



# Implementing Climate Change Adaptation: The researchers' perspective

## VCCCAR Implementing Adaptation project

CASE STUDY REPORT

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# 1 Context

## 1.1 About this Case Study

This is the sixth case study in a series produced under a collaborative social research project known as the '*Implementing Adaptation*' project (see Section 2 below). The project investigated climate change adaptation in the natural resource management and community sectors in Victoria, Australia. The first five case studies in this series were co-developed with the organisations that participated in the research, in particular in a six-month action research process to 'test' adaptation planning tools.

The first five case studies in the series document the experiences and reflections of the five participating organisations. This case study presents the perspectives of the six researchers involved in developing, implementing, evaluating and reporting on the project. The purpose of this case study is to present an informal narrative of our experience and share some of the personal and professional insights we gained throughout the project, into the research process, adaptation planning, and the health and community service sector.

## 1.2 About Us

The research team consisted of researchers from RMIT and Monash Universities, and a VCCCAR Visiting Fellow from the UK. This energetic and amiable team brought together different theoretical perspectives and experience of working with very different kinds of organisations in climate change adaptation planning: from state to local government, from emergency services to natural resource management to the private sector, in Victoria, Australia and in the UK. None of the team had ever worked in or directly with the health and community service sector.

## 2 The Implementing Adaptation Project

### 2.1 The project

The *Implementing Adaptation* project ran from September 2012 until November 2013, and was formally entitled: 'Implementing tools to increase adaptive capacity in the community and natural resources management sectors'. The main goal of the project was to understand the adaptation capabilities and needs of three types of government funded service providers and agencies: catchment management authorities (CMAs), community service organisations (CSOs), and primary care partnerships (PCPs). The project also sought to facilitate context-specific implementation and testing of available tools and methods for climate change adaptation planning; and provide information to state government about how to better support these types of organisations in adaptation planning.

The project's formal reports can be found at:

<http://www.vcccar.org.au/implementing-tools-to-increase-adaptive-capacity-in-community-and-natural-resource-management>

### 2.2 An action-research approach

This three-phase project drew on theories of social and organisational learning. The first phase, which involved a stakeholder workshop, was intended to open up the design of the project to contributions from potential participants. The second phase, involving a series of semi-structured interviews (over 70), was designed to build an understanding of the context of organisations working within the sector, and to form relationships with potential collaborators. The third phase of the project adopted an action-research approach. Put simply, action research is a process of undertaking interactive activities to achieve both practical and

research outcomes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in collaborative pursuit of practical solutions, and the flourishing of individuals and their communities<sup>1</sup>.

While the research team had varying experiences and understandings of action research methodologies, the *Implementing Adaptation* project provided us opportunity to refine that understanding and learning practically, underpinned by strong research ethics and the development of good working relationships within the team and with participating organisations.

The action-learning approach enabled us to actively support the development of practical adaptation planning processes with the participating organisations, without directing them. Adaptation planning from this perspective relies on the expertise and knowledge of *all* parties, and on their willingness to learn from each other, to jointly create outcomes and outputs.

As researchers, we were keen to test our theoretical perspectives, our assumptions, and expand our personal-professional experience to learn from experts and practitioners in the health and community sector. Our overall goal was to support the sector and the organisations within it in building their capacities to plan for and respond to climate variability and change. We hoped to support these organisations in continuing to provide these vital services to our society under a changing climate.

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<sup>1</sup> Reason and Bradbury's 2006 Handbook of Action Research.

### 2.3 Why produce this case study?

Most research projects provide formal outputs in the form of reports, literature reviews, guides and academic journal papers. The *Implementing Adaptation* project is no different and its formal outputs can be found on the VCCCAR website (See Section 2.1).

However, reflective perspectives of research experiences are not often published. This case study aims to provide some insights into our experiences and thoughts on the project. We felt it vital to be reflective throughout our work, as reflection is necessary for 'learning into an unknown future'. We cannot know the future but we can make best guesses now and set up processes for reviewing these, and for learning more consciously from practice. This practice is 'the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning'<sup>2</sup>.

We felt that because adaptation planning is an emerging field generally, let alone within the primary health and community services sector, adaptation researchers (and others involved in the system) need to take on a reflective practitioner stance. We sought to create moments of reflection by taking short notes, first as individuals and then collectively after meetings throughout the project. We asked the participants to do the same – requesting that they write down their reflections first individually, before discussing them as a group. These reflections, shared among the team and the research participants at beginning of the next meeting, both informed the research process and its outputs.

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<sup>2</sup> Flood, 1999 & Schön 1983



We learned much throughout the process and we encourage others to adopt a similar approach to systematic reflection in any research project. This case study presents our cumulative and 'final' set of reflections on the Implementing Adaptation project.

