Reflecting on Learning
A role for evaluation in rural sustainable development

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Evaluation for sustainability

- What role can evaluation play in rural sustainability research?

  - Individual and shared reflection
    - →Facilitating collective learning
      - →Building social capital
        - → Sustainability

  - Evidence of value and impact for participants
    - →Shift in policy focus from just tangible outcomes to include social capital development

Overview

- The Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI) in regional Victoria

- Developing an evaluation approach

- Role(s) for evaluation

- Future directions

Challenges for Rural Communities

- ## Global, national, local forces
  - Climate change
  - Declining terms of trade
  - Demographic change
  -

- ## Complexity
  - Interacting forces eg increased tourism - $\uparrow$ but water use also $\uparrow$
  - Conflicting values eg pro- and anti- growth

- ## Uncertainty
  - Complexity
  - Unknowns eg future policy decisions

- ## Future is unpredictable

Sustainable Communities

Sustainable Communities are…

….socially, environmentally and economically viable,

…able to make decisions about their future.

"…the capacity to create, test and maintain adaptive capability"

(Holling et al. 2002)

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Holling, C.S., S.R. Carpenter, W.A. Brock, L.H. Gunderson 2002. Discoveries for Sustainable Futures. In: L.H. Gunderson, C.S. Holling (eds.) *Panarchy. Understanding Transformations in Human and Natural Systems.* Island Press: 395-418

Sustainable Communities Initiative

- Five community sustainability projects across regional rural Victoria
  - A partnership between Regional Development Victoria (RDV), local government and CSIRO

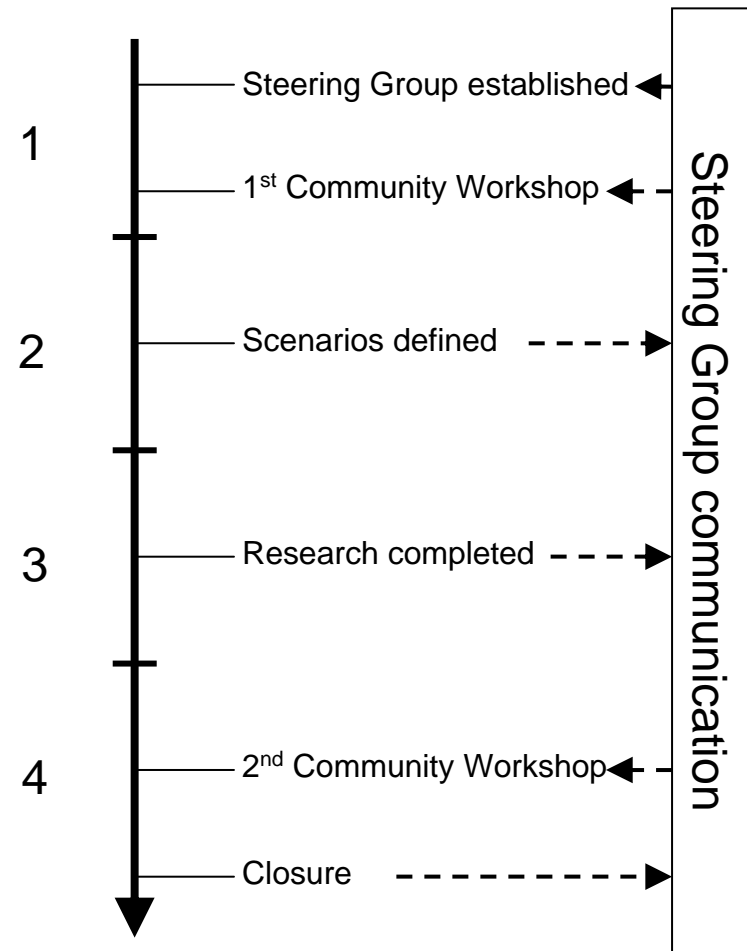# Project Objectives - Community

- Strong relationships amongst key stakeholders as the foundation for local action

