

## What 'community' means for farmer adoption of conservation practices

Graham R Marshall

### Summary

'Community-based' natural resource governance has been sponsored by Australian governments since the 1980s as a way of strengthening farmers' self-reliance in adopting conservation practices. Our understanding of how this outcome may be achieved has mainly reflected thinking in the discipline of rural extension. Ideas from the theory of collective action reveal that adding a 'community' layer to natural resource management (NRM) governance means more for strengthening farmers' self-reliance than can be appreciated with rural extension thinking alone. These ideas highlight the complementary roles of 'vertical' trust and reciprocity between farmers and NRM governance structures in strengthening farmers' self-reliance in this domain. They demonstrate it is not enough that farmers trust NRM governance structures to support them in addressing the NRM problems they face. Farmers' self-reliance is strengthened under NRM governance only to the extent that this trust exists and they become motivated to reciprocate the support they receive (e.g. by complying proactively with conditions attached to this support). Potential advantages of community-based governance in providing such motivation are explored. Quantitative evidence from the author's research indicates that community-based governance can achieve significant success in exploiting these advantages and thereby can strengthen farmers' self-reliance in addressing the NRM challenges they face.

### Introduction

Since the 1980s, Australian governments have sponsored participatory, decentralised approaches to natural resource management (NRM). This style of governance, often described as 'community based', has been chosen as a means for supporting farmers' self-reliance in adopting conservation practices. I argue in this chapter that too much emphasis has been placed on 'rural extension thinking' as a basis for understanding how community-based governance may strengthen this self-reliance. I argue further that this has led the Australian NRM policy community to think too narrowly about the potential of this approach. Drawing on evidence from my research, I propose that insights from the theory of collective action can broaden this understanding and help us design and implement community-based arrangements more capable of strengthening farmers' self-reliance in adopting conservation practices.