Paying attention to the spatiality of power in assessing the adaptive capacity in primary food production systems

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Drawing on narrative ethnographic study in North-East Victoria, Australia, this paper explores issues of scale in assessing adaptive capacity in primary food production systems. Adaptive capacity refers to the ability of the actors in a system to influence or manage resilience (Walker and Meyers 2004). A key insight from resilience thinking, and the focus of recent work, is that successful adaptation may require conscious transformation of the system(s) (ie to avoid crossing thresholds to undesirable states) (Walker et al 2006). We draw on Darnhoffers (2010) application of resilience thinking to family farms in Austria. However, like the resilience assessment conducted by Walker et al (2009) in the Goulburn Broken catchment in which our case study is also located, there is a relatively uncritical view of how scale itself is socially and purposefully constructed. We find the relative power of actors in the system is important for understanding how and why and in whose interests informal and formal social institutions (patterns of relationships) form and how they influence adaptive capacity of various actors/systems. In conceptualising systems in terms of set influences at different scales there is a risk that we reify and enact ideas about impacts at a certain scale, assuming common effects and responses. In trying to understand adaptive capacity of primary food producers in the case study area, we complement resilience thinking with Allen (2003) in particular but also Lejano (2008) and Cahill (2008) about the relationship of space (and time) and power and the need to pay particular attention to the detail of how power plays out in the effects of everyday life. We use Allens topological concepts of proximity and reach and Gibsons (1977) notion of affordance to look at both social and ecological influences on everyday decisions that shape primary food production systems. What is afforded in a certain context will be influenced by the combined effect of social relationships and physical (ecosystem) relationships but also how these are shaped by an actors understanding of them. We look at practices of primary food producers in the case study area, how these may or may not increase adaptive capacity (from their perspective), and how these are influenced by their specific understandings of what is constraining and enabling their options. Of particular importance is the differing perceptions of what is seen to be in or and outside the interest and/or control of primary producers in the study; and how this relates to proximity and reach. This influences how they self-organise to adapt to change.