

CWA response to SLC discussion paper on community benefits from investment in natural capital.

Question: is the definition on community benefits from investment in natural capital correct?

CWA has 20 years' experience of working with communities to deliver benefits from their natural environment. In our experience there is no one size fits all approach each and every community is different across a whole range of factors; *inter alia* geography, environment, population size, land type surroundings, opportunity, experience, confidence and capacity to get involved.

The only determinant of correct definition of community benefit for each community is the community itself.

We can talk of economic or social benefits or mental health or biodiversity or climate change mitigation benefits and drill to detail under each of those broad headings, but it is for communities to decide for themselves what they wish to arise from projects that impact them.

We believe that communities are best served by themselves and this is achieved by what is increasingly termed community wealth building whereby communities become actively engaged empowered partners with real authority to act in their own self-identified best interests. Importantly this includes the authority to significantly change or veto ideas and suggestions.

Question: what do we know about current delivery of community benefits? And what about the role of collaboration?

In large part current delivery of community benefits does not reflect the primacy of community in the identification of benefits. Indeed, this language "delivery" has overtones of provision of a prescribed menu pre-determined in advance of contact with communities. Communities should be more than passive recipients of benefits agreed elsewhere.

Collaboration is essential where it is wished for. We have just completed a six month project articulating the social and economic benefit of native woodlands with staff who have a long history in this field. They were able to identify threads of development within communities traceable to a small amount of collaborative intervention from CWA some years ago. This evidences that small collaborations at appropriate at agreed times and have long lasting impacts: in terms of the community an important part of the collaboration was that it ended! The community was then able to take forward & develop the work as they wished themselves.

This may be tricky for supporting organisations as it means inconsistent demand and inconsistent workload. However, it is better from the perspective of the community that organisations have spare capacity to respond to the need for collaboration speedily than to have overloaded support structures unable to respond at all.

Are the principles for the delivery of community benefit from investment correct?

It follows from our responses above that maximisation of benefits to communities should be centred around community wishes and controlled by the community. Benefits should be achieved flexibly, responsively and as determined by the local community in partnership with investors and others.

We are unconvinced this requires alignment with local strategic and development plans that some communities and individuals may have little understanding of or engagement with.

We agree benefits should be clear and identifiable and commonly understood however, whilst we understand the need for monitoring there should be awareness and understanding that communities may not be best placed to do this themselves.

Question: how can responsible good practice be supported and encouraged?

We believe the over-riding principle is that investment in natural capital brings the investor responsibilities in terms of their obligations to land and community.

How all investors may be supported and encouraged to maximise benefits for communities by truly partnering with communities so that communities are empowered, enabled, and importantly heard and responded to, is a challenge. Some investors will likely see this as an unnecessary burden to which they will tend to pay lip service and want to deliver the minimum of benefits as quickly as possible.

Land managers are long used to the concepts of Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC) and cross-compliance, is there a case for an analogous structure of expectations for investors that includes working with the local community?

We suggest recognition and reward of good or best practice coupled with penalty for investors that fail to reach determined standards will go a long way.

For implementation to be regarded as successful investors must adopt the spirit not just the letter of any guidance or advice that follows; community benefits on the ground must go beyond good words.

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