- Shared understanding of local conditions, issues and future options

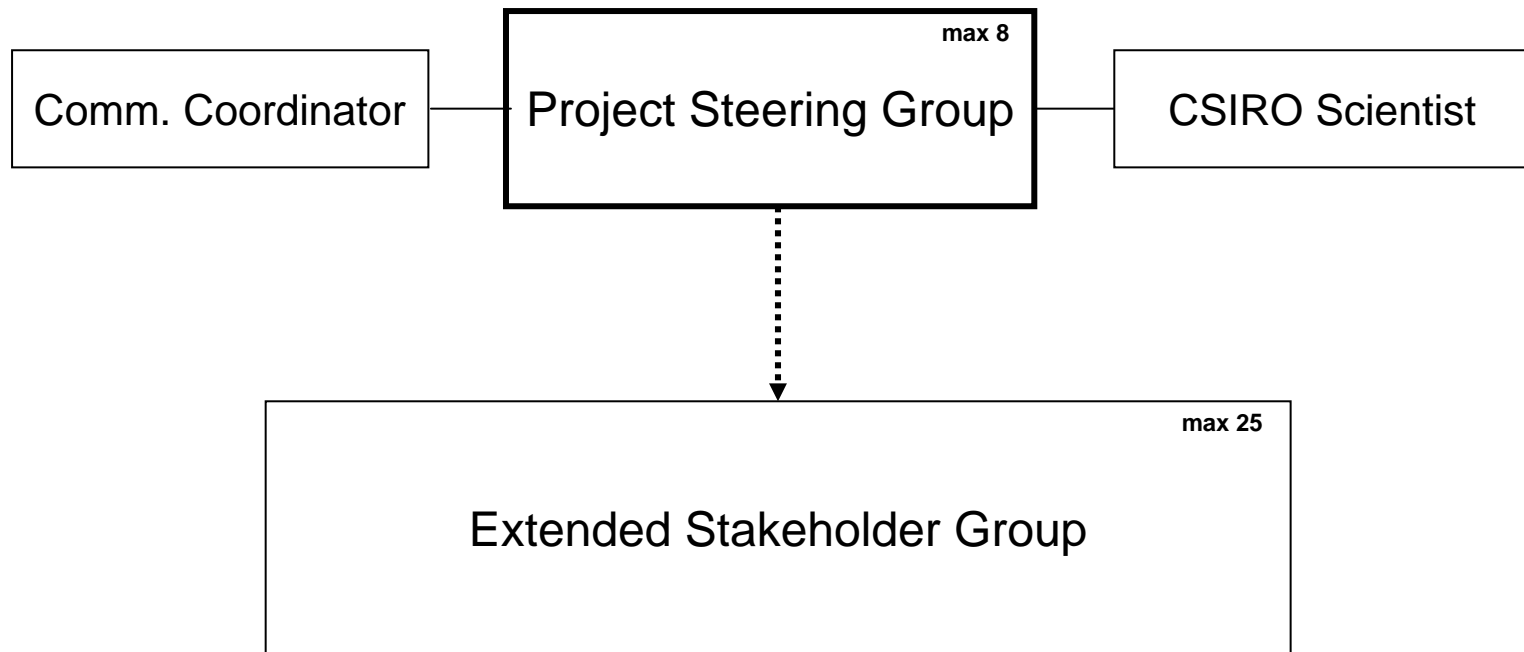- An agreed pathway for action suitable for resourcing and implementation

Project Process

Brief engagements

- 3-4 months
- Two community workshops
  - Community visioning - development of future possible scenarios
  - Desk-top analysis
 - Scenario refinement
- Guided by a community steering group

1

Steering Group established

1st Community Workshop

2

Scenarios defined

3

Research completed

4

2nd Community Workshop

Closure

Steering Group communication

Project Structure

Comm. Coordinator — Project Steering Group **max 8** — CSIRO Scientist

Extended Stakeholder Group **max 25**

Project Objectives - Researchers

- New science knowledge (learning)
  - *How can local-level interventions be conducted to increase options for communities and enhance sustainability perspectives of local stakeholders?*

