer-to-peer learning. This year, the same principle has emerged around Network Builders and communication.</p> <p>The research with VLC delegates has showed CLEA that there are people already connecting those who want support and expertise with those who can give it. We called them Network Builders, and we now have a good picture of how they operate and what support they need. See Appendix D <i>What will support Network Builders</i>.</p> <p>With regards to getting CLEA's learning out into the Landcare community, visits to the CLEA website are low. CLEA's emails sit in overflowing in-trays. The interviews with Landcare leaders over CLEA's first two years have served to identify the challenges facing Landcare Networks, and get the project known in the Landcare community. But it is futile to attempt to set up a new channel for broadcast to the Landcare community. A more relevant strategy is to</p>	<p>Get talking with CMAs about how they can support Network Builders</p> <p>Do this jointly with VLC delegates in each region.</p> <p>Explore how to piggy-back on the quarterly Victorian Landcare Magazine</p> <p>The articles in the Victorian Landcare quarterly are overwhelming about the biophysical side of landscape, and the technical solutions being applied. They say only a little about the motivations and personal journey of the protagonists, and only a little about what it take to organise, create partnerships and influence decision makers. Stories that this side of Landcare stories would give the other half of the story.</p> <p>Stories from the action learning projects proposed above should be broadcast</p>

piggy-back on existing channels. The most obvious one is the quarterly Victorian Landcare Magazine.

A related learning is that **Capacity building needs institutional support at several levels.** CLEA QWEA sessions are a way to engage local to landscape level through Landcare Network CoMs. VLC sponsorship of CLEA and access to the VLC's regional Forums gives support at State level.

But there's an untapped opportunity to bring CMAs into closer collaboration with CLEA. CLEA initially approached Landcare Networks through the CMAs' Chairs group (Corangamite) and the Coordinators group (Goulburn Broken). CLEA has kept both those groups informed of progress, and it is time to return and ask for stronger on-going commitment from CMAs to peer-to-peer learning.

VLC delegates for each region haven't easy to connect to as a group, but CLEA has talked to all of them individually in Corangamite and Goulburn Broken regions, so there's a basis for taking forward to those CMAs the recommendations of the research reports *How knowledge moves and support flows in Landcare* and *What will support Network Builders*.

through the Victorian Landcare magazine.