### **3 The research approach**

The research project was structured into three key phases, as described earlier. However, it is important to note that our learning began from the outset of the project, where we used rich pictures to identify our assumptions and to explore our feelings about the project. In doing so, we built a shared understanding of how each of us saw the project, including some fears and concerns, and about our assumptions and potential stereotypes of the sector and its capacity to plan for climate change. Taking a learning stance helped us to achieve a team performance that was highly collaborative, flexible, and gave us a heightened sense of curiosity towards what we may learn from participants.

This case study focuses on the action-research process adopted during phase three of the project, which consisted of four meetings with participating organisations. Our approach to this phase is outlined in the following.

#### **3.1 Meeting 1: Scoping and establishing context**

From the beginning, we wanted to build respectful and meaningful relationships with each participating organisation. Therefore, we designed Meeting 1 to enable the organisations and the research team to interact on an informal basis and have some fun. At the beginning of the process, we also stated that we genuinely wanted to learn from these organisations – from their expertise and

experiences, as well as wanting to share our knowledge and experience.

Preparation was also crucial. Prior to each meeting, we compiled folders of documents for each participant, so that all information material was easily accessible. All documentation, including a flexible agenda, was emailed to the organisations at least a week prior to each meeting. The flexible agenda aimed to allow the organisations to co-develop the proceedings of each meeting. Importantly, we made sure we arrived on time every time for each meeting. Where possible, the whole research team attended the first meeting with each organisation. From then on, a partnership of researchers were dedicated to each organisation, where participants were encouraged to contact those researchers whenever they needed advice, information, or had things to discuss.

At the first meeting, we presented what we hoped to achieve from the project and our preliminary research findings from research phases one and two (covering mostly our desktop reviews of literature, the institutional context, and analysis of interview data). We invited feedback, reflections and ideas for how to proceed. We then facilitated a participatory 'historical timeline' activity to explore the history of each organisation, followed by a 'system mapping' exercise to depict the vast array of institutional arrangements that characterise governance in the health and community sector in Victoria. Each meeting closed with an invitation to write down five reflections to discuss at the next meeting.

### **3.2 Meeting 2: Tool selection**

Before Meeting 2, we had undertaken a process to identify a shortlist of adaptation planning tools that we considered suitable to the context of the organisation. Guidance to tool availability and access was gained from the "leading adaptation practices and support

strategies for Australia: an international and Australian review of products and tools' project<sup>3</sup>. Tool identification was based on an analysis of the discussions from Meeting 1, where the organisations' adaptation planning needs were identified. This analytical process used a boundary work framework<sup>4</sup> classification.

The second meeting commenced with a discussion of our collective reflections from the previous meeting. This involved each person voicing their reflection notes, and then the group discussing the commonalities and points of interest. Talking through reflections in this way helped everyone reconnect with the process.

The research team then presented what we perceived to be the adaptation planning needs of the organisation and invited feedback on our interpretation. In most cases, we found good accordance of our interpretations with those of the organisation. We then presented a summary (outline, structure, function, purpose) of each of the adaptation planning tools we perceived as appropriate to the organisation. At the end of the meeting, and after some discussion, most organisations selected a tool. One organisation found it challenging to decide on a tool during the meeting due to the need to find consensus among key stakeholders, but eventually came to a decision outside of the meeting that had greater legitimacy. One other organisation decided that the suggested tools did not fully suit

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<sup>3</sup> Webb, R. & Bai, J (2013):

[http://www.nccarf.edu.au/sites/default/files/attached\\_files\\_publications/Webb\\_2013\\_Leading\\_adaptation\\_practices\\_support.pdf](http://www.nccarf.edu.au/sites/default/files/attached_files_publications/Webb_2013_Leading_adaptation_practices_support.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> **Boundary work** is about working across interfaces between different communities of knowledge. For example, multi- and interdisciplinary research between different communities of research (e.g. disciplines) can be thought of as a type of boundary work. Different 'communities of knowledge' have different standards for what counts as valid knowledge and how it is obtained.

their needs and developed their own tool, building on the tools suggested by the researchers.

After tool selection, we facilitated a discussion in which the organisations planned their next steps, and reflections were again noted down.

### **3.3 Meeting 3: Tool testing - adaptation planning in action**

We began by revisiting reflections from the last meeting. Meeting 3 was conducted differently for each organisation, and this was where we confirmed by experience that adaptation planning is highly context-specific. For example, two organisations, which had selected the same tool, decided to use that tool in different ways.

During Meeting 3 organisations started to tackle the use of their selected tool. After starting to use the tool – with some guidance - we again facilitated a discussion in which the organisations planned their next steps, which generally involved their decision on how to further implement their selected tool. Reflections were again recorded.