- Process improvement (learning) between projects

Evaluation Context

Project Scheduling
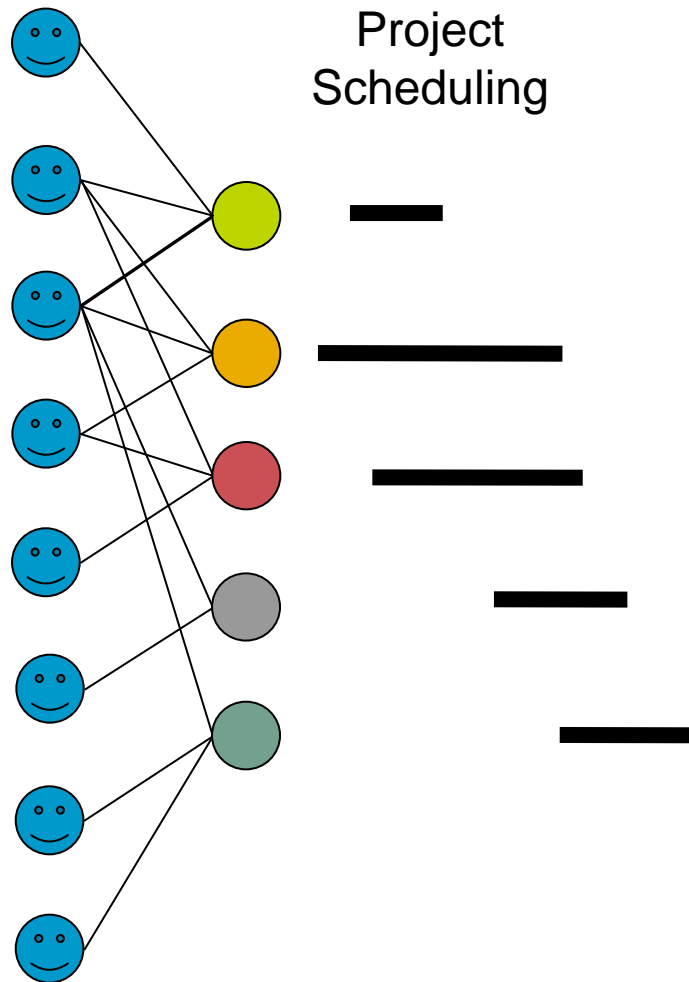
- Five projects, five different contexts
  - Feasibility of comparison?
- Several projects happening at the same time
  - Learning between projects?
- Eight (very busy) researchers based in three states
  - Learning between projects?
- Several researchers working on >1 project
  - Learning between projects ✓
- One evaluator, relatively new to evaluation, also working as a project researcher
- One other researcher with evaluation experience

Evaluation Context

- No clear 'client' for the evaluation
- Contrasting assumptions about the purpose of the evaluation among the researchers
- Brief engagements
  - 2 workshops of 2-3 hours duration
  - Participants mostly have full-time jobs
    - Time available for evaluation?

- More frequent interaction with the project steering group
  - Evaluation via project steering group?

- Projects are already geared towards learning among community participants
  - What role for evaluation then?

Evaluation Approach Taken

- Monitoring the quality of the participatory process

- Identifying/evaluating project impacts

- Facilitating reflection/learning
    - Surfacing what has been learnt and making it explicit

- Evaluation as part of the research
    - Responding to the research question

    (How can local-level interventions be conducted to increase options for communities and enhance sustainability perspectives of local stakeholders?)

Monitoring process quality

- Participant observation

- Feedback from project steering group

- Post workshop reflection among researchers

- Workshop questionnaires
  - Satisfaction with the content and process eg
    - Facilitation?
    - Opportunity for you to contribute your views?
    - Opportunity for discussion?
  - What did you like most about this workshop?
  - How could this workshop have been improved?

- Post-project interviews or focus group with steering group
  - What was the most important aspect of the project?
  - What could have been done to improve the project implementation?

Assessing project impacts

- Workshop questionnaires
  - Have you made any new contacts that you are likely to follow up?
  - What new insights have you had from attending the workshop?

- Post-project interviews or focus group with steering group
  - Project achievements?
  - Satisfaction with project?
  - Changes in
    - Thinking
      - How has your thinking changed about the future of (*eg Apollo Bay*)?
    - Talking
      - How have your conversations with others changed regarding the future of (*eg Apollo Bay*)?
    - Doing
      - What have you been doing differently in relation to the future of (*eg Apollo Bay*)?

Facilitating reflection and surfacing learning

- **New insights reported by participants include**

    - Increased awareness of the community
        - *"What people's interests are towards the town"*
        - *"Realisation of depth of knowledge around the room/community is great"*
        - *"Diversity of perceptions and possibilities encouraged/materialised."*
        - *"More people see the need for* (economic) *diversity than I thought"*

    - Possible futures and what they might be like
        - *"What life might be like if certain changes occurred in the town"*

    - That their future is being considered
        - *"Pro-active approach to planning – nice to feel our viewpoints are valued and considered"*

Unexpected benefits

- Workshop feedback was useful in reassuring council stakeholders that participants were finding the process worthwhile.

  - Retains support for continuation of project

  - Builds receptivity to projects targeted at 'soft' outcomes

Into the future

- A colleague's literature review on rural transitions has provided some much firmer grounding for the evaluation work and identifying objects of evaluation, eg
    - Social capital and its development
    - Social learning
- Two projects still underway
    - Opportunity to target evaluation more specifically to eliciting and facilitating learning
- Refine and test evaluation approaches to facilitating social learning for sustainability
    - Evaluate the evaluation
- Develop instruments for researcher reflection/reflexivity

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Thank you

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