The stories of Community Voices in Australia bring to the fore a people and community dimension that is rarely shared but is an incredibly important component of developing and implementing major changes to water policy. There have been successes and failures in Australia’s journey that may be of value to those considering undertaking water reform.

The Australian Water Partnership commissioned Community Voices to provide an Australian perspective on the complexity and challenges of water reform from a community perspective. It represents an important contribution to the Australian water reform journey in addition to the technical and policy reform experiences.

The purpose of Community Voices is to share insights on how to enhance decision making and build resilient communities through the authentic engagement of people whose lives and livelihoods rely on access to water resources.

“Bringing people with divergent, conflicting views together to work out what is fair for everyone (including external stakeholders and future generations) is not something that is traditionally done well in water resource management.” – Grabbe and Boully

“The first step of problem solving is to look carefully at the problem and understand all of its dimensions. In water resource issues we can nearly always be certain that people are integral. Therefore, it makes sense that a large part of the solution is going to involve those people.” – Maywald and Boully

The high potential for conflict among stakeholders over a limited resource like water requires leaders to create an environment where all voices can be heard. The authors of Community Voices propose that successful water reform happens when leaders from across the stakeholder landscape come together and work with a shared purpose. From their lived experiences, the authors share their definition of leadership and the principles that underpin successful processes that lead to improving relationships and water management.

Water reform is undertaken for many reasons, it can take different forms and occur in unique contexts around the world. A consistent feature of water reform processes is that there are many stakeholders involved both directly and indirectly. These stakeholders must be able to engage through a process guided by principles and have their voices heard and genuinely considered if reform is to be successful.

“Downstream water users look upstream with envy and upstream users look downstream with disdain.” – Maywald

“Downstream farmers and fishermen hosted upstream counterparts and had lengthy heated discussions, but with time, and no agenda but to learn, deep and strong relationships formed. So much so, the upstream irrigators quickly returned the invite and asked to host their new downstream friends.” – Campbell
Six key principles

*Community Voices* identifies six key principles below and explores how they can be used to underpin “effective leadership” that is necessary to create an environment where stakeholders can come together to jointly identify problems and find solutions that meet diverse values and needs.

### Key Principles

1. **Leadership**
   
   Create “leaderful” communities\(^1\) and commit to inclusive, transparent, and well-resourced engagement with a wide range of stakeholders.

2. **Building Trusted Relationships**
   
   Provide a safe environment to build trusted relationships through exploration of values, culture, and conflict – people matter.

3. **Clarity of Purpose**
   
   Provide clarity on the reform purpose, roles, responsibility, and accountabilities.

4. **Problem Definition and Joint Discovery**
   
   Share power through knowledge exploration, problem definition and joint discovery of workable solutions.

5. **Time, Flexibility and Windows of Opportunity**
   
   Allow for flexibility in time and process.

6. **Decision Making and Change Management**
   
   Demonstrate how decision making and reform implementation reflects the outcomes of the engagement process.

These fundamental principles have been distilled from the experiences of the *Community Voices* authors and are supported by two Australian case studies:

1. The Murray Darling Basin Plan development and
2. Local Management Arrangements for Queensland Irrigation Districts.

Both case studies focus on water reform challenges that most of the stakeholders agreed in principle needed to be addressed. Developing clear objectives is essential for success but becomes increasingly difficult when there are multiple jurisdictions, uncertainty in the science and potential unequal community impacts over large geographic areas. There is also a need for community voices to agree on principles and associated processes that allow the foundational components of conflict to be explored and resolved.

The case studies highlight how early consideration of the principles assist in the design of a successful community and stakeholder engagement process. Through interviews with local communities and key government officials, the authors draw on personal reflections to show success (or not) of processes undertaken.

“Considering these key principles when designing engagement process right from the outset can set the foundation for building trust and enabling leadership throughout the stakeholder community. The processes necessary to create and support this environment will vary according to the particular localised context and should be designed and redesigned through a collaborative mechanism as new information or stakeholders are identified.” – Maywald and Boully

The *Community Voices* authors acknowledge that their observations reflect their interpretation of the sentiments and experiences of a range of stakeholders involved in the presented case studies. There may well be other views. There is no intention to make right or wrong judgements, rather to offer insights to assist those planning water reform and stakeholder engagement processes.

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\(^1\) “Leaderful” communities are where everyone involved has the opportunity to be heard, to listen and to play a part in the reform process in some way. Leadership comes from across a broad landscape of stakeholders with different perspectives, purposefully working to identify problems, find solutions and take action. No individual or institution has sole responsibility for leadership – it is a shared responsibility because the resource is essential to the lives and livelihoods of all.
Seven Cornerstone Ingredients for Success in Community and Stakeholder Engagement

1. Make room for people in highly contested policy areas.

2. Acknowledge science will inform but it is people who will collectively solve the problem.

3. Create an engagement environment that enables people to shift from fear to trust. Using political or institutional power to dictate solutions may inflame long term conflict that can take generations to unpick.

4. Know that evidence-based decision making is as much about the people as it is about the science.

5. Do not rely on the biophysical sciences only. Include the economic and social sciences.

6. Understand that the science, the values, the cultures, and the community needs are all critically important when engaging communities to achieve agreement on the trade-offs.

7. Develop solutions that clearly articulate trade-offs and impacts and how they are to be managed and mitigated.

This is a summary of the forthcoming Community Voices publication.