### **3.4 Meeting 4: Adaptation planning continues and project evaluation**

Evaluation was the main focus of Meeting 4, with the team using the ORID framework<sup>5</sup> to explore the Objective, Reflective, Interpretive and Decisional aspects of the process we had been through with each organisation. By this stage, each organisation had experienced what it meant to 'test' tools for adaptation planning. This in effect

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<sup>5</sup> ica-international.org

meant a participatory process of learning and action carried out with stakeholders, assisted by the research team and some tools.

At the close of the action research phase, it was encouraging to be told that we had had an impact with the organisations and that several organisations felt that they were on a trajectory to increased adaptive capacity.

## 4 What we learned

We formed a team identity by being challenged (by the situation) to extend ourselves and collectively test our differing ideas. We learned how we each work and how we interact with others on a challenging and complex topic, in an inherently 'human space'.

Some organisations would have been happy to let us select a tool for them to use. We learned how not to automatically step into an 'expert' role, which was difficult when there is an expectation that as researchers, you are seen as 'an expert'. However tempting, we found that not dictating the choice of tool but allowing the organisation to choose – even where this took considerable time and effort to reach a consensus – was a crucial part of the people 'owning' the process and hence in building their adaptive capacity.

We also found the reflective practice, described above and below, highly valuable. It created the space and time in all of our busy schedules to ponder five central questions:

*"What was new?"*

*"What was challenging?"*

*"Has your perspective changed?"*

*"What will you take away?"*

*"What was the most important point to you?"*

We found the approach extremely rewarding – for the research and personal development - that we have used it here to structure the case study as we look back over the past year. We have also outlined what we would do differently if we were to participate in a similar study again in the future.

#### **4.1 What was new**

As we gained greater insight into the organisations and the issues they faced, we developed new understandings of the breadth and complexities of social and health issues. It was sobering. These organisations are at the frontline of the implications of climate change for our physical and mental well-being.

At the same time, the passion and dedication of these organisations resulted in us delivering beyond the project's formal requirements, and led to a sense of fulfilment in working with our organisations. For some of us, it was our first experience of a 'case-study' to 'researcher' relationship transitioning into a collegial friendship.

Researchers are often portrayed as 'experts' in our chosen fields. Throughout the project, we deliberately practiced and expressed our roles as 'co-developers', seeking to learn about adaptation in the community services sector with the participating organisations. We were particularly clear that we are not 'experts' in the field of health and community service, and this helped our participants see that we genuinely perceived them as collaborators, with an equal wealth of expertise to contribute. This approach allowed us to play a shared role in facilitating social learning within the organisations and amongst ourselves.

#### **4.2 What was challenging**

Getting past the required formal aspect of the meetings into the real conversation was initially quite challenging. It was perhaps

unsurprising that participants were reserved at the start of the engagement process. They thought they were going to have a standard meeting, where we would walk in, tell them how to do adaptation planning, collect data and leave.

At first, it was challenging to navigate differing understandings and expectations of the project. Rather than seek consensus, and risk losing the diversity of participant's contributions, we sought to accommodate different understandings and expectations through conversations and negotiation.

Another challenge was relinquishing control and allowing the organisations to make a choice of tool that we might not have, or that we were not familiar with, and working with that. This also sent us on a steep learning curve to understand ways of making various tools practical.

Conversations about trust were both interesting and challenging. These included discussion on interactions with all stakeholders, varying roles and the associated 'power' relations. We understand trust as an emergent property of relationships, not something that can be designed, and it can easily be damaged. In building relationships, we followed the enthusiasm of participants and the ethics of invitation.

It was challenging to maintain a reflective practice through all aspects of the project. We were so busy creating the process and adapting it for each organisation that we occasionally slipped into assuming everyone shared our interpretation of central phrases such as adaptation. We had to regularly 'check-in' and recognise different interpretations of the same words and phrases. Another challenge was having to recognise and admit when we had made assumptions

about the level of shared understanding, and continually acknowledge organisational context and associated framing.

Finally, it was challenging to decide whether a reflection in this case study was about a challenge, change, or something new.

### 4.3 What changed

Each tool was adapted and modified, once we had established whether the organisation wanted to plan for itself or to consider climate change implications for their stakeholders. Originally, the project's initial aim was to 'make a tool fit', and as our insights and the confidence of the organisations grew, the emphasis shifted to facilitating an organisational learning process. As trust built, dialogue surrounding experiences and opinions of working in the sector became increasingly honest, frank and friendly.

We had to recognise when we had ignored an organisation's underlying context associated with climate variability and change, and how this, more than the tool selection process, was dictating their work. In acknowledging this, we were able to adapt the process to suit. In fact, we were often able to adapt our language to parallel that of the organisation – for example, some organisations were most comfortable with 'planning for extreme weather events as in emergency management planning' over climate variability and change. Along the way, participants started identifying the need to address more strategic issues and so as adaptation planning commenced so too did their adaptive capacity.

### 4.4 What will we take away?

Providing a process for 'thinking through' adaptation planning is crucial. The concept of adaptation can be a bit amorphous and hence, participants would willingly turn to 'experts' to provide the path. We found however, that what is really needed is a process by



which people can begin to 'see' what adaptation might mean for them and their organisation, and of what adaptation planning might consist.

For many of our organisations, the easiest introduction into adaptation planning was through experience of a severe weather event. Impacts of events such as drought, heatwaves, floods and bushfires – whether for the organisation's stakeholders or wider communities- were often the trigger for proactive planning. However, we also found this 'emergency management lens' potentially limits people to a reactive stance, which does not necessarily encourage longer term planning that acknowledges more pervasive impacts of climate change.

Adaptation planning requires addressing the tension between (and thereby challenge of) dealing with serious and immediate issues, and the need to consider future scenarios. For example, one of the organisations argued that they did not know if they would even exist in a year's time, so contemplating planning for 50 to 100 years seemed almost futile. It was useful in this situation to talk of small steps on a more strategic but flexible path.

Finally, mapping an organisation's history is not only a useful information sharing exercise, it is also a confidence building process whereby experiences can be both documented and celebrated. However, we also learned that individuals, as much as historical events, shape the differences in capacities and needs of organisations. It was also important to listen for and appreciate an organisation's underlying agenda and framing of itself. This framing was as much, if not more, of a driver of an organisation's initial approach to adaptation as its history, budget, or strategic plan.

## 4.5 What was most important for us

We cannot emphasise enough, the importance and value of the reflective practice – from both a professional and personal perspective. Not only did the process enable us to capture our research insights immediately, it also built strong working relationships amongst the research team and the people from the various participating organisations. The research and the researchers are both richer for the process. Our thanks go to our colleague Kate Lonsdale for making the initial suggestion.

Our participants consistently stated that they too found the practice of reflections immensely useful and rewarding. Organisations do not often get the chance to sit back and reflect on, let alone document, their organisational history; to see how far they have come; to enable new employees to gain some understanding of that history – battles fought, won and lost. The participatory timeline exercise was a useful way to generate new insights and share institutional memory with newer staff members.

The process was valuable for a number of reasons, but importantly, it provided us insights into the perspective from which these organisations consider adaptation. It helped us to understand the high responsibility of organisations within the sector and therefore the importance of ensuring that they can operate and deliver their services in a changing climate. Most importantly, with this knowledge, we feel that we can now recommend a process and program to effectively engage with and increase the adaptive capacity of organisations within the sector.

Although we commenced the project with the idea that there would not be a readily applicable adaptation tool suitable for these organisations, we learned that the selection of a specific tool is secondary to a process of reflection and genuine collaboration.

Being open and honest with the organisations about what we understood and what we were capable of it – be it our collective knowledge or simply resourcing. Our seeking feedback - both negative and positive – maintained a level of respect and honesty.

On the more personal and creative front, systems mapping techniques also provided a great 'team bonding' exercise. It not only enabled a genuinely co-learning experience, the approach removed the potential for 'researchers as experts'. The very first action under the auspices of the project was for the organisations to share *their* knowledge and expertise and we were the willing students. By practising what we preached from the beginning, we not only gained useful data, we feel we established respect and trust.

#### **4.6 What would we have done differently?**

To begin, we might not have described the process as one of finding an appropriate planning tool to fit an organisation, but rather of facilitating an organisational adaptation learning process. Sometimes, however, an organisation might want a tool and not a learning process, so perhaps the lesson here is about instituting gradual shifts in framing.

We would spend more time trying to understand an organisation's agenda and framing of its fundamental purpose, and thereby, where it saw its role in adaptation. Towards this end, we would spend more time working to ensure a shared understanding of what we all mean by adaptation and adaptation planning at the beginning – even if that understanding was that we have different understandings.

## 5 Thanks

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## 6 Where to from here?

The formal, final report presents our recommendations for a program and implementation process for those aiming to work within the primary health and community services sector on adaptation planning.

We have been fortunate to receive funding from the Victorian State Government Adaptation and Sustainability Partnership (VASP) Grants Program to continue this work with in a pilot program with the Southern Grampians and Glenelg Primary Care Partnership (SGGPCP) in affiliation with the Southern Grampians Shire. Please contact us for further details